



**UNIVERSITY  
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# **Building Affective Community and Navigating Censorship: Fengli In Action's Feminist Space on WeChat**

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### **Abstract**

This thesis examines the construction of an affective feminist community and the navigation of digital censorship through the case study of Fengli In Action, an online feminist community which was active on WeChat during China's COVID-19 lockdown period, and its programme Fireside Talks. The purpose of the research is to explore how grassroots feminist communities build emotional solidarity, address internal and external challenges, and negotiate political restrictions in a censored digital environment. The study employs qualitative research methods, combining ethnography, netnography, and interviews with eight former participants and organisers of Fengli's Fireside Talks programme. The research data consist of WeChat Official Account materials and in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that while Fengli created a temporary safe space fostering emotional support and feminist dialogue, it also faced limitations including exclusionary practices, ideological tensions, generational divides, and challenges in sustaining long-term engagement. The study concludes that affective connections provided crucial emotional refuge under authoritarian conditions but were fragile, short-lived, and insufficient to overcome structural constraints, reflecting broader tensions within contemporary Chinese feminist activism.

**Key words:** Digital Feminism, Affective Community, WeChat, Censorship, Feminist Activism in China

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## 1 Introduction

Feminism in China has evolved through various forms, from state feminism to NGO feminism, then to outer-system feminism, and finally to digital feminism (Wang, 2018; Liao, 2020; Mao, 2020; Yin, 2021), reflecting shifting dynamics among gender, power, and the state. Historically tied to national development goals and socialist ideology, feminist agendas were often mediated through state institutions like the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) (Magarey, 2014a; Whyke, Wang & Lopez-Mugica, 2024). Yet despite social propaganda such as “women hold up half the sky (妇女能顶半边天)” (Zheng, 2005), the lived realities of women remained shaped by patriarchal structures and limited political agency (Croll, 2013; Whyke, Wang & Lopez-Mugica, 2024). The 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was a landmark moment that brought international attention to gender issues in China (Magarey, 2014b). Since then, feminist discourse has increasingly contended with market-driven narratives that frame gender equality in terms of individual empowerment while sidelining systemic inequalities.

With the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the digital era has brought new opportunities for feminist activism in China. The rise of social media platforms, particularly WeChat, has provided a space for feminist discourses to flourish, allowing activists to circumvent traditional state censorship and reach a broader audience. However, the digital space remains highly controlled, and feminist movements must navigate the tensions between state repression and grassroots organising (Yin & Sun, 2021; Aharoni, 2023). Social media outlets like Weibo and WeChat have become key sites for discussing feminist issues, though the content often faces censorship. Furthermore, living after global crises like COVID-19, climate change, and rising nationalism and authoritarianism, digital feminism is further intruded upon and actively shaped (Chang & Tian, 2020; Zhao, 2024). In this context, a new wave of feminism has emerged, characterised by young feminists using decentralised digital spaces to challenge patriarchal structures and create solidarity.

One of the examples of this shift was Fengli In Action, an online feminist community founded in late 2020. Fengli operated primarily through WeChat, where it attempted to build an affective community that navigated both feminist ideals and the restrictions imposed by the state. Fengli was initially conceived as a grassroots feminist initiative, operating outside the traditional frameworks of state-backed organisations like the ACWF and without a formal

NGO status. It was founded by a young college student, Xavier<sup>1</sup>, in her early 20s, alongside other volunteers, many of whom have international educational backgrounds. It was established from scratch. By examining Fengli and its Fireside Talks programme, this thesis explores an example of how young feminists in China attempted to construct an affective online community, navigate censorship, and negotiate the boundaries of digital feminist activism. By investigating the experiences of former participants and organisers, this study examines the rise and decline of Fengli, exploring its initiatives, the challenges it encountered, and the broader implications for grassroots feminist communities on WeChat, offering insights into the dynamics of China's digital feminist landscape. Additionally, Fengli's work underscores the complex and different practices in Chinese feminist activism. The community, which began as a small collective, has also raised questions about who has access to feminist activism in China, particularly in relation to class, education, and geographic location (Whyke, Wang & Lopez-Mugica, 2024).

As an online feminist initiative, Fengli In Action was shaped by the broader landscape of Chinese digital feminism, yet it was also influenced by specific contextual factors, namely, its presence on WeChat and the COVID-19 lockdown period. Unlike other global feminist movements that primarily relied on open-access social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook, Fengli operated within WeChat's closed ecosystem, which presented both opportunities and constraints. This thesis situates Fengli In Action within the evolving discourse of Chinese digital feminism, examining how it navigated state constraints, fostered community engagement, and adapted to WeChat's digital infrastructure. By focusing on Fengli's Fireside Talks programme, which was Fengli's most significant initiative to foster a sense of community and create a safe space for participants, as described in the programme's outline (see Appendix 3), this research explores how grassroots feminist groups construct online spaces for solidarity and resistance under restrictive conditions. Specifically, this thesis seeks to address the following research questions:

### ***Research Questions***

- 1) What kind of online feminist community was Fengli?
- 2) What was the role of the Fireside Talks programme for the Fengli online feminist community?

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<sup>1</sup> All personal names used in this thesis are pseudonyms.

- 3) How did Fengli meet and negotiate the expectations from its participants and organisers?
- 4) How did Fengli navigate censorship and what are the obstacles?

Through an ethnographic and netnographic analysis of Fengli In Action's WeChat activities and interviews with its former organisers and participants under the theoretical framework combining Berlant's (2008) *intimate publics* and Zink's (2019) *affective communities*, this thesis investigates how was Fengli's attempt in building an affective feminist community and navigating through censorship in China's censored digital environment.

## 2 About Fengli and the Fireside Talks Programme

### 2.1 The Establishment, Growth and Challenges of Fengli In Action

On December 27, 2020, Xavier, the founder of Fengli In Action, announced the establishment of the community through an article published on the WeChat Official Account. (WeChat Public Accounts, also known as WeChat subscription accounts, are platforms operated by individuals or organisations to publish content and engage with the public on social media (Chang, Ren & Yang, 2018).) The Chinese name 凤梨在行动 (literal translation is Fengli In Action) was originally translated into English as NOT JUST VICTIMS, a name reflecting the founder's personal motivation for creating this space. Between 2016 and 2020, Xavier was an undergraduate student who travelled extensively and shared her experiences on her personal WeChat Official Account, gradually gaining a significant number of followers. However, a traumatic incident in 2018 became the catalyst for her activism. In her own words, "In a village<sup>2</sup>, in the broad daylight, I was almost raped and murdered by a local farmer."<sup>3</sup> This experience profoundly shaped her resolve to raise awareness about gender-based violence (GBV) and contribute to social change. Encouraged by a friend, she began publicly sharing her story and advocating for GBV survivors.

The name 凤梨在行动 carries symbolic meaning: 凤 (Feng) refers to the phoenix, a mythical animal in Chinese mythology often associated with femininity, while 梨 (Li) is homophonic with 力 (Li), meaning "power." The name NOT JUST VICTIMS has two meanings: gender-based violence affects not only its direct victims but also society as a whole, and those who

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<sup>2</sup> All geographic identifiers have been anonymised or generalised.

<sup>3</sup> “从旅游博主到凤梨在行动，我们为什么要反对性别暴力？” (From travel blogger to Not Just Victims, why is it important to fight against gender-based Violence?)  
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/0TUUyPGn1tp3nMsBhmuQwQ>

have suffered violence are not defined solely by victimhood, they are also resilient fighters with diverse identities and professions: We are not just victims; we are also resilient fighters.<sup>3</sup>

As Fengli In Action grew, its scope expanded beyond gender-based violence, evolving into a supportive online feminist community. It hosted a variety of interactive programmes, including Fireside Talks, Reading Circles, and Political Depression Roundtables. The community became a space for women to find solidarity, empowerment, and a shared sense of belonging. In this thesis, I use the literal translation Fengli In Action (short as Fengli) rather than NOT JUST VICTIMS because the former is how the community was widely recognised by its audience.

From late 2020 to July 28, 2023, Fengli In Action remained active for almost three years, nearly the exact duration of China's COVID-19 lockdown period. During this time, it gained approximately 10,000 followers on WeChat Official Accounts and maintained around 400 active participants in its WeChat groups. Based on its WeChat Official Account, Fengli produced content related to gender-based violence featuring personal narratives and feature stories, literature and movie recommendations, and promotions for gender-related events, including online seminars, workshops, and global feminist lectures.

Fengli operated with a rotating team of volunteers who contributed to content writing, event planning, graphic design, translation, and community management. Volunteers were typically recruited on a three-month basis, as most were engaged in full-time studies or employment and could not commit indefinitely. I personally volunteered in Fengli's Activity Group from April 2022 to August 2023. My primary role involved hosting the Fireside Talks and Reading Circles programmes, and curating gender-related event promotions. Occasionally, I also contributed articles. On average, Fengli's articles achieved 500 reads, with exception of some topical pieces, especially those aligned with trending feminist discussions, gained significantly higher engagement, with one article reaching 23,000 reads.

This community is unfortunately not in action anymore due to strict censorship: In its final three months, the community's WeChat Official Account was muted, preventing any new articles or event announcements from being published. The WeChat groups also came under strict monitoring. Even though Fengli is no longer operational, remnants of its community persist. As of this writing, two WeChat social groups formed under Fengli remain active, now self-managed by its former participants, with 385 members in one major group and 278 in the Fireside Talks programme-specific group.

## 2.2 The Fireside Talks Programme

The Fireside Talks programme was conceived as a safe space for women to share their personal stories, discuss experiences, and find emotional and psychological support within the community. We share our stories, and then we share our experiences. Rooted in the tradition of women's circles, which have historically provided spaces for intimate discussion and collective empowerment, the programme aimed to foster connection and solidarity.

The first Fireside Talk session was introduced on International Women's Day in 2021 via Fengli's WeChat Official Account. Unlike formal discussions or structured debates, these sessions were designed to be open-ended and participant-driven, allowing women to speak freely about their experiences, whether related to gender, personal growth, career aspirations, relationships, or everyday struggles. Three sessions were held as an experimental initiative in 2021. The programme reached its peak in 2022, hosting 28 Fireside Talk sessions. In 2023, the most frustrating time, due to increased censorship pressure, only two sessions were held (See Figure 1.).

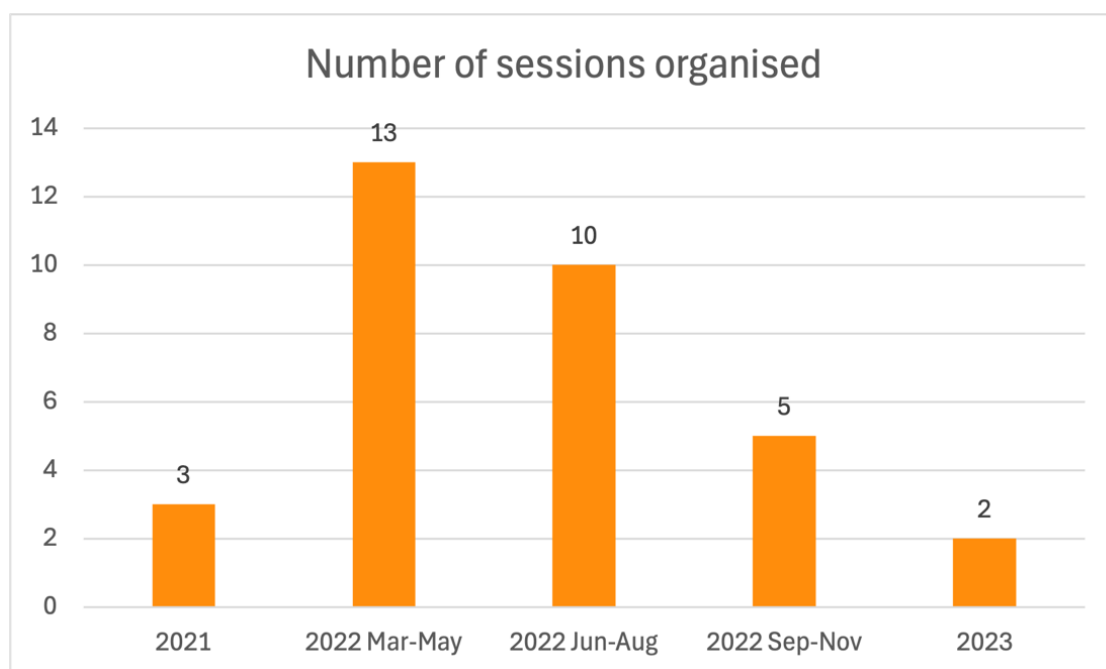


Figure 1. Number of Sessions Organised.

A key element of the programme was its emphasis on creating an inclusive, non-judgmental environment, where participants could express themselves without fear. The official description of the Fireside Talk programme outlined its purpose as follows:

“-What is Fengli’s Fireside Talks programme?”

Fireside Talks programme is originated from ‘women’s circle’, a women-centred event with a long history around the world, and is a platform for women of all ages to communicate with each other. It’s about gender, but it’s also about women’s inner wisdom and spiritual strength. Fireside Talks provide a safe space for women to talk about all aspects of life burden-free. The topics covered are not limited to gender, but can also include personal growth, future prospects, work and study, emotions, family, friendship and love, daily complaints, etc. It can be tender or intense; It can be serious or whimsical, in short, it can be anything you want it to be, and as long as you’re willing to open up, the possibilities are endless.”<sup>4</sup>

The process of organising a Fireside Talk session followed a structured yet flexible model, starting from Fengli volunteers signed up as the moderator/host role; then the host proposed a topic, or, if undecided, worked with the Activity Group to select one; the Activity Group collectively agreed upon the choice of topic; an event announcement was published on Fengli’s WeChat Official Account to recruit participants. After the announcement, once participants signed up, the host contacted them individually via WeChat, adding them as contacts using the provided WeChat IDs. To ensure a women-only space, participants underwent a voice verification process via private voice messages. This step was implemented to confirm that registrants were biological women, maintaining the integrity and safety of the community. Prior to the event, the host sent out the meeting link to verified participants. During the Fireside Talk session, participants engaged in open discussions, facilitated by the host.

The requirement for participation in Fengli’s Fireside Talks programme to be “biological women” stems from a combination of practical concerns and cultural attitudes towards transgender people. On one hand, participants expressed concerns about the potential for heterosexual men to pretend to be transwomen, seeking entry into feminist spaces and causing disruption. This reflects broader societal anxieties about the authenticity of gender identities and the safety of women-only spaces. On the other hand, the exclusionary practice can also be linked to the long-standing cultural and institutional marginalisation of transgender people in

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<sup>4</sup> “-什么是凤梨女性围炉夜谈？”

女性的围炉夜谈源自在世界范围内有着非常悠久历史的以女性为主体的活动 women’s circle，是各个年龄段的女性相互交流的一个平台。它关乎性别，也关乎女性的内在智慧与精神力量。女性围炉夜谈为女性提供一个安全的空间，无忧无虑地畅谈生活的方方面面、点点滴滴。所涉及的话题不止于性别，还可以包括个人成长、未来展望、工作学习、情感家庭、友情爱情、日常吐槽等。它可以是温情的，也可以是激烈的；可以是严肃认真的，也可以是异想天开的，总之，它可以是你希望它成为的任何样子，只要你愿意敞开心扉，这里就有无限可能。”

China, where transgender individuals face significant social and legal challenges. The attitudes towards transgender people and their rights in China are complex, reflecting both growing societal support and continued deep-seated resistance, especially in contexts where gender roles are viewed as natural or immutable (Luhur et al., 2021). Thus, the exclusion of trans women from Fengli's Fireside Talks programme can be seen as both a precautionary measure against potential disruption and as an implicit reflection of the broader challenges faced by the transgender community in China. This decision, while not explicitly transphobic in intent, is nonetheless influenced by these socio-cultural dynamics and reflects the ongoing negotiation of gender norms within Chinese feminist spaces. Furthermore, even though later Fengli recruited transwomen volunteers, Fengli's participants were not too welcoming to the transwoman volunteer. This will be further discussed in the Section 6 and 7.

The core of the Fireside Talks programme is a safe space for female experiences and expressions, is to support each other emotionally and psychologically. It was an ambitious experiment in digital feminist organising, spearheaded by a group of young feminists with a shared vision for empowerment and solidarity. While Fengli In Action may no longer exist as an active organisation, its legacy remains in the form of the conversations it sparked, the connections it built, and the alternative feminist space it created, however temporary, in an era of increasing censorship and socio-political challenges.

### **3 Literature Review**

#### **3.1 The Rise of Digital Feminist Activism in China**

Feminists have increasingly turned to digital media and online platforms to gain visibility, mobilise support, and advocate for gender equality. This shift marks a significant departure from previous feminist paradigms, positioning cyberactivism as a key driver of feminist discourse.

Digital feminist activism, often referred to as cyberfeminism, hashtag activism, or viral feminism, has opened new pathways for visibility, engagement, and transnational networking (Olson, 2016; Roth-Cohen, 2021). Through the lens of hashtag activism, Olson (2016) explores how online platforms help raise awareness, as seen in the #BringBackOurGirls movement. This hashtag captured global attention for the kidnapped Chibok girls in Nigeria, illustrating how hashtags serve as both community-building tools and public forums for political engagement (Olson, 2016). The online spaces allow activists to mobilise and connect

freely across social and political boundaries. In contexts such as fat activism, digital platforms provide space for marginalised groups to reclaim visibility. Heiselberg and Raun (2024) show how Instagram, through hashtags like #fatacceptance and #bodypositivity, empowers activists to challenge societal norms around body image. This movement aligns with cyberfeminism's capacity to transcend individual experiences and connect communities of shared struggle, promoting social change through collective online identity and discourse. Movements such as #MeToo are studied, and similar modes of activism are applied across the world: in Korea, communities like Megalia and Womad were influential between 2015-2019 (Jeong & Lee, 2018; Koo, 2019); in Nigeria and Israeli, activists adopt hashtag activism to fight back and against the assaults and deprivation women are facing (Olson, 2016; Aharoni, 2023).

The rise of digital feminism in China has been transformative, providing new modes of advocacy and engagement (Chang, Ren & Yang, 2018). In China, researchers suggest that digital platforms have facilitated novel forms of feminist expression, enabled young women's political involvement, and fostered the growth of a translocal and transnational feminist culture (Chang & Tian, 2020). Hou (2020), based on ethnographic online observations from 2012 to 2018 and interviews with feminist activists, identifies that digital feminism in China has evolved while also highlighting its inherent limitations. Despite its reach, cyberfeminist activism faces challenges in China. For instance, the #MeToo movement encountered intense censorship, compelling activists to avoid politicised hashtags (Han & Liu, 2023). Instead, feminists opted for media-led hashtags, which allowed evasion of censorship but limited collective impact.

Chinese digital feminism, stifled by a government that portrays it as a Western threat, grapples with complex issues like cyber misogyny and class bias that restrict its broader transformative potential (Han & Liu, 2023). Digital platforms have undeniably enhanced feminist activism, enabling unique forms of expression and connectivity. However, the limitations of cyberfeminism in China, whether through censorship, or short-lived trends, highlight the importance of reinvestigating online efforts to ensure sustained, culturally sensitive, and impactful feminist advocacy.

### **3.2 Online Feminist Activism during COVID-19 Lockdown on WeChat and The Role of Affect in Feminist Communities**

Feminist communities are not only sites of activism but also spaces of emotional connection, solidarity, and collective care. Many feminist organisations and communities in China rely on

WeChat Official Accounts as their primary media platform for outreach and advocacy. Scholars have extensively discussed feminist initiatives such as Feminist's Voices (女权之声), the Women's Awakening Network (WAN, 新媒体女性网络) (Wang & Driscoll, 2019), and Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV) (Mao, 2020). WAN, which arose from a joint union of several female journalists based in Guangzhou founded in 2004, was registered as an NGO in 2013 (Wang & Driscoll, 2019). By the time GWWV was established, social media had become a vital arena for grassroots feminist activism in China. By looking at GWWV, Mao (2020) explores that WeChat and its grassroots users create both opportunities and challenges for feminist development in China.

A growing body of research has explored how the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected women, exacerbating labour market inequalities, care burdens, and gender-based violence within households (Zhang, 2022). As the gendered impacts of the pandemic became more pronounced, feminist groups and activists worldwide mobilised to address women's vulnerabilities and contest gender injustice and inequality (Zhang, 2022). In China, the internet and social media facilitated feminist campaigns, enabling activism to continue despite physical isolation. Bao (2020) highlights that in times of crisis, social media not only facilitates activism but also serves as an emotional refuge. The heightened emotional intensity of crises can drive stronger engagement and community formation, as individuals seek support and solidarity in moments of uncertainty (Bao, 2020). During the lockdown, WeChat played a crucial role in sustaining feminist networks, allowing activists to remain connected even in physical isolation. WeChat connected people in a time when physical connection was impossible and allowed individuals from different geographical locations to form new connections and activist networks. Feminist communities during this period were shaped by affective bonds, they were not only spaces for political advocacy but also for emotional survival (Bao, 2020; Zhang, 2022). Digital platforms allowed women to share personal experiences, process trauma, and collectively cope with the stress of isolation, state suppression, and gendered violence.

Fengli In Action was one of these communities born during the COVID-19 lockdown, positioning itself as both an activist space and a support network. Unlike open-access platforms like Weibo and Twitter, Fengli relied on WeChat's semi-private ecosystem, where it could create intimate, closed-group interactions. One of Fengli's key initiatives, the Fireside Talk programme, embodied the role of affect in feminist digital spaces. While existing studies

discuss how WeChat fosters general social connectivity, there remains a gap in the literature on how feminist communities use WeChat to sustain affective engagement and resistance. This study aims to bridge that gap by analysing Fengli In Action as a case study of affective community-building and grassroots feminist organising on WeChat during the COVID-19 lockdown. By focusing on how digital feminist spaces function as emotional, political, and activist platforms, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of affect in feminist digital activism under conditions of crisis and censorship.

### **3.3 The Impact of Censorship and Authoritarian Control on Online Activism**

Censorship in China has significantly hindered digital feminist activism, with posts deleted and accounts suspended. As many feminist organisations in China rely on WeChat Official Accounts, this dependence also makes them highly vulnerable to state surveillance and suppression. WAN's WeChat account was shut down twice in 2015, first for reporting the detention of "Feminists Five" and later for commemorating the event (Wang & Driscoll, 2019). It is no exception for Fengli In Action. Fengli was muted for three months at the end of 2022 and again after March 2023, preventing its WeChat Official Account from publishing articles or promoting activities. Once an account is muted, warned, or deleted, it remains under heightened surveillance and scrutiny, making any future activism precarious.

Dealing with the censorship, young feminist activists take up "small-scale guerrilla-style actions to fight the patriarchal state" (Liao, 2020, pp.264): using homophones and coded language, selling feminist-themed merchandise (e.g., T-shirts, stickers, and tote bags with feminist slogans) through online stores, embedding feminist messages in artistic and cultural productions. However, besides explicit and direct suppression as muting and suspension, linguistic and cultural limitations also hinder feminist online activism (Wang & Driscoll, 2019). The stigmatisation of feminism has made it a politically sensitive and taboo subject in many contexts, limiting open discourse. Such censorship restricts academic freedom, effectively steering research away from topics that could raise awareness of feminism and activism in China (Liao, 2020).

Censorship in China does not always result in complete silencing, activists have developed adaptive strategies to counteract information suppression. Sun and Wright (2023) introduce the concept of "relay activism", which describes how activists engage in collective, decentralised efforts to continuously re-upload, alter, and disseminate censored content. A notable example is the case of COVID-19 whistleblower Dr. Ai Fen, where Chinese netizens

resisted government censorship by circulating her story across multiple digital platforms (Sun & Wright, 2023). Activists used WeChat, GitHub, and other digital tools to create backups and ensure that suppressed information remained accessible. This form of resistance demonstrates the fluid, adaptive, and decentralised nature of digital resistance in authoritarian contexts (Sun & Wright, 2023).

While Fengli In Action operated within a feminist framework, its experience with state censorship aligns with broader patterns of digital suppression in China. The limitations placed on Fengli reflect how grassroots feminist communities must constantly navigate the tensions between visibility, activism, and survival in a heavily censored environment. This study contributes to the growing discourse on digital resistance by examining how Fengli attempted to maintain its online presence, how it was ultimately suppressed, and how its members adapted to a hostile digital landscape.

Fengli In Action exemplifies how young feminist activists in China strategically navigated digital censorship, leveraging WeChat as a platform for community-building, advocacy, and resistance. However, its eventual suppression underscores the challenges grassroots feminist communities face under an increasingly restrictive political climate. This study documents Fengli's trajectory, its emergence during the COVID-19 lockdown, its affective engagement with participants, its struggles with state censorship, and its eventual silencing, to highlight both the opportunities and limitations of digital feminist activism in China. By examining the perspectives of previous participants and organisers, this research explores the affective dynamics within Fengli, including the interactions between organisers and participants, relationships among community members, and the challenges of sustaining engagement.

#### **4 Theoretical Framework**

This study explores how Fengli In Action, an online feminist community operating on WeChat during the COVID-19 lockdown in China, attempted to construct an affective community of solidarity, resistance, and emotional engagement. To understand the dynamics of digital feminist activism in this context, this research draws on two theoretical concepts of *intimate publics* (Berlant, 2008) and *affective communities* (Zink, 2019), which offer lenses through which to examine how feminist collectivity was affectively articulated and politically negotiated within a digitally censored and precarious environment.

Lauren Berlant's concept of intimate publics emerges from their broader critique of American cultural narratives in *The Female Complaint* (2008), in which sentimentality becomes a site of social pedagogy and lateral belonging. These publics are not formed around deliberative reason or ideological consensus, but through affective recognition and emotional intelligibility, typically enabled by mediated storytelling. Central to intimate publics is what Berlant calls "a structure of feeling" (pp.266), a kind of lateral intimacy where strangers come to feel emotionally proximate by consuming narratives of suffering, resilience, and hope that mirror their own experiences. Berlant argues that these publics offer a "promise of belonging" (pp.ix), allowing participants to see their own private struggles refracted as socially meaningful, even politically significant. In *The Female Complaint*, Berlant (2008) demonstrates how women's culture (e.g., sentimental novels, talk shows, "chick lit") operates not simply as entertainment but as a circulating emotional pedagogy, where readers and viewers rehearse familiar scenarios of disappointment, desire, and coping. These narratives do not necessarily aim to challenge power structures but function as spaces of consolation, adaptation, and emotional survival, particularly when structural transformation feels out of reach.

In *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*, Dobson et al. (2018) extend Berlant's concept into the realm of networked intimacy, arguing that social media platforms now function as sites where intimate publics are not only formed, but commodified, datafied, and algorithmically managed. These platforms shape new affective economies while simultaneously exposing users to the risks of surveillance and exploitation. Azhar and Boler (2023) further argue that intimate publics in digital media, while promising forms of ambient citizenship and political belonging, often collapse under the contradictions of "cruel optimism" (pp.359), where desires for connection are routed through commodified infrastructures that frustrate actual change.

Building on Berlant, this study reads Fengli's Fireside Talks as both a sentimental infrastructure of feminist recognition and a critical space for emotional survival. These talks are similar to the structure of an intimate public: shared narratives of gendered pain, digital mediation, and affective consolation. But they also raise urgent questions about the limits of such recognition in authoritarian regimes. As Berlant asks: does feeling together equate to acting together? This thesis interrogates whether Fengli's affective storytelling simply reaffirmed survival or catalysed resistance. Moreover, Berlant characterises intimate publics as "juxtapolitical" (pp.x), adjacent to politics but not fully within its institutional sphere, and

are most politically generative when their sentimental logics are mobilised during times of crisis. This notion is especially relevant in China and during COVID-19 lockdown, where political speech is tightly monitored and overt feminist discord is often silenced. The emotional and narrative strategies within Fengli allowed for oblique forms of critique and subtle acts of resistance, even while remaining aesthetically and discursively anchored in normative registers of care and survival.

However, scholars like Al-Ali (2003) problematised the transferability of affect-driven frameworks into authoritarian or postcolonial settings in non-Western countries even though not explicitly critique Berlant by name. Later, Al-Ali (2019) critiques the liberal feminist tendency to universalise concepts like recognition, visibility, and emotional discourse, warning that these frameworks often fail to engage with the material and geopolitical specificities of Middle Eastern women's struggles. Al-Ali's critique rings true in the case of *Fengli In Action*, where emotional solidarity may offer fleeting comfort, yet remains precariously situated within a surveilled, censored, and politically constrained digital environment (Al-Ali, 2019). This thesis thus interrogates how feminist collectivity is differently structured and threatened under authoritarianism, even as it continues to draw on the hopeful possibilities articulated in affective frameworks.

Where Berlant emphasises durable emotional narratives and mediated recognition, Zink (2019) develops the concept of affective communities to describe momentary, immersive collectives that arise from mutual affectability, the capacity to sense and be affected by others in shared space. Drawing from affect theory, ritual theory, and new materialism, Zink presents affective communities as non-institutional, sensually immersive, and emotionally contagious. They emerge through ephemeral moments of embodied resonance, such as dancing, protesting, or even shared laughter, where bodies align not ideologically but affectively. Zink positions affective communities against traditional sociological models of community that presume coherence, longevity, or shared purpose. Instead, she foregrounds "sensual infrastructures" (Zink, 2019, pp.289), the textures, rhythms, and atmospheres through which community is felt rather than declared. Drawing on theorists like Durkheim, Simmel, and Massumi, she shows that movement, mimicry, and contagion are central to how such communities form. These are not publics grounded in discourse or meaning, but collectives that operate in the register of pre-reflexive resonance, often dissolving as quickly as they emerge, yet leaving behind powerful emotional residues. Nevertheless, as Zink and later

scholars like Baumann (2022) emphasise, these communities are fragile, disintegrating when affective alignment dissipates, or when participants fail to feel “the right way” (pp.387).

This lens offers a crucial complement to Berlant. While *Fengli In Action* can be read as an intimate public organised around narrative and emotional coherence, it can also be understood as an affective community, a more fluid, immediate space where solidarity was forged in real-time, through affective intensities generated by the pandemic, digital isolation, and the emotional urgency of feminist dialogue. This study adopts Zink’s framework to ask: What kind of online feminist community was *Fengli*? During the pandemic, *Fengli*’s temporal precarity mirrored the logic of affective communities: it came into being not through planned agendas but through affective need. Yet unlike Zink’s largely celebratory account, this thesis considers the political and infrastructural fragility of such formations under authoritarian constraint. What happens to fleeting solidarities when digital platforms become zones of risk, and affective mobilisation is subject to surveillance?

Together, Berlant’s and Zink’s frameworks reveal two sides of feminist collectivity: the durable emotional architectures of recognition and narrative (intimate publics), and the transient, event-driven solidarities of mutual resonance (affective communities). Berlant accounts for discursive coherence and cultural continuity, while Zink captures the sensory immediacy and spontaneity of affective alignment. In applying both, this thesis situates *Fengli In Action* at the intersection of durable emotional infrastructure and ephemeral affective intensities. However, both models require adaptation to the Chinese digital context. Berlant’s framework presumes a degree of freedom in media circulation that is sharply limited under China’s authoritarian regime. Meanwhile, Zink’s celebration of fleeting collectivity underplays the risks of dissolution and erasure under censorship. This study thus contributes to feminist media theory by extending these models to contexts where state control, digital surveillance, and platform fragility structure the possibilities of feminist expression. In particular, WeChat, as a semi-private, state-regulated platform, functions as both enabler and constraint. It fosters intimacy through voice messages, small group chats, and ephemerality (e.g., vanishing posts), but simultaneously limits visibility, curtails dissent, and enforces moderation. This duality makes *Fengli* a poignant case study for exploring how emotional solidarity operates under authoritarian digital conditions.

Building on recent literature on digital feminism in China that shows the growth of new modes of feminist expression, enabling young women’s political involvement, and fostering a

translocal and transnational feminist culture (Chang & Tian, 2020), this framework provides insight into the dynamic nature of feminist communities in China, especially during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic exacerbated gender inequalities and violence, feminist groups mobilised online to address women's vulnerabilities and contest gender injustice (Zhang, 2022). The heightened emotional intensity of the crisis drove stronger engagement, creating feminist communities that were not only spaces for political activism but also for emotional survival (Bao, 2020). This thesis argues that affect, not just discourse or visibility, is central to how feminist collectives form, survive, and resist. *Fengli In Action* emerged not only as a discursive space of critique but as a sensorial and affective environment, enabling survival, adaptation, and relational care under pressure. By synthesising Berlant's intimate publics and Zink's affective communities, this dual framework enables the study to interrogate both the emotional glue that sustains community and the political fractures that threaten its cohesion. It bridges the gap between affective engagement and political resistance, offering a deeper understanding of how feminist digital activism in China operates not only through ideology and critique, but through the lived intensity of emotional collectivity.

## **5 Research Data and Methods**

### **5.1 An Explanation of the Platform: WeChat and WeChat Official Accounts**

WeChat is a dominant digital ecosystem in China, with over 1.3 billion users worldwide as of 2024 (Thomala, 2025). It has become deeply embedded in daily life, integrating instant messaging, mobile payments, news consumption, and social networking. Among its features, WeChat Official Accounts serve as a primary information source, with about three-quarters of users following them primarily for news (Tencent Research Institute, 2015). The platform's networked structure enables faster information dissemination and allows users to filter content based on their interests. As WeChat and self-media continue to grow in influence, they are reshaping the balance of media discourse, rivalling traditional media and news apps as core information channels (Tencent Research Institute, 2015). As news and information shift from traditional media to new media in China, organisations across sectors, including media, government, and businesses, use WeChat public accounts to engage audiences and share content (Pan & Mou, 2024).

The advances in information dissemination on social media generally enable the freer flow of information and connections with less constraints compared with traditional media (Chang, Ren & Yang, 2018). Specifically, according to Wang and Gu (2016), the design of WeChat functions in a way that favours activism to happen in the public sphere within the People's Republic of China, facilitating grassroots movements. It is because WeChat's design blurs the definite boundary between public and private spaces since the information flows between private Friend Circles and public WeChat Official Accounts (Wang & Gu, 2016). This fluidity has enabled diverse social practices on WeChat, from business and self-branding (Wang & Sandner, 2019) to counter-narratives and activist engagement (Corsaro, 2023). Studies highlight how users leverage diary-writing, podcasts, and collective purchasing groups to foster alternative networks of knowledge-sharing and emotional support, further complicating the distinction between the public/political and private/intimate spheres (Corsaro, 2023).

In this context, Fengli In Action operated as a semi-private feminist space, using WeChat to connect participants, host discussions, and disseminate feminist content. However, as with many grassroots feminist initiatives in China, its reliance on WeChat also made it vulnerable to state censorship and platform restrictions.

## **5.2 Research Approach and Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative approach, combining ethnography and netnography (Roth-Cohen, 2021) methodologies to examine the construction, operation, and suppression of Fengli as an online feminist community. This research is grounded in both a broader social and political context and a personal insider perspective, focusing on the experiences of participants and organisers. The study draws on data from Fengli's WeChat Official Accounts and digital interactions within its community, offering a nuanced understanding of how these dynamics unfold within the constrained environment of censorship.

Given my insider positionality as one of the former organisers of Fengli's Fireside Talks programme, this study engages in reflexive ethnography, wherein I reflect on my personal experiences while maintaining a critical research perspective. Insider research poses ethical and epistemological challenges, including issues of objectivity, power dynamics, and emotional labour (Bowen, 2023). Bowen (2023) highlights the need for transparency and reflexivity, advocating for an approach that acknowledges subjectivity while fostering trust with participants. Reflecting on my position in past activities and conducting a collaborative,

non-invasive approach is a fair method to interact with interviewees. Given my involvement, I remain attuned to power asymmetries and the emotional complexities of insider research, ensuring that both personal insight and critical distance inform my findings.

While the research is primarily ethnographic, this thesis also draws upon netnography, a qualitative method for analysing online community data (Roth-Cohen, 2021), which is particularly relevant for analysing digital feminist spaces operating under censorship. Following Roth-Cohen's (2021) framework, this study examines Fengli's feminist WeChat groups, the identification and classification of WeChat Official Account publications, and digital interactions within the Fengli community. These sources provide insight into how community members expressed solidarity, shared knowledge and responded to censorship in real-time.

### **5.3 Data Collection and Process**

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with four former participants and four former organisers of the Fireside Talks programme. I contacted the initiators of this community and first asked for permission to conduct this research using the remaining social groups. Then, I proceeded to find respondents from the two major Fengli WeChat groups and one volunteer WeChat group by disseminating a research invitation poster. The number of respondents accepting the interview invitation is eight, four former participants and four former organisers. The interviews were carried out as semi-structured in-depth interviews of 1.5 hours per interviewee (See interview questions in Appendix 1 and 2.). The eight respondents to my interview invitations and their participation information are listed below (See Table 1 and 2.). In accordance with the privacy notice for scientific research and EU General Data Protection Regulation Art 13 and 14, and given the sensitive nature of feminist activism under censorship, this study intends to ensure participant anonymity, the interview data is pseudonymised in the transcription. These interviews provide firsthand perspectives on community participation and organisational challenges. By integrating digital content analysis with participant narratives, this study presents a comprehensive view of how Fengli functioned as an online feminist community, while also documenting its limitations and eventual decline under state control. Although the number of respondents is limited, their insights provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of Fengli's internal dynamics and community interactions.

Table 1. Participants of Fireside Talks Programme and Participated Themes

Pseudonym	Participated theme	Age
Cecile	Marriage and Feminism	Early 30
Laura	Humour and Gender	Late 20
Shela	Marriage and Feminism	Mid 30
Yolanda	Marriage and Feminism	Early 20

Table 2. Organisers of Fengli In Action and Join Time

Pseudonym	Joined Fengli (in)	Age
Helena	Early 2021	Early 20
Lilia	Early 2022	Early 20
Dana	Late 2022	Early 20
Winola	Late 2022	Early 20

Thematic analysis is employed to identify themes within the collected data. Using NVivo software, interview data is systematically categorised and coded, allowing for an organised interpretation of themes related to affective engagement, digital activism, and the constraints imposed by censorship. This analytical process ensures that both explicit and underlying narratives within Fengli's online interactions are carefully examined.

#### 5.4 Data Limitations and Ethical Considerations

One of the key limitations of this study is the recency of participant experiences. The most engaged, three out of four participant respondents, were participants from the final episode of the Fireside Talks programme, which took place on February 25, 2023. This session, themed "Marriage and Feminism," occurred just weeks before Fengli was muted and monitored and six months before its official suspension. The proximity of this event to Fengli's closure meant that participants were able to recall their experiences with clarity, providing detailed insights into the programme's dynamics, challenges, and community impact. However, the study also faces certain limitations due to its reliance on interviews from participants participating in a single, later stage session of Fengli's Fireside Talks programme. Since earlier Fireside Talk sessions took place over two years before the final episode, the research may not fully capture the long-term evolution of the community or the changes in discourse

and engagement over time. As a result, there is a risk that the study provides a snapshot of Fengli's final stage rather than a holistic historical account of its development. However, to mitigate this limitation, interviews with former organisers offer additional insights into Fengli's earlier phases, internal decision-making, and strategic adaptations over time. Their accounts, when combined with participant interviews, provide a more layered understanding of Fengli's broader trajectory. Nevertheless, this study is based on a relatively small sample of eight respondents, which limits its generalisability.

## 6 Findings

### 6.1 A Star in a Million: Fengli In Action's Community Identity

As many online feminist communities spontaneously stemmed from the challenging time, Fengli was one of them, riding the tide together. This section examines how Fengli In Action emerged as a distinctive online feminist community during the politically charged period of the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores the community's formation through collective emotional experiences, co-creation between organisers and participants, and its complex relationship with notions of grassroots identity, privilege, and feminist activism within the restrictive context of Chinese socio-political censorship.

#### 6.1.1 A Community Made by Times and Co-Created with Participants

Fengli emerged during a politically sensitive period, the COVID-19 pandemic, when restrictions on physical gatherings made digital activism a vital space for feminist discourse (Bao, 2020; Zhang, 2022). Fengli's organisers' reflections illustrate this heightened phase of digital feminist activism in China. Lilia noted:

“Fengli was only established in 2021. From the very beginning, the organisation was built in a rather tough socio-political climate. In such a challenging environment, we needed an outlet to process our emotions, and that's how this event came to be.”<sup>5</sup>

During this time, numerous grassroots feminist communities surfaced on WeChat. According to Lilia, she found many unconventional feminist accounts and communities on WeChat during that period, most were created by individuals and had a small number of followers.

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<sup>5</sup> 最开始风梨它也是 2021 年才有的这么一个组织，它的组织建设之初所在的时代背景就有一点 tough，然后我们在很 tough 的环境下需要疏解心理，就有了这么一个活动。

Echoing this statement, Winola, Dana, and Cecile referenced feminist accounts like ShaDiaFengWeiXiaoMaoMi (沙嗲风味小猫咪, Satay Flavour Kitties), Avoice, and Shero, in which latter two were closely collaborated with Fengli. However, most of these feminist-related accounts were shut down by the time of writing, just as Fengli. Dana suggested that the level of political risk determined whether a feminist initiative could survive. She observed that feminist spaces discussing “high-risk” topics, such as gender-based violence or state repression, were often targeted by censors, while those focusing on less politically sensitive issues, such as eating disorders, faced fewer restrictions.

The toughness of sensitive time motivated unconventional ways of speaking up and gathering communities (Sun & Wright, 2023), moreover, it also enlightened and engaged more common citizens to criticise. Dana noticed that at that time, participants and organisers were furious, and their discussion/sharing was more politically sensitive. High-profile gender-based violence cases, such as the 2022 Tangshan Restaurant Attack incident<sup>6</sup> and the Xuzhou Chained Woman incident<sup>7</sup>, triggered public outrage and intensified feminist discussions. Winola explained that such incidents were a catalyst for her activism and one of the reasons she decided to join Fengli as a volunteer:

“At the time, I read about the Tangshan Restaurant Attack incident, and I was already in a state of anger. Later, I came across this community (Fengli) and decided to join.”<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Shela reflected on how the political urgency of the time heightened her engagement, making her more vocal and assertive:

“I feel like that group carried a lot of my aggression toward public affairs during those years, right? I was constantly expressing and asserting my opinions,

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<sup>6</sup> “On 10 June 2022, a group of men assaulted four women at a barbecue restaurant in Lubei District, Tangshan. The surveillance footage was circulated on the Internet soon after the incident, causing extensive discussions on multiple social media platforms in China.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022\\_Tangshan\\_restaurant\\_attack](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Tangshan_restaurant_attack)

<sup>7</sup> “The Xuzhou chained woman incident (Chinese: 徐州铁链女事件), also known as the Xuzhou eight-child mother incident (Chinese: 徐州八孩母亲事件), is a case of human trafficking, false imprisonment, sexual assault, severe mistreatment, and subsequent events that came to light in late January 2022 in Xuzhou’s Feng County, Jiangsu, People’s Republic of China. The video of a mentally disturbed and unlawfully imprisoned woman who was chained to a wall and who gave birth to eight children went viral on China’s internet and sparked a huge public outcry.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xuzhou\\_chained\\_woman\\_incident](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xuzhou_chained_woman_incident)

<sup>8</sup> 主要是当时我看唐山打人事件，我本身就处在一个比较愤怒的状态，后来来到了这个社群，然后就加入了。

challenging others, and also facing attacks in return. But in recent years, I've rarely engaged in such intense expression of viewpoints anymore.”<sup>9</sup>

The emotional intensity and anger common among participants and organisers facilitated emotional proximity, aligning with Berlant's (2008) concept of intimate publics, communities bound by shared emotional resonance rather than explicit ideological alignment.

Thus, Fengli navigated censorship while providing emotional solace, embodying a community both critical of and shaped by its socio-political context. However, its limitations were clear: despite reaching a peak in feminist discourse, tangible activism remained largely elusive. Fengli's existence reflected Berlant's (2008) assertion that intimate publics often offer emotional consolation without fundamentally challenging prevailing power structures.

Fengli's Fireside Talk programme and its WeChat groups were not solely top-down initiatives; rather, they were co-created by both organisers and participants. Volunteers were not just facilitators but also active participants. Winola shared that she also got to tell her own stories in the Fireside Talk programme. She felt that participants and organisers were complimentary. When she was sharing, she was a participant herself. Lilia also described an instance in which a participant recommended a book during a Fireside Talks session, which later had a profound impact on her feminist understanding. She considered this an unexpected but valuable outcome of her engagement with the programme. She considered this an unexpected but valuable outcome she gained from hosting Fireside Talks. Moreover, Lilia pointed out that a significant part of Fengli's volunteers stem from our audience/participants, including Lilia, Winola, Dana and the researcher. This fluid movement between participant and organiser roles highlighted the dynamic and organic nature of community-building within Fengli. This fluidity exemplifying Zink's (2019) depiction of affective communities as fluid, immersive, and emotionally contagious. By participating in the Fireside Talks, organisers and participants were both sensually immersive and emotionally contagious. The immersion and contagion retained them, either continue being participants or signing up to be part of the volunteer team.

Beyond Fireside Talks, Fengli's WeChat groups became spaces of spontaneous interaction and peer support. Helena, one of the lead organisers and leader of the Activity Group,

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<sup>9</sup> 我觉得好像是我应该说是那个群在那几年里面承接了我非常大的对于公共事务的攻击性，对吧？我在里面疯狂的去表达观点，输出观点，攻击别人，然后也承受别人的攻击。其实到这几年我已经很少再做那么强烈的观点输出的事了。

admitted that while the initial intent was merely to maintain engagement between events, the groups evolved into self-sustaining spaces where participants actively supported one another:

“I think the overall atmosphere has always been quite good. The group has been active, and everyone is very supportive. When someone shares an experience where they need support, others are always willing to give feedback. I think this is great, especially considering that we’re all strangers to each other. Yeah, this aspect left a deep impression on me.”<sup>10</sup>

Even after Fengli ceased operations, two WeChat groups remained active, with former participants occasionally posting articles, viewpoints, and personal stories. Both Winola and Helena noted that this spontaneous persistence reflected the community’s lasting impact, even in the absence of its original structure. Winola noted that even after Fengli disbanded, participants still occasionally posted in the WeChat group, demonstrating a lingering sense of community:

“Maybe it was a mass message, but I don’t think that’s really the key point. For me, what matters is that at such moments, people still think of Fengli or other all-women groups. At the very least, whether they are in Fengli or not, they can still find their own community elsewhere. That, to me, is what’s more important, it’s not just about Fengli being the only place where they can find a community. ...Through Fengli, people had a platform to connect with others and engage in conversations with different people. I think that is far more meaningful than just keeping everyone within Fengli’s groups or events. After all, our goal was never just about Fengli itself, but about creating a space where women could express themselves. That’s how I see it.”<sup>11</sup>

Cecile’s description echoed Winola’s answer in the way that they both considered the Fireside Talk programme to play a connecting and encouraging role that linked people together as a community. As for Dana, she believed that the community need not be omniscient or omnipresent. It should nurture participants and water you; or like a shelter, put a roof over you when you need a place to hide from the hurricane outside; or an umbrella over your head

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<sup>10</sup> 整体氛围我觉得一直比较好，然后群里的人也比较活跃，然后大家也都非常的 supportive，就是有时候有些姐妹她如果分享一些需要别人支持到她的一些经历什么，大家都可以给予一些反馈，所以我觉得这一点我觉得还是很好的，因为毕竟大家都是陌生人。对，我觉得这一点对我来说对印象比较深刻。

<sup>11</sup> 你会发现尽管凤梨到解散到现在，其实那个群里还是有时候经常会有人跳出来讲话，然后会发一些什么，我觉得是有的，至少大家会愿意把自己的一些观点去发到凤梨的社群里。……他可能是群发的，但是我觉得这好像并不是一个关键，反正对我来说是重点是，……这个时候能想到凤梨或者能想到别的全女群，我觉得也蛮至少无论他们是不是在凤梨，他在别的地方也能找到自己的 community，我觉得这是更重要的，而并不代表就不仅仅是他只有在凤梨才能找到自己的 community。……在凤梨这里你有了一个平台去认识别人，去跟不同的人交流。我觉得这比仅仅是把这些人就是 keep 在凤梨所建的群或者凤梨所搞的活动里更有意义的一件事，因为我们本身也并不是为了让凤梨怎么样，而是为了让这些女性能有一个抒发的平台，我是这么想的。

when it's raining. This lingering impact underscores Fengli's place at the intersection of durable emotional infrastructure and ephemeral affective intensities, contributing subtly yet significantly to the broader landscape of Chinese online feminist activism.

### 6.1.2 Questioning "Grassroots": A Window into the Realities of Chinese Feminism

Fengli was initially conceived as a grassroots feminist community, operating outside institutional structures and without formal NGO status. It was founded by a young college student in her early 20s, alongside other student volunteers. Helena described its beginnings as: "It started from nothing (是白手起家的)". However, it is questioned by two participants, Cecile and Laura, and two organisers, Winola and Dana, during interviews that if Fengli counted as a "grassroots" community. Winola pointed out that many of Fengli's volunteers have international education backgrounds coming from middle-class families, including herself who received secondary and higher education in the North America. By the time of this study, Helena and Lilia are pursuing their graduate degree in Europe. This raised broader concerns about who has the resources to engage in feminist activism. A prevailing notion among respondents was that feminism requires a certain degree of privilege, namely, financial security, higher education, and the ability to study abroad. As a result, there was an implicit suggestion that once an activist enters an international academic or professional space, they may no longer be considered "grassroots". Yet, importantly, Fengli, whether grassroots or not, introduced and provided an affective feminist space to its audience.

This liberated middle-class image can be identified in the participant's responses as well. Cecile referred to historical feminist movements and applied the previous modes of women's liberation to understanding the mechanism of Fireside Talks and the role of Fengli:

"In previous waves of the feminist movements, there were two groups of women involved in the talks, one group to be liberated and the other group who thought that they had liberated themselves and wanted to help more by doing theoretical discussions, so it was perfectly fine for these two groups to get together, that is, one group of people were the ones who knew, and the other the ones who were receiving."<sup>12</sup>

Cecile's analysis placed Fengli's organisers within the "liberated" group while positioning participants as those still seeking empowerment. However, this binary was complicated by the

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<sup>12</sup> 几波女性主义浪运动的时候，他们的那些围炉夜谈都是涉及到两批女孩子的，一批是待解放的女生，另外一批是自认为已经把自己解放了的，然后想要帮助更多人的那种做理论探讨的女生，那么这两批人在一起完全是可以，就是一批人是知与者，另外一批人是接受帮助的人。

backgrounds of many participants, who themselves belonged to highly educated, middle-class circles. Winola, who had access to participants' activity sign-up sheets, noticed that many attendees were well-educated with international study experiences. Cecile herself is a college researcher, and Shela is an urban planner. This raises an important question for future study: what does "grassroots" mean in the contemporary Chinese feminist landscape and how does this definition gap affect feminist activism in China?

## **6.2 Affective Expectations: Material Specificities of Chinese Women's Struggles**

This section investigates the role of Fengli In Action's Fireside Talks programme as a central initiative intended to foster emotional support and community among its participants. Using insights from in-depth interviews with organisers and participants, it explores their motivations, experiences, and perceptions regarding whether the programme met its goals. Interacting with Al-Ali's (2019) critique of affective framework's failure in engaging with the material specificities of non-Western women, this section analyses how participants' and organisers' motivations, experiences, and perceptions ensemble reflect, constitute, and highlight the material specificities of Chinese women's struggles within an attempted affective framework in Fengli's community.

For the volunteers who hosted Fireside Talks, the programme was designed to be a warming virtual space, where participants could share, listen, support, and empower each others, which resonates the structure of an intimate public: shared narratives of gendered pain, digital mediation, and affective consolation (Berlant, 2008). Winola described Fireside Talks as:

"I think Fireside Talks is essentially a platform where everyone can share what they want to say. It may not necessarily be about social hot topics; it could simply be about something you've experienced, a small act of resistance, or even just something that made you unhappy."<sup>13</sup>

The primary objective was not to instigate large-scale feminist activism, but rather to focus on everyday experiences and personal empowerment. Lilia clarified:

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<sup>13</sup> 我觉得围炉夜谈就是一个平台,大家可以把自己想说的话分享出来,可能不一定真的是社会热点,有可能就只是你经历了一些事情,你的一些小小的反抗,甚至是一些你不高兴的事情。

“In this space, we don’t focus on the exchange of professional knowledge or acquiring specific skills. Instead, our main goal is casual conversation, providing a way to relieve mental stress.”<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Helena described with three keywords: empowerment, support, and common mindset. Fireside Talks provided a weekly opportunity for sharing, connection, and support. The programme was trivial, quotidian, and emotionally supportive. Fireside Talks thus served as “sensual infrastructures” (Zink, 2019, pp.289), forming community through emotional resonance rather than structured activism or formal knowledge dissemination. Adding to Zink, more than emotional resonance and contagion, non-directional and indirect supports are also important element in affective communities.

While participants had diverse motivations for joining, they generally expected companionship, emotional support, and opportunities for knowledge-building. Two distinct themes emerged from participant interviews: Seeking like-minded people and Seeking diversity and role models, which are two different directions of their attitudes towards fellow participants.

Participants valued the opportunity to connect with others who sought similar feminist personal growth. Echoing Helena’s vision of a “common mindset,” Laura and Cecile expressed their objectives to find like-minded people. Cecile stated:

“Through this medium, you can connect with many women from diverse backgrounds who seek personal growth.”<sup>15</sup>

This response shows the two themes at the same time, they wanted diversity yet looked for cases similar to their own situation that can be used for reference and learning. In answer to how were the interactions and conversations in the groups and during Fire-side Talks, respondents reported that they felt they met like-minded people and the atmosphere usually was comforting. One reoccurring keyword is “同温层” (literal translation as “same temperature layer”), which in the Chinese context is a metaphorical expression used to describe social or ideological echo chambers, where individuals are surrounded by like-minded people who share similar views, interests, or values. Laura expressed that communities should be built on similarity, with some participants believing that true

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<sup>14</sup> 我们在这个活动中并不追求非常专业的知识的互换，或者是获得什么技能，我们以闲聊天为主，来缓解一个精神上的压力。

<sup>15</sup> 你借由这个媒介你能够证实很多各种背景的，同时希望获得自身成长的女性同伴。

friendships could only form between people of the same “cognitive level (认知水平)” (Cecile, Laura).

While many participants sought cognitive alignment, others were looking for diverse feminist experiences to learn from. Listening to how different women practised feminism in daily life encouraged participants to challenge societal expectations (Cecile, Shela, Laura, Yolanda). Deep down in their logic of looking for diversity, they were looking for cases similar to their situations that can be used for reference and learning, i.e. they were looking for role models. Cecile summarised her observation that women participants preferred learning directly from “successful examples” (成功的样本), “building confidence” (建立自信) from that and then “navigate their own life experiences” (指导自己的生活).

Participants’ expectations of companionship, friendship, role models or like-minded people were provided during the Fireside Talks programme, yet the programme failed to meet part of participants’ expectation of knowledge empowerment. As Lilia had clarified that Fireside Talk was not intended for the exchange of knowledge, so did Winola say that Fireside Talk need not necessarily be an exchange of academic information but functioned more as an outlet for suppressed emotions. However, participants like Laura and Cecile expected there to be “knowledge empowerment” (Laura: “我们是希望能够有知识赋能”). Cecile’s response echoed with Laura’s:

“In that occasion, participants would like to feel as if they were in an academic lecture, discussing in a round table, listening to a podcast. They would like to hear something (inspiring), and learn something (useful). They want something practical.”<sup>16</sup>

This misalignment between organisers’ intentions and participants’ expectations created some discontent. It is organisers’ envision that Fengli and Fireside Talks were intended for an affective intention; however, participants’ intentions, other than searching for companionship and emotional support, involved as well practical knowledge empowerment. The pursue after knowledge empowerment stems from a practical and reasoning mindset among Chinese, the roles of education, mentorship, and professional and personal development play crucial part in the way to success (Tan, 2015), in feminism or just personal life. This discrepancy reflects the material realities and specificities of Chinese women’s struggles, underscoring the cognitive

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<sup>16</sup> 会希望在这个场合里面，我像听一场学术讲座一样，我像参加一个圆桌会议一样，我像听一个播客一样，我想听出点东西，我得学到点东西，会希望听到干货。

gap between participants' and organisers' visions about affective communities and intimate publics.

Despite these challenges, the Fireside Talks programme generally received positive feedback. Winola hosted four sessions of Fireside Talks, Lilia hosted three, Dana one, and Helena, as the group leader, stepped in the host role many times whenever no other volunteers were available. Apart from Dana, each organiser received direct positive feedback from participants, confirming that the programme had a meaningful impact.

One particularly touching example was shared by Winola, who recalled a 50-60-year-old woman attending one of her Fireside Talks. After the session, the woman sent her a private message via WeChat expressing gratitude and sharing more about her life. Winola had the information about her age from the self-introduction part at the beginning of Fireside Talk, where every participant opened the camera and shortly introduced themselves. Winola was impressed by Fengli's potential for intergenerational inclusivity. However, this story was a rare exception rather than the norm. Testified by Shela's experience, she pointed out the generational gap and age difference she encountered when participating in Fireside Talks. She noted that the community was primarily composed of young feminists in their late teens and early twenties, which made her feel somewhat out of place as someone in her early 30s:

“I was thinking that like Fengli and other official accounts on WeChat, they were doing a good job, very sincere, very interesting, also very young, in fact, some of the things they did were with good intentions, and also quite practical. But I had a feeling that the groups they were centred around might be a bit too young.”<sup>17</sup>

These experiences of organisers and participants highlight an overlooked generational gap within affective communities. Berlant's (2008) “a structure of feeling” (pp.266) or “promise of belonging” (pp.ix) highlights the emotional proximity and the desire to mirror others' experiences, allowing participants to see their own private struggles refracted as socially meaningful, even politically significant. Similarly, Zink (2019) describes momentary, immersive collectives that arise from mutual affectability, the capacity to sense and be affected by others in shared space. Yet, neither of these two concepts take age into account. The multi-generational women in the same affective sphere do not feel the same. This

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<sup>17</sup> 我当时是觉得像凤梨和其他的公众号，他们都做的很好，很真诚，也很有趣，也很年轻，其实做的一些东西的初衷都是好的，而且也还蛮实用的。但是我有一个感觉，就觉得他们围绕的群体可能都有点过于年轻。

observation extends existing theories by Berlant (2008) and Zink (2019), suggesting that affective communities should account for generational differences among participants.

Another positive feedback manifests in the recurring participation of participants and recommendations by participants to their friends (Lilia). Winola, Lilia, and Helena all observed that some participants attended multiple sessions, indicating a recognition of the programme's value. Lilia believed that the recurring participation demonstrates good experience and a recognition of the programme. However, when recruiting interviewees for this research, few former participants responded. This suggests that while Fireside Talks were meaningful at the moment, their impact did not translate into long-term community engagement. This temporality aligns with Zink's (2019) description of affective communities as momentary, resonant experiences vulnerable to the passage of time.

The temporality is also reflected in participants' responses to what they have gained in the Fireside Talks programme and from the Fengli community. For example, Cecile believed that personal growth was not from the community but from personal efforts. The temporal and limited gain was suggested to be the result of the nature of the site where the Fireside Talks were happening, the online space. Laura concluded that the closeness or connection she felt in the meeting only happened in the immediate arena, once the meeting ended, the utopian social bubble burst. Everyone turned back to their reality, their social roles. This one-time effectiveness of the connection the Fireside Talks built created a utopian fantasy or, quoted Laura, "a vacuum space" (真空的空间) for its participants. Despite this, the programme continued to receive positive feedback. The appreciation from participants was a key motivator for volunteers, reinforcing their dedication to running the Fireside Talks throughout Fengli's active period.

### **6.3 Affective Community Dynamics: Safe Space, Sense of Community, and Conflicts**

This section explores the dynamics within Fengli's Fireside Talks programme, analysing its attempts to foster a safe space, build a sense of community, and navigate internal conflicts. The nuanced interactions, contradictions, and limitations inherent in maintaining these feminist virtual spaces are critically examined.

### 6.3.1 An “Exclusive” Safe Space: To Protect or To Marginalise?

One of the most important aspects of Fireside Talks was that it was an all-women space explicitly designed to foster safety and mutual understanding. When asked “How did the Fireside Talks create a ‘safe space’ for participants?”, all respondents, both organisers and participants, highlighted the all-women space. In an explanation of why an all-women space is a safe space, two participants, Cecil and Laura, and one organiser, Lilia, mentioned that same biological sex brought us similar life experiences, and the sense of safety stemmed from shared life experiences. Lilia expressed that the sense of safe space came from that we all can relate to each other’s experiences and easier to empathise with one another. The famous quotation from the Japanese feminist sociologist Chizuko Ueno “Being a woman is a positionality (女性是一种处境)” was quoted by Lilia. Furthermore, Dana underlined loads of work volunteers committed to guaranteeing a safe space, the volunteers carried out voice verification one by one before sending meeting invitations to ensure everyone accessed the meeting was all women.

In addition, one vital element identified for an all-women community to be safe is common rules. Three out of four respondents answered that where they believed the feeling of safety came from is the rules of Fireside Talks (See Appendix 3.). Shela suggested that “In discussion groups with strangers, it is inevitable to use rules to regulate and measure interactions.”<sup>18</sup> Cecile gave an example of her experience in that one episode of Fireside Talks:

“The women participating really appreciated this kind of opportunity and showed a lot of respect for others. Even if someone had limited expression skills or shared something that seems simple, no one tried to interrupt, judge, or summarise for them. There’s none of that, and I think it was really great.”<sup>19</sup>

Yolanda’s response echoed with Cecile’s description, agreeing that the rule of Fireside Talks guaranteed a friendly, respectful and supporting environment during the talks. Two noteworthy points of view mentioned by respondents are the effect of self-disclosure and privateness in all-women groups. Cecile and Yolanda both also spoke of self-disclosure and privateness during Fireside Talks and daily in-group conversations. This reflects Berlant’s

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<sup>18</sup> 这种陌生人讨论群里面不可避免的会涉及到要用规则去约束和衡量的

<sup>19</sup> 参加的姐妹都非常 appreciate 这种机会，然后也很尊重别人，就哪怕有些人表达能力有限，或者讲的东西很浅显，也不会有任何人想要打断它，或者是 judge 或者是试图对她进行总结，就没有这样子的，我觉得这种形式其实挺好。

concept of intimate publics, where communal rules foster affective solidarity through shared emotional experiences and narratives of gendered struggles.

However, Winola expressed her concern about the safe space through one incident she believed broke the impeccable bubble of such a safe space. Since the all-women space was refer specifically and exclusively to biological women, the transgender women were excluded from this programme and could participate in the community only without revealing their trans women's identity. Fengli recruited one transgender woman volunteer to the Activity Group around one year before its announced shutdown. She hosted one reading circle, which was advertised to be open to everyone, with no gender constraint. Nevertheless, because her voice sounded male, once she spoke, one participant stood against her presence in the reading circle meeting which insulted her personally. She was not able to host any Fireside Talks since in the activity that has no gender constraint she was attacked personally. Winola is concerned that an all-women space did not prevent such an insult from happening, and she felt disappointed and helpless. This incident was brought up by Lilia as well.

The safety guaranteed by the community's exclusivity unintentionally marginalised trans women, revealing critical tensions within its affective structure. Winola and Lilia voiced concerns about the exclusion and personal targeting of a trans woman volunteer, underscoring the fragility of affective solidarity when confronted with entrenched social prejudices. This dynamic echoes Berlant's insight that intimate publics, though offering emotional refuge, are still susceptible to dominant societal power structures. Fengli's experience highlights the contradiction between the community's stated commitment to inclusivity and the exclusionary practices it enacted under broader socio-cultural pressures. While Fengli succeeded in recruiting trans women volunteers as the first step, the proposal to integrate transwomen into weekly programmes as the second step was rejected by some participants. As previously discussed (see Section 2.2), the rationale for this exclusion stemmed from fears of disruption by heterosexual men and a pervasive cultural stigma against transgender individuals in China. Within the framework of intimate publics, both Fengli and the Fireside Talks program operate as sensual infrastructures shaped by gendered hierarchies and power stratification in Chinese society. As long as such infrastructures remain embedded within these structures, the community's vision of safe space and solidarity will remain fundamentally constrained.

### 6.3.2 Who Built Connections? Limitations in Creating Lasting Communal Tie

From the perspective of a sense of community, the expectation from the organisers' side was loosely defined. Lilia retrieved from positive feedback and concluded that the trust from the participants who were willing to expose their traumatised experiences and those who directly messaged the hosting volunteer to express their gratitude and appreciation of the Fireside Talk programme all manifest a sense of community, even temporarily. Lilia argued that time played a key role: Time washes away some intense moments, but the memories stay and remind you of the good times. In answer to "Do you think Fireside Talk foster a sense of community among its participants?", Winola gave a confirmative answer.

While the expectation for a sense of community was loosely defined by organisers, participants' experiences of the sense of community were rather transient. Referring to the feedback from participants, the connection was brief and temporal which was felt at the exact moments. The sense of community only lives in the "vacuum space"; therefore, the sense of community is vulnerable anywhere outside the online meeting. Quoting Laura:

"Always in a vacuum, unable to access the real environment. It feels like it can only exist in a kind of suspended, detached-from-reality state. Do you realise how rare it is in real life to have a group of 15 women who can truly open up and talk? ...It feels like an illusion, a fragile bubble that can easily be burst because it's something that can't really happen in reality. It can only exist under specific conditions and within a specific group of people, an online, virtual, and fragile safe haven."<sup>20</sup>

In addition to Laura's vacuum space, Yolanda pointed out that the online space might simplify the connection of people as sharing the same labels or same identity:

"The internet makes it easier for us to categorize people through labels. We tend to believe that those who share the same labels as we are naturally 'our kind of people.' However, in reality, beyond ideologies, what truly matters are shared experiences, similar personalities, or other deeper aspects, these are what make a person more complete... In a way, shared experiences may take precedence over ideologies and labels, playing a more fundamental role in connecting people."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> 总是真空，接受不了真实的环境。他好像只能说飘在一种很悬浮的脱离于现实的一个环境中。你知道现实生活中就有那种能够敞开心扉去聊的，就一群女性 15 个人是多么的难得的事情吗？……它像一个虚幻的泡沫，很容易就被戳碎，因为就是它在现实中是无法做到的，就可能是他在特定的人群中特定的条件下，他才能形成这样子一个线上的虚拟的不牢固的安全屋。

<sup>21</sup> 互联网会让我们更容易通过这种标签来划分人群，我们好像以为这些标签跟我们相似的人，他就天然的跟我们是一类人，但其实你会发现主义之前，其实更重要的是一些相同的经历，相似的性格或者是什么，其实这些东西是一个人更完整的部分。……可能共享的经历，反而可能是某种意义上比主义和标签更在前的东西。

Participants' sense of community was largely defined by temporary moments of emotional resonance during events. These reflections highlight the tension between idealised community aspirations and the practical limitations of virtual spaces.

It is affirmative that it was not easy to be connected merely through online methods. In answer to the question of who felt truly connected within the community, three participants, Cecile, Shela and Yolanda, and two organisers, Winola and Helena, hesitated on whether there was a resilient connection. Laura acknowledged a connection happening, however, only during the talks. Once it was ended, the connection ended with the talks:

“I think connections are indeed made, but after the event ends, there isn't necessarily a deeper or lasting discussion on the topic. It's more like attending a meeting, once it's over, everyone just goes back to their own business.”<sup>22</sup>

This aligns with Zink's (2019) description of affective communities as momentary and immersive yet transient experiences, highlighting their limitations in creating lasting communal ties.

For many participants, the connections remained temporary and event based. However, for organisers, the experience was different. Lilia and Dana both felt more connected to fellow volunteers rather than to the broader participants. Lilia described her relationship with participants as a “served-servant relation (被服务与服务的关系)”, while with other organisers as one of shared purpose and deep mutual understanding:

“I realised our uniqueness when communicating with other organisations. Among our volunteers, there is a strong sense of consensus, we are very similar in many ways. ... Those of us who have been volunteering with Fengli for a long time share a high level of agreement. On most issues, we naturally find ourselves on the same page.”<sup>23</sup>

For Lilia, this “sense of consensus” stemmed from Fengli's leadership philosophy, which intentionally recruited volunteers who aligned with the group's core values. Similarly, Winola felt more deeply connected to other organisers, as working together allowed them to become familiar with each other's personalities and commitments. Dana also shared how she received help from other volunteers, career advice, job recommendations, and even a sleepover on the

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<sup>22</sup> 我觉得是有的（建立到链接），但是的话可能在结束之后，这种不一定会有更加深入的持久的就这一个话题的交流，就更多可能是说有点像来开个会结束了，我就各忙各的事了。

<sup>23</sup> 独特性我也是在跟其他组织沟通的时候发现的，我们志愿者的共识是很大的，我们是非常相似的，……我们长期在做凤梨志愿的人，我们是有很高的共识，就是在大多数问题上，我们都有一个就是不谋而合的这种状态。

sofa when she travelled. However, she admitted that she rarely engaged in WeChat group discussions with the broader community. Instead, she preferred smaller, more intimate chats with Fireside Talk participants in her own session's WeChat group. She continued sending festival greetings to this smaller circle long after Fengli had shut down. Yet Helena felt the other way:

“One thing that feels a bit regrettable for me is that people kept coming and going, and in the end, I didn't really form strong connections or close friendships with others. On one hand, this might be because it was online, and on the other hand, everyone had their own priorities. So, I don't feel like I really became close friends with others in the organisation.”<sup>24</sup>

Helena's reflection highlights a key limitation of online communities, even when individuals are deeply engaged, maintaining sustained, personal connections remains a challenge and connection is not guaranteed.

### 6.3.3 De-Affective Side of the Community: When Conflicts Happen...

As Fengli's community expanded, differences in opinions became inevitable. However, based on respondents' recollections, few conflicts escalated into major disputes. Instead, there was a general preference for rationality and action over sensitivity and emotion. For Shela, when asked what types of discussions or activities she usually engaged in, she shortly replied: “Those related to current social affairs (和时事相关的)”. This suggests a practical tendency in discussions, related to the expectation of knowledge empowerment analysed in Section 6.2. Similarly, Laura criticised overly emotional discussions, arguing that feminist discourse should remain analytical rather than purely expressive. This reflects Cecile's concept of an “average level of pain” (均值的痛苦), the idea that participants were willing to engage with feminist struggles, but only within a certain threshold of emotional intensity. The preference for rationality and the “average level of pain” suggests a de-affective side of the Fireside Talks programme and Fengli's community. Even though participants were sharing gendered struggles and affect through personal stories, they suppressed the level of affect. Therefore, even though diverse points of views exist, they hardly led to actual conflict to the best of the participants' recollection. Helena testified this statement that she barely remembered any

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<sup>24</sup> 有一点对于我来说可能比较遗憾，就是因为就是人来了又走，走了又来，其实到最后感觉没有跟大家形成特别好的搭子，好朋友那种感觉，因为一方面可能是因为线上，另一方面大家有各自的 priority，对，其实我感觉我没有说是跟组织的其他人有（成为）好朋友。

conflict that went out of control, people in the community made peace usually before things escalated.

Nevertheless, Winola recalled a particularly contentious intense moment when she attempted to introduce the topic of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the Fengli WeChat group. She intended to explore how cultural norms shape women's experiences, but instead, she was met with strong resistance, she was attacked for her negotiable opinion. Community participants accused her of not taking a firm stance with them criticising and rejecting this inhumane violence against women. Nevertheless, Winola was making a point that women under certain cultural contexts were powerless to refuse unyielding social norms, therefore it is important to provide, for example, safe mutilation at hospitals and not judge women who are subjected to this.

“I just thought that maybe there could be more voices in the discussion. To me, the most important thing is that different perspectives can emerge. ... I felt that this topic was something that could be brought up since it was a discussion after all. But later, I got attacked, and then I didn't dare to speak anymore.”<sup>25</sup>

It is an instance of the side effect of an echo chamber, the potential downside of ideological homogeneity in an activist space. In some instances, participants rejected conflict not as a means of maintaining harmony but because they assumed all members shared the same stance on every feminist issue. This echo chamber effect made it difficult for alternative perspectives to emerge, even within a community built on inclusivity. In contrast, Lilia recognised the value of disagreement, terming them “safe conflicts” (安全的争吵). She argued that conflict can be beneficial as long as it is conducted in a way that does not lead to personal attacks or degrade participants based on gender. Therefore, the conflicts should be beneficial and safe. However, Winola's experience exposed vulnerabilities in maintaining ideological openness within affective communities and illustrated how ideological uniformity can suppress alternative viewpoints within intimate publics. These findings underscore the paradox within intimate publics and affective communities, while promoting emotional solidarity, they simultaneously risk suppressing diversity of thought through unexamined consensus.

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<sup>25</sup> 我就想说可能本来是讨论可以多一点点声音，我觉得最重要的是大家能有不同的声音出现，……我感觉这个话题是可以抛出来的，因为本身就是再谈论，然后但是后来我就被喷了，然后我就不敢说话了。

## 6.4 Coming to an End: Censorship Barrier and Internal Challenges

Fengli's eventual cessation was the result of multiple interwoven challenges, including censorship, limited volunteer retention, funding difficulties, and the inability to commercialise. While censorship was the most immediate and overwhelming external barrier, internal structural weaknesses also played a significant role in the organisation's decline.

### 6.4.1 Censorship: A Major Barrier to Growth

Censorship posed a constant and escalating threat to Fengli's survival, as emphasised by all four organisers interviewed. One of the most pressing issues was the visibility of IP addresses on Chinese social media, a regulation, Administrative Provisions on Internet User Account Information (2022), enforced since August 2022 (Guo & Liu, 2022). Under this policy, WeChat began displaying users' IP addresses by province for domestic users and by country for users abroad. This transparency placed Fengli under intense scrutiny, as its founder and main leader were based outside Mainland China. With Fengli's IP address frequently appearing outside Mainland China, the Fengli's WeChat Official Account became a target for both state surveillance and nationalist netizens. The organisation was accused of being a "foreign (hostile) forces (jìngwài (dídù) shìlì, 境外(敌对)势力)", a term commonly used in China to discredit activists by associating them with foreign interference. Many human rights and feminist activists in China have been prosecuted under charges of subverting state authority, and such accusations placed both Fengli's reputation and its members at risk. The tightening censorship climate had a chilling effect on volunteers. Dana recalled the growing unease among members:

"At that time, everyone was feeling uneasy due to the frequent mute and censorship. People were on edge and somewhat in a dormant state."<sup>26</sup>

Every little detail can be censored. Even seemingly trivial aspects, such as Fengli's name choice, sparked controversy. Helena noted that social media users questioned why the organisation used the term "Fengli" (凤梨, pineapple), instead of the more commonly used "Boluo" (菠萝, pineapple) in Mainland China. This minor linguistic difference led to accusations of supporting Taiwanese independence, illustrating how hyper-politicised the online space had become.

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<sup>26</sup> 当时大家都因为频频被查，其实都有点人心惶惶，大家都有点处于休眠状态。

Beyond speculation and online harassment, censorship had tangible consequences for Fengli's ability to operate. Several key collaborations with other feminist organisations were disrupted due to increasing restrictions. A joint political roundtable event with Shero resulted in Shero's WeChat account being permanently suspended. Similarly, multiple Fireside Talks episodes planned by Dana in partnership with Avoice had to be cancelled due to content restrictions. By the end of its active period, Fengli was severely constrained by censorship. With its WeChat account muted for months and its content subject to constant monitoring and takedowns, the organisation found itself in a state of stagnation, unable to publish, promote, or expand its community engagement. This situation again aligns with Berlant's (2008) assertion that intimate publics often struggle to enact meaningful political change due to structural limitations imposed by dominant power structures.

#### 6.4.2 Internal Challenges: The Struggles to Sustain Fengli

Beyond external repression, Fengli also faced significant internal challenges that hindered its long-term sustainability. One of the most pressing concerns was volunteer retention. As Helena pointed out, the organisation struggled to maintain a stable core team, making it difficult to sustain regular programming and activities. This challenge reflects Zink's (2019) characterisation of affective communities as momentary and contingent, emphasising the difficulty of sustaining these communities beyond ephemeral, emotionally charged moments. A recurring vision among the organisers was to eventually transition Fengli into a registered NGO. Lilia emphasised that formalising the organisation was a long-term aspiration, but doing so in China's restrictive political environment was nearly impossible. The legal barriers to registering a feminist organisation meant that Fengli would always remain in a precarious, unofficial status, leaving it vulnerable to sudden shutdowns. Dana further highlighted that Fengli struggled to find a sustainable way to survive, either financially or systematically. The community relied entirely on volunteers' unpaid labour, which proved unsustainable in the long run.

Despite all the difficulties, when speaking of the shutdown, volunteer respondents expressed their sense of loss feeling they once had so much strength and visions they wanted to utilise and realise, yet were bound by the rough reality. Fengli's closure was not merely an organisational failure, but a reflection of broader structural constraints faced by feminist activism in China. The combination of external censorship pressures, lack of institutional recognition, and financial precariousness underscored the fragility and vulnerability inherent

within intimate publics and affective communities. Fengli's trajectory highlights the tensions and limitations within affective communities in authoritarian contexts, illuminating critical insights into the structural constraints shaping contemporary feminist activism in China.

## 7 Discussion

### 7.1 Still Necessary Apparatus: Consolidating Overwhelming Feelings under the Overwhelming Power Structures

Fengli's Fireside Talks programme can be understood as an "intimate public" in Berlant's sense, where participants came together around shared experiences of gendered struggles, social marginalisation, and emotional support. Fireside Talks were not built around structured political action but rather a collective space of recognition where participants could share their personal narratives in a feminist-leaning environment. As Berlant (2008) argues, an intimate public is formed through affective identification rather than direct activism, creating a sense of belonging through common lived experiences. This was evident in how participants of Fireside Talks described their engagement and the goals from the organisers' side, not as political mobilisation but as an emotional refuge. Besides being filled with "a significant amount of first-person narrative" (Berlant, 2008, viii), Fireside Talks was intimate because participants and organisers in the programme were expected to "...share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience" (Berlant, 2008, pp.viii).

The findings from this study indicate that Fireside Talks participants were looking for others' experiences of being deviant to support their determination to live a feminist life that they were hesitating to pursue. This aligns with Berlant's (2008) explanation of intimate publics: "...participating in the promise of belonging that it represents insofar as they are trying to recalibrate whose experience it can absorb so that they can feel included in the mass intimacy that has promised to include them" (pp.ix). The emotional intensity and anger common among participants and organisers during the politically charged COVID-19 pandemic facilitated emotional proximity, creating a community bound by shared emotional resonance rather than explicit ideological alignment. This also aligns with Wilson et al. (2010), who frame feminist empowerment as a process rooted in "relational action" and collective efficacy. Their *Circles of Hope* model illustrates how emotional solidarity and peer support

can enhance both personal growth and community capacity, particularly among marginalised women.

However, Berlant (2008) also warns that intimate publics, while providing comfort, often do not lead to structural change. This paradox is visible in Fengli's Fireside Talks. While the programme created a sense of safe space, it did not always empower participants toward collective feminist action, not even a guaranteed sense of community. Many respondents, including Winola, Lilia, and Cecile, highlighted that the atmosphere was supportive, yet discussions often remained within an "echo chamber", reinforcing shared frustrations rather than strategising resistance. Winola's experience of attempting to discuss female genital mutilation (FGM) and being met with rejection rather than dialogue demonstrates the limits of this affective space, where ideological consensus sometimes overrode critical engagement. This echoes Berlant's (2008) demonstration of how narratives in women's culture do not necessarily challenge power structures but function as spaces of consolation, adaptation, and emotional survival, particularly when structural transformation feels out of reach.

However, this thesis argues that it is precisely this feeling that "structural transformation is out of reach" that prevents these narratives from breaking their presuppositions. Participants exist within a feeling-reality where political depression deactivates transformative potential, leaving temporary affective ventilation as the primary means to ease immediate pain rather than enabling reasonable planning for future change. The affective communities or intimate publics ease the immediate acute pain rather than facilitating strategic action toward structural transformation. This is the exact effect and limitation of affective communities and intimate publics. Within the context of Chinese authoritarian governance, these exact effect and limitations become even more pronounced, as feminist discourse exists within tightly constrained parameters where even emotional solidarity can be deemed politically threatening.

Beyond the Fireside Talks, Fengli as a whole functioned as an "affective community" in Zink's terms, where members formed temporary emotional bonds based on shared feminist concerns. Zink (2019) describes affective communities as spaces of ephemeral connection where solidarity is built through emotional resonance rather than structured organisation. This was reflected in how many participants viewed Fengli as a transient, supportive space rather than a long-term activist network. The fluid movement between participant and organiser roles highlighted the dynamic and organic nature of community-building within Fengli,

exemplifying Zink's (2019) depiction of affective communities as fluid, immersive, and emotionally contagious.

The temporality of Fengli's community was particularly evident in the feedback from participants, who expressed that while they felt deeply connected during Fireside Talks, this sense of belonging quickly dissipated outside of the meetings. Laura's description of Fengli as a "vacuum space" illustrates this, while the community provided a momentary escape, it did not necessarily translate into sustained engagement beyond the digital platform. Cecile and Shela also acknowledged that many participants saw Fireside Talks as a one-time emotional release rather than an ongoing commitment. This suggests that while Fireside Talks were meaningful at the moment, their impact did not translate into long-term community engagement, aligning with Zink's (2019) description of affective communities as momentary, resonant experiences vulnerable to the passage of time.

However, this transient nature does not diminish Fengli's significance. In Fengli, emotional resonance was both an outcome and an objective. The community emerged not in spite of political constraint but because of it. Participants, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, sought out affective validation to navigate their private struggles within a collectively recognisable frame. Affective communities, as Zink argues, offer momentary but crucial forms of resistance and empowerment. They provide emotional validation and solidarity, even if they do not develop into formalised movements. For many young Chinese feminists facing isolation, censorship, and societal backlash, spaces like Fengli were one of the few available channels for feminist connection.

## **7.2 Negotiating Expectations: Why Does Grassroots Matter?**

The friction between organisers' intentions and participants' expectations in Fengli illuminates larger questions of grassroots authenticity and class dynamics in Chinese feminism. While organisers framed the Fireside Talks as emotionally supportive rather than pedagogical, many participants sought knowledge empowerment and practical resources. This mismatch underscores Al-Ali's (2019) critique of affective frameworks for failing to engage the material realities of non-Western women's lives and highlights a broader challenge in feminist organising: how to balance emotional support with intellectual and political empowerment.

Lilia, as an organiser, repeatedly emphasised that Fireside Talks were not designed for academic debate or activist training but as a mental health relief space. However, Laura and Cecile's dissatisfaction with the lack of "knowledge empowerment" suggests that some participants sought a more structured feminist learning environment. Cecile described a desire for "practical" takeaways, expressing that many women in the community looked for role models to guide their feminist journey rather than just emotional validation. This discrepancy underscores the cognitive gap between participants' and organisers' visions about what a feminist community should look like and serve for, and suggests an indefinite positionality of Fengli's community.

This thesis argues that the indefinite positionality is related to the questions about "grassroots". While the community positioned itself as grassroots, some participants, especially Winola and Dana, questioned whether Fengli's members truly represented grassroots activists, given that many volunteers had international education backgrounds and middle-class privilege. This self-reflection on who has the ability and resources to engage in feminist activism suggests a deeper issue of class dynamics within Chinese feminist spaces. Wilson et al. (2010) found that deliberately diverse groupings fostered empowerment through dialogue across social positions. Fengli, in contrast, often drew from a relatively homogenous demographic of educated, urban women. This mirrors critiques found in Han's (2018) analysis of Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV), where feminist activists faced backlash not only from the state but also from within for appearing elitist or disconnected from grassroots realities. Additionally, these virtual efforts have their limitations, including limited access for rural populations. Media strategies that have proved effective in the West when advocating feminist ideals fall short in confronting China's authoritarian discourse and cultural tradition (Chang & Tian, 2020; Zhao, 2024). The digital divide between urban and rural areas further complicates the notion of "grassroots" feminist organising, as digital platforms like WeChat inherently privilege those with consistent internet access and technological literacy, typically urban, educated women. This thesis accentuates unresolved tensions around authenticity, representation, and the politics of knowledge production. Feminism in China must reconcile affective solidarity with material disparities in access, language, and epistemology.

The generational gap observed among participants further complicates the grassroots identity. The multi-generational women in the same affective sphere do not feel the same. This observation extends existing theories by Berlant (2008) and Zink (2019), suggesting that

affective communities should account for generational differences among participants. The analysis reveals that women of different generations experienced the affective space differently, suggesting that the “structure of feeling” (Berlant, 2008, p. 266) is not universal but mediated by participants’ historical and generational positionality. Recognising these divergences is essential for rethinking grassroots not as a fixed identity but as an ongoing negotiation between access, affect, and authenticity.

### **7.3 Affect and Political Challenge: “We Seek Those Moments of Togetherness”**

Fengli’s story is emblematic of the fragile but meaningful political potentials embedded in affective community-making. From the title of Thorpe et al.’s (2022) study, “we seek those moments of togetherness”, they describe such moments as “becoming community”, a posthuman, temporally unstable process of relating through care and digital entanglement. For Fengli, these moments were not just metaphorical but ontological reconfigurations of feminist being. As Thorpe et al. (2022) argue, digital feminist spaces during pandemic lockdowns created “virtual touch” and “digital intimacies” that allowed women to experience closeness and care despite physical disconnection. These digital affective encounters represent not a deficit but a reconfiguration of political subjectivity and community-building under duress. At those moments, we are together.

However, affective safety came with its exclusions. Trans women volunteers were initially embraced but later sidelined, revealing how emotional solidarity can reinforce dominant hierarchies when challenged. As Han (2018) observes, feminist groups in China often walk a tightrope between radical inclusion and strategic invisibility. This exclusion, driven by fear of surveillance and cultural stigma, highlights how intimate publics are shaped by, and limited through, the very hierarchies they seek to subvert. Even though participants remembered a peaceful community environment, this thesis understands it as a preference of avoidance of conflict, preferring “safe harmony” over ideological debate, paradoxically undermined its openness. The suppression of dissent turned its affective space into an echo chamber. Yet, as Wilson et al. (2010) note, empowerment often arises from structured conflict within diverse group dialogues. In choosing comfort over confrontation, Fengli missed opportunities to deepen its political potential.

While Fengli’s internal challenges shaped its limitations, external forces, particularly the pandemic and state censorship, further constrained its potential. The COVID-19 pandemic

created a unique moment for digital feminist organising, as many young feminists sought online spaces for discussion. Lilia pointed out that many WeChat-based feminist communities emerged during this period, fuelled by pandemic-related frustrations, gender-based violence, and collective trauma. The case of Fengli aligns with broader global trends, where feminist activism flourished in online spaces as physical protests became impossible (Zhang, 2022). The toughness of this sensitive time motivated unconventional ways of speaking up and gathering communities (Sun & Wright, 2023). Fengli's attempts to foster a safe space, build community, and navigate conflicts reveal important insights about the relationship between affect and political challenge in contemporary Chinese feminist activism.

Furthermore, the “de-affective side” of the community also offers a nuanced insight into the complex relationship between affect and political challenge. The finding that participants suppressed the level of affect while sharing gendered struggles suggests a strategic adaptation to Chinese cultural and political contexts. The preference for rationality and maintaining an “average level of pain” reflects participants' awareness of how affect is politically coded in contemporary China, where emotional expressions by women are often dismissed as irrational or hysterical.

Censorship, surveillance, and platform regulation ultimately constrained these affective possibilities. The challenges of sustaining an emotionally grounded, politically aware feminist community under authoritarian constraints speak to the limits of affective organising itself. Nonetheless, Fengli mattered. Its affective legacy endures in the lives it touched and the solidarities it forged, however fleetingly.

## **8 Conclusion**

Fengli In Action and its Fireside Talks programme serve as a compelling case study of digital feminist activism in contemporary China. Amid a landscape shaped by authoritarian governance and digital surveillance, Fengli demonstrated the potential of affective community-building as both refuge and resistance. Drawing on Berlant's concept of intimate publics and Zink's idea of affective communities, this thesis has shown how Fengli created spaces of emotional solidarity, where participants could share experiences, find support, and foster a sense of belonging.

Yet, this community was not without its contradictions. The intimacy nurtured in Fireside Talks was often fleeting, challenged by the practical limitations of digital interaction and

mismatched expectations between organisers and participants. While Fireside Talks functioned primarily as emotional support platforms, many participants yearned for more structured, knowledge-based empowerment. This tension highlights the complexities of grassroots feminist organising in online spaces, where the desire for affective connection must coexist with political mobilisation and intellectual engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique context for Fengli's emergence, as young feminists turned to online spaces to navigate collective trauma, gender-based violence, and isolation. Yet, Fengli's development and eventual closure also underscore the enduring pressures of state censorship, platform fragility, and organisational precarity. Despite its brief existence, Fengli left an indelible mark on those involved, testament to the power and limits of digital feminist collectivity in restrictive political environments.

Ultimately, Fengli's story is one of courage, creativity, and constraint. It speaks to the vitality of grassroots feminist expression in China, while reminding us that sustaining such spaces requires navigating not only emotional dynamics but also structural barriers. As digital authoritarianism intensifies, the lessons of Fengli offer critical insight into how feminist communities might endure, adapt, and continue to resist through the affective bonds they create.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Interview Questions for Fireside Talks Participants

#### Basic information/ General engagement with the community:

1. Hello, I'm ... [introducing myself]. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? How can I refer you, your age, what do you do now?
2. How would you describe your experiences in Fengli? What are your encounters in Fengli?
3. When was your first encounter with this community "Fengli In Action" and how did you first become involved? What was the opportunity?
4. What initially attracted you to this space, and what kept you engaged?
5. Were you in other similar communities back then and are you now? [In what ways do you feel this online community is different from other feminist spaces (online or offline) you've been part of, if any? What do you think feminist communities are?

#### Participation in social media groups and activities in general:

1. After joining Fengli's WeChat group, what was your experience in interacting with other group members? [Did you make any friends in the community? [if any, what's the story?
2. How many activities held by Fengli you've participated in (we used to have reading groups, fireside talks and political-depression roundtable)? [How often did you participate in discussions or activities? [Follow-up: What types of discussions or activities did you usually engage in?
3. What were your experiences in those activities? What were the discussions?

#### Fireside Talks programme specific:

1. Why you wanted to participate the Fireside Talks?
2. Do you still recall which "Fireside Talks" you've participated in? What were the topics or which topics interested you?
3. How did the talking and meeting go that time? What were the discussions?
4. It's said in the programme's description that "Fireside Talks provide a safe space for women to talk about all aspects of life burden-free." How would you define the "safe space" referring to your experiences? What's your experience of talking burden-free?
5. The purpose of this programme is "to build a sense of community for women, a platform for women to share, connect and grow". How would you define the "sense of community" referring to your experiences? Did you feel connected?
6. How would you assess this activity? Can you explain why you assess it this way?
7. If mention, Have there been moments when you felt disconnected or alienated from the community during this programme? [If so, what contributed to those feelings?
8. If mention, How do you think this community managed conflict or disagreement among members during the programme?
9. If mention, Were there any challenges or limitations you've observed in this programme? [if so, what were they?
10. How's the impact of the community personally? In what ways does the community impact you?

#### Postlude

1. What were your thoughts and feelings when the programme stopped?
2. Did you search for other similar programmes? Did you find any?
3. How's the impact of the community personally? In what ways does the community impact you?

## Appendix 2 Interview Questions for Fireside Talks Organisers/Volunteers

### Background and Initial Involvement

1. When did you join Fengli? When was your first encounter with Fengli and how did you first become involved? What was the opportunity? and what motivated you to get involved? What did you expect of Fengli? [What's your story with Fengli?]
2. Did you have any prior knowledge or involvement with online feminist communities on WeChat before joining Fengli? Were you in other similar communities back then and are you now? [In what ways do you feel this online community is different from other feminist spaces (online or offline) you've been part of, if any? What do you think feminist communities are?]

### In WeChat groups

3. During your involvement, how would you describe the overall atmosphere of the Fengli community in WeChat groups? Did it align with your initial expectations?
4. How did women of different ages and backgrounds interact within the Fengli community? Any impressive stories?

### Organising the Fireside Talks

5. How many Fireside Talks did you organise, and what were the main themes and objectives of each session? How were the topics for the Fireside Talks chosen?
6. As an organiser, what were your expectations for the Fireside Talks?
7. What was the planning and organising process like for the Fireside Talks, and what challenges did you usually encounter?
8. It's said in the programme's description that "Fireside Talks provide a safe space for women to talk about all aspects of life burden-free." How did the Fireside Talks create a "safe space" for participants?
9. The purpose of this programme is "to build a sense of community for women, a platform for women to share, connect and grow". What strategies did the Fireside Talks use to foster a sense of community among women?
10. One key goal of the programme is to help women feel they are not alone in facing life's challenges. What moments or feedback did you observe that demonstrated this goal being met?
11. How did participants interact during the events, and what kind of feedback did you receive from them?

### Reflecting on Fengli's Role and Function

12. What do you think made Fengli unique as an online space compared to other grassroots feminist communities on WeChat?
13. What impact do you think Fengli had on feminist communities within the WeChat platform?
14. Do you think Fengli met your expectations? Why or why not?
15. What problems or challenges did you observe as Fengli developed over time?

### Reflections

16. If you look back, what could have been done differently to help Fengli sustain itself better?
17. What insights or takeaways have you gained from your involvement with Fengli, particularly in relation to feminism or community organising?

### Appendix 3 Fireside Talks Programme's Texts on Fengli In Action's WeChat Official Account for Recruiting Participants in the Talks

✧ An example:

On the topic of humour and gender:

<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/dVHBIg3O65p2du6hcYQugQ>

✧ Its official description is as below:

“-What is Fengli's Fireside Talks programme?

Fireside Talks programme is originated from 'women's circle', a women-centred event with a long history around the world, and is a platform for women of all ages to communicate with each other. It's about gender, but it's also about women's inner wisdom and spiritual strength. Fireside Talks provide a safe space for women to talk about all aspects of life burden-free. The topics covered are not limited to gender, but can also include personal growth, future prospects, work and study, emotions, family, friendship and love, daily complaints, etc. It can be tender or intense; It can be serious or whimsical, in short, it can be anything you want it to be, and as long as you're willing to open up, the possibilities are endless.

.....

- What is the purpose of our Fireside Talks programme?

By hosting Fireside Talks, we hope to build a sense of community for women, a platform for women to connect, share, grow and connect. I hope that every woman can feel that no matter what kind of problems and troubles they encounter in life, they are not alone.”

✧ The Rule for Participation in Fireside Talks:

#### 【Event Rules】

1. **Respect, Inclusivity, Sharing, and Listening.** Everyone has different experiences, personalities, and perspectives. Differences in opinion are inevitable during discussions, and we hope that we can all respect, understand, and appreciate these differences.
2. **Express Your Thoughts Without Imposing Them on Others.** Everyone is encouraged to share their ideas, but please do not force your opinions on others or engage in personal attacks.
3. **Anonymity is Optional.** Participants are free to change their display name (choose something simple and easy to remember).
4. **Active Participation is Encouraged.** We welcome enthusiastic discussions, but out of respect for one another, please avoid interrupting others while they speak.
5. **Privacy Protection.** To ensure everyone's privacy, recording audio or video is not allowed.
6. **Flexible Discussion Topics.** Conversations are not limited to the topics provided by the host, feel free to explore and expand discussions in any direction.

◇ Notice for Signing-up:

**【Registration Guidelines】**

1. *Fireside Talks* is exclusively for women. During the event, please ensure that no men are present in the background or speaking loudly, to **maintain a comfortable and safe sharing environment for all participants**.
2. Every participant **must, must, must** turn on their microphone and actively engage in the conversation. Using a camera is encouraged to create a sense of closeness, but it is not mandatory.
3. Once registered, **participants are expected to attend on time** unless there are special circumstances. If a participant registers but fails to attend without a valid reason or remains muted throughout the event, they will lose eligibility to participate in future *Fireside Talks* events.