

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Feminist Frontiers

WILEY

“When nobody listens, go online”: The “807” labor movement against workplace sexism in China's tech industry

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Abstract

An online petition, signed by more than six thousand Chinese tech workers in August 2021, is the latest example of an online labor movement in the authoritarian context of China. Combining interviews and publicly available information, this article provides a descriptive account of an activist movement, explains workers' demands, and discusses the characteristics of online labor activism. It explores how Chinese tech workers fight collectively against a gender-discriminatory workplace culture as they strive to bring justice to a sexual crime victim without affiliating themselves with official political organizations. The research findings suggest that while rising feminist consciousness has the potential to motivate collective action by workers, such motivation is highly dependent upon individual experiences at work and tends to be event-based and of limited continuity. It argues that rising awareness of women's rights provides a new kind of legitimacy to labor activism, and a new way to express labor concerns in a context of increased criminalization of labor organizational activities in China today.

KEYWORDS

China, digital economy, industrial relations, labor activism, tech worker

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the economic transition from manufacturing and service to the digital economy, the tech industry has become a new frontier of labor activism in China. Researchers have demonstrated that the working day in the tech industry is stressful, highly exploitative, and extremely long. Studies (Sun & Magasic, 2016; Xia & Kennedy, 2014) show that the working conditions in China's tech and Internet industry are poor, often with long working hours in highly stressful environments. Also, Liu (2022a) documents the intense competition in China's tech industry that has led to prolonged working hours (widely known as "996" scheduling), as well as the resulting worker burnout.

This article looks at workplace sexism in China's tech industry by examining the "807" labor movement. In August 2021, as a protest against a workplace culture that discriminates against women, over 6000 tech workers signed an online petition demanding that their employer, Alibaba, investigate into what they believed was a sexual crime in the workplace, as well as implement several institutional and policy changes intended to promote a better work environment. This case warrants academic attention for two reasons. First, Alibaba is the largest tech enterprise in China, with more than 200,000 workers. Therefore, worker organization in Alibaba can have a significant impact on the work ethics and workplace culture throughout China's tech industry. Second, researchers note that the current leadership of China's government has employed a significantly more coercive and repressive approach to governing labor activism (Fuchs et al., 2019). This includes a crackdown on labor NGOs and mass arrests of labor activists (Franceschini & Lin, 2020), which have heightened the risks associated with and have a demoralizing effect on labor activism in China today. Hence, the willingness of so many people to publicly support the workers' demands is worthy of sustained scholarly attention.

Past case studies of collective actions by workers in China focus mainly on rural migrant workers in the manufacturing industry, such as the Honda workers' strike in 2010 (Chan & Hui, 2012; Gray & Jang, 2014), the strike against shoemaker Yue Yuen in 2015 (Schmalz et al., 2017), and the Shenzhen Jasic struggle in 2019 (Pun, 2021). Meanwhile, despite being featured in some journalistic reports (Cadell, 2019; Meng, 2021), the importance of collective actions by more privileged and better-paid Chinese tech workers has been overlooked. Moreover, existing studies rarely place workers' online activities at the center of their analyses. The implicit assumption seems to be that, even today, workplace actions like strikes are the main source of pressure on employers in labor disputes. This article addresses this poverty of knowledge by asking the following two research questions:

- (1) What is the state of gender relations in the Chinese tech industry, particularly in the tech enterprise Alibaba, and how did such relations motivate the 807 online petition?
- (2) How and to what extent the 807 movement inform our understanding of online labor activism in China, including the government's responses to digital activism more generally?

This article draws on data collected from online sources and semi-structured interviews during a broader research project (2018–2021) that examined the industrial relations of China's tech industry. It argues that raising consciousness about women's rights provides new legitimacy to workers' collective action. The 807 movement is an excellent case for understanding sexism as it exists in China's tech workplaces, including the role of gender relations in motivating workers to advance their interests without institutional protection from the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) or the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU).

To set to context, this article begins with a review of two sets of scholarly literature: the literature on women's empowerment, emphasizing research on Chinese women in the labor market, and the literature on online labor activism in China. Next, methodological issues are discussed and then applied to a presentation of the 807 movement and its associated worker demands. Finally, the characteristics and dilemmas of online labor activism in China are assessed. This article contributes to a better understanding of the tangled and complicated relationship between the labor and feminist movements in China's Internet industry, illustrating their motivations and challenges, strategies adopted and responses of state actors.

2 | RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Women's empowerment in digital China

Following China's economic transformation into a digital economy over the last 2 decades, more women are entering the digital workforce, taking roles such as online content producers, software developers, and web designers (see Tech Node, 2019). It is estimated that in 2019, 20 million people worked in the Internet industry in China. As the tech industry continues to expand, it provides more career opportunities for women, including managerial positions, and their contributions are acknowledged in society. For instance, the founder of Alibaba, Jack Ma, frequently stresses the importance of women in the company, noting that one-third of Alibaba's high-level managers are women (Human Rights Watch, 2018, p: 37). A study by the Silicon Valley Bank (Lacy, 2017) revealed that in nearly 80% of China's tech companies, at least one senior management position is filled by a woman; this is significantly higher than in the UK (53%) or the US (54%). Compared to jobs in other industries, digital economy jobs require more technological skill and a higher general education; they also provide more financial rewards to the Chinese women who are hired.

One result of the expansion of female professionals is that, nowadays, more Chinese women are socially and financially independent, which enables them to ignore traditionally restrictive cultural norms. For instance, Wu and Dong (2019) detail how, by being hardworking and financially self-sufficient, some Chinese women are successfully breaking through the prevalent marriage norms and redefining singlehood in China. Tan et al. (2021) find that more middle-class Chinese women in cities are keeping pets as companions and use domestic animals to demonstrate their womanhood, instead of getting married and starting a family the traditional way. Others (Liu, 2014, p: 21) find that Chinese women today emphasize "self-worth, self-reliance, and individual autonomy", instead of devoting themselves to family or childcare; they believe they should be "the master of their life", free from the control of others and even gaining the capacity to 'training' their partners (Peng, 2019, p: 115).

All of these research findings illustrate that Chinese women see traditional gender norms as less relevant to them. They are becoming more conscious of their autonomy, financial capability, worthiness and freedom, all of which combine into a rising awareness of women's rights in China today. Consequentially, Chinese women are more eager to express their voices, advocate for their rights and create social change, particularly on social media platforms (e.g., Han, 2018; Mao, 2020). The women's liberation movement and institutions associated with it had been initiated by the state and often were connected to the official narrative of "women's emancipation". Chinese women today, however, prefer to promote their own rights themselves, rather than working through official institutions (Wang, 2018; see also; Zhang, 2015). They do not locate themselves in relation to the communist past, and some even doubt the ability of the official institutions to represent their interests. In addition, the digital space was catapulted into prominence when the global #MeToo campaign reached China in 2017 (Lin & Yang, 2019). Since then, despite potential backlashes, ever more Chinese women have begun to take an active role in defending their identity and their rights, including gender inequalities and sexual harassment in the workplace. The '807' movement, organized in the workplace, can be seen as the latest example of activism in this new wave of feminist movement.

2.2 | Chinese women in the labor market

The last 2 decades of studies on Chinese women in the labor market have been dominated by investigations of rural migrant workers, because they are seen as the most precarious workforce in China (e.g., Chun & Cranford, 2018; Ip, 2017; Liao, 2015; Pun, 2005; Yuan, 2021). Due to their generally low education, limited skill set, and low social mobility, many migrants fill jobs in the manufacturing and service sectors as, for example, production line workers, dry nurses, or beauty therapists at beauty salons. Their dissatisfaction with their unfavorable working conditions has caused a wave of workers organization and protest movements in China, especially since 2010, and these events

have occupied center stage for those who study labor activism (e.g., Chan & Hui, 2012; Gray & Jang, 2014; Schmalz et al., 2017).

Despite the state's many efforts to improve the employment conditions of women (e.g., the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women in 1992 and the Special Rules on the Labor Protection of Female Employees in 2012), researchers have found that discriminatory practices against women remain in recruitment, job allocation, promotion, redundancy and retirement management and other areas (e.g., Cooke, 2003; Cooke, 2010; Sincoff et al., 2009). Moreover, some employers in China require women to undergo pregnancy tests or adhere to stringent conditions regarding plans for marriage and pregnancy, and often find ways to coerce the resignations of pregnant workers (China Labor Bulletin, 2020). Others (He & Wu, 2018; Wu & Dong, 2019) document wide and still-expanding gender gaps in labor participation, unemployment, and income, especially in China's urban areas.

While academic interest in female workers in the tech industry in Western countries and in India has been on the upswing in recent years (e.g., Castell & Skardzius, 2019; Dwivedi & Mukherjee, 2021; Richterich, 2020), Chinese female tech workers have received relatively little attention. As a group, China's tech workers are more educated, well-paid, and far more privileged than most people in the labor market, but these characteristics do not dismiss the fact that gender discrimination and sexism exist against women in China's tech sector.

Cadell and Jourdan (2018) document the extent of workplace sexism in China's major tech companies. Examples include the Chinese e-commerce firm JD.com, which has organized men-only staff social events; a tech giant Tencent's scandal involving a staff event that featured a game in which female employees, on their knees, unscrewed bottles caps held between the legs of male colleagues; and more generally the long-lasting gender stereotypes and pay inequality in these companies. In 2018, Human Rights Watch revealed that tech giant Alibaba's recruitment practices were highly discriminatory against women and that female employees often were sexually objectified for recruitment purposes. For example, several recruitment ads on Alibaba's website stated a preference or requirement for male candidates, and one job ad that stated a preference for female candidates added that they should "possess fine personal image and qualities" (p.38). Some ads even used the physical attributes of female employees to attract male applicants and described the female employees as "late night welfare" (p.86). Another ad highlighted in the report said the female candidate should be "impressive enough to computer programmers" and that "physical characteristics like those of popular female Japanese adult film star Sola Aoi could help the applicant succeed" (p.38).

While Alibaba claims that these ads are attempts at humorous marketing, they are a clear violation of laws intended to protect women. For instance, Chapter IV of the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women states, "[t]he State guarantees that women enjoy equal rights, with men, to work and to social security" (Article 22, see China Laws Portal, 2020). However, commentators including the China Labor Bulletin (2021) argue that these policies are poorly enforced, and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU)—the only legitimate labor organization in China—has long been under fire for its ineffectiveness in defending the interests of women workers. For example, Taylor and Li (2007) criticize the ACFTU for actions that effectively serve the interests of the state rather than workers it is supposed to represent. Despite the fact that union membership of women is generally high (and mandatory for state-sector employees), researchers suggest that the ACFTU pays scant attention to its members' gender-related labor concerns. Not coincidentally, women have failed to break into the upper echelons of ACFTU leadership (Cooke, 2010, 2011, 2010); the federation itself is characterized by a male-dominant culture and, in practice, either unwilling or unable to challenge elements of that culture that manifest themselves in the workplaces of its members. Understanding this background helps explain why a majority of labor activism in China, including the petition in this case study, is led by industry veterans, practitioners, and other committed individuals (Chen & Yang, 2017).

2.3 | Online labor activism in China

With the rising awareness of workers' rights in China today (Chen, 2021), labor activism remains substantial despite the establishment of increasingly high political hurdles. According to the Chinese Labor Bulletin (n.d.; regularly

updated), labor NGOs, students, and activists have staged over 14 thousand protests and strikes in the last decade. Chen (2021) argues that these collective actions can be categorized into three types: moderate, liberal, and radical activism, which represent different ideologies that energize the labor movement. Moderate activism focuses on protecting workers' individual legal rights, for example, by seeking to redress work disputes through legal proceedings; liberal activism advocates for collective bargaining and worker representation; and radical activism calls for the restoration of socialism in China. He suggests that the state has encouraged moderate activism and constrained activities that seem to have liberal or radical narratives at their core; the current Chinese government is highly vigilant of collective actions and criticism of the market economy policy (Chen, 2021, p: 17–18).

Indeed, commentators (Howell & Pringle, 2019) observe that the current political leadership is criminalizing more and more elements associated with labor research and activism and that a vague law that prohibits 'picking quarrels and provoking troubles' is being used to justify the arrests of labor activists and others (Hong Kong Free Press, 2015). The latest incident happened in September 2021: Fang Ran, a sociology Ph.D. student at the University of Hong Kong, was put into secret detention for researching labor conditions in Chinese factories in the southern manufacturing hub of Shenzhen (Hong Kong Free Press, 2021).

As the physical space for labor organizing in China diminishes, more labor activism is taking place online. For example, in March 2019, an anonymous user uploaded a web page named 996.icu on Github, as a protest against the so-called "9-9-6" pattern of work. Workers filled the "anti-996" website with their own working experience, thus demonstrating the high prevalence of the tech industry practice of working from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., six days per week (Lin, 2020). A parallel event occurred in October 2021, when another unidentified user created an open-edited spreadsheet that enabled other users to name their companies and share their actual working time (Shen, 2021). Both events attracted a large number of online participants and neither involved the work stoppages that labor activism in China typically relies on.

Researchers have noticed that digital platforms (including ICTs and social media) have become increasingly crucial for labor activism in the West, and there is an emerging academic literature on how digital platforms help to revitalize trade unions. This literature is written against the background of the substantial decline in trade unionism in Western countries over the decades (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2018). Empirical evidence suggests that digital platforms can benefit trade unionism in many ways (see Geelan & Hodder, 2021). For instance, Panagiotopoulos' (2021) study of the Twitter activities of 33 trade unions in the UK finds that social media can help extend the network of communication beyond people with a clear, expected, and immediate interest, thereby strengthening the power of union engagement, recruitment, and mobilization.

The Western experience, however, is not directly applicable to China, for two reasons. First, the substantial decline in trade unionism in Western countries is not mirrored in China; second, Internet politics in China are totally different from the West. It is no secret that China's government censors collective expression on digital platforms (King et al., 2013). In response, activists in China have developed innovative strategies that enable them to promote their messages online. Gleiss (2015) finds that in order to avoid censorship, the Chinese labor NGO "Love Save Pneumoconiosis"—an organization that campaigns for workers suffering from pneumoconiosis (the most common occupational lung disease in China)—adopted "polyphonic expressions" on social media platforms. This successfully "depoliticized" its work and made it less sensitive in the eyes of the authorities. More broadly, Gleiss finds that by creating new communities that connect previously divided populations (in her case, rural and urban) to support its cause, social media can facilitate advocacy campaigns by articulating alternative discourses that challenge the hegemony of official discourses without directly confronting them.

Another commentary is made by Lin (2020), who looked at the "anti-996" campaign in China's tech industry. He argues that the use of social media platforms enables a networked mobilization of workers across different workplaces without a centralized leadership and potentially create a new basis of international solidarity. Together with the public consciousness, online labor activism creates an enormous account of public pressure on the targeted company. As he notes, these tactics "resemble other social movements such as Chinese feminist advocacy", where they

used social media to launch public campaigns around gender inequality and sexual harassment to raise public consciousness and to bring public pressure on the government and public institutions like the universities. (p. 55)

The current article stands on the shoulders of Lin, Shen, and others, arguing that labor activism in China today emerges out of opportunities that present themselves in China-specific contexts. Specifically, the 807 movement does not merely resemble the existing feminist advocacy repertoire; it was, indeed, ignited by the rising consciousness of women's rights in society, especially among high-salaried, well-educated female professionals in the tech industry.

3 | RESEARCH METHODS

The author has a long research interest in studying industrial relation systems in Asia, and the research on which this article is based was conducted in the context of a broader project (2018–2021) that examines the industrial relations of China's tech industry today. Alibaba, the largest employer in the sector, presents itself as a workplace with vibrant, healthy, and sociable culture. Its website proclaims that "Work Happy, Live Seriously" is "the Alibaba Way" and quotes its founder, Jack Ma: "the biggest differentiator between Alibaba and other companies is the emphasis on living a meaningful life" (see also Hsu, 2019). However, local journalistic reports often tell a different story. A Sina Finance (2021a) story about an Alibaba employee who complains about the long working hours and poor management went viral on China's Internet; another article explains Alibaba's attempts to lay off seasoned (expensive) workers and retain younger, cheaper workers (Sina Finance, 2021b).

The "807" movement itself was highlighted by media in China and overseas, and the online portion of this research took the form of keyword searches on two Chinese search engines (Baidu and Sogou), which yielded news reports that have enriched the analysis. Keywords related to labor activism included "807 incident", "Alibaba's female worker", "Ali-people petition" and so on. In addition, several news sources were monitored, especially the state-run news outlets, *People's Daily* and *China Daily*, in order to understand the government's response to activism. These two newspapers are two most important newspapers published by the Chinese government to disseminate the state's messages and promote its propaganda (Zhu & Krever, 2022).

After the 807 activism took place, the author conducted additional semi-structured interviews with eight of Alibaba's employees (five women and three men) and one Chinese tech journalist. These employees had worked for this company for at least 2 years, and the author met them during his fieldwork in China in 2020. As he had already left mainland China, the interviews were conducted via telephone, lasted around 1 hour and were audio-recorded with the workers' consent. Our conversation took place in Mandarin Chinese and then was translated into English for this writing. These interviews enable triangulation of the findings from public sources and provide additional knowledge of gender relations in this specific company, and in China, at present. To ensure the interviewees' privacy, pseudonyms are used throughout.

4 | CASE STUDY: THE 807 ONLINE LABOR MOVEMENT

4.1 | Background to the activism

On July 27, 2021, a female employee of Alibaba, Ms Zhou, went on an overnight business trip with her male manager and other colleagues to meet a client in the city of Jinan. Ms Zhou claimed that she was sexually assaulted by the client when she was drunk and, afterward, when she was resting in her hotel room, she was raped by her manager.

She reported her bitter experience to the Jinan local police. The police contacted her manager on the phone and directed him to go to the police station for questioning; he was released without charges a few hours later.

On August 2, Ms Zhou reported the incident to a higher manager. She demanded that he fire the manager in question, and at the same time requested leave from work. Her leave was not granted and no investigation was conducted. Days later, Ms Zhou contacted an even more senior manager, who promised to follow up on her complaints. Three days later, he told her that he could not do anything about the case. Further, he suggested that a no-action response was better for Ms Zhou herself, as her reputation would be tarnished if the incident became public.

When the author sought interpretations of the senior managers' refusal to take action regarding Ms Zhou's complaints, his interviewees provided the following explanations:

In our company, men occupy most of the managerial positions, and the masculine culture compels them to dismiss women's concerns.

(Amber, administration assistant)

There is a "baotuan" culture in the tech industry. Baotuan originates from Honor of the Kings [a popular online game in China] and means that teammates will "stick together" and back each other up. Managers tend to cover up for each other, hoping the favour will be returned one day.

(Vivian, marketing specialist)

Meanwhile, interviewee Lily reflected on societal culture in urban China:

There is a victim-blaming culture in China. If a woman makes complaints about sexual harassment in the workplace, the first thing people would say is, "why are you dressing up like this? Are you inviting people to harass you?"

(Lily, assistant manager)

Male interviewees, on the other hand, did not seem to agree with these statements. In Gareth's view:

In our company, we have the most educated people, people with good character and decency. These are important criteria when we recruit people... There are circumstances when we laugh at each other, but these mean no harm. I don't know anyone who disrespects women.

(Gareth, operations manager)

4.2 | The flashpoint

The "incident" earned its name from the events of August 7, 2021. Driven by desperation, disappointment, and furiousness, Ms Zhou started to shout her demands in Alibaba's staff canteen, at the same time distributing handouts stating that she was raped by her manager, but the management had done nothing to follow up. The verbatim translation of the message on her handout is

An Alibaba manager, NAME, raped and sexually offended his subordinate; FIVE OTHER NAMES know this situation but do nothing. I urge my company to bring justice to me.

On the same day, Miss Zhou uploaded a post on social media. The post provided details of the business trip and explained what had happened during and after she was raped: she attempted to commit suicide but was saved by her husband, while the suspect continued to work in the company as usual; she reported the event to the senior management, but nothing was done.

According to an interviewee, Miss Zhou's action is almost standard procedure for all Chinese women who work actively to defend their rights (*weiquan*):

When a woman experiences sexual harassment in China, she will first go to the police. And if the police have no follow-up actions, then she will talk about the event openly on social media platforms such as Weibo [the Chinese version of Twitter] to draw public attention. ... This is how you will get follow-up actions... It comes from public pressure.

(Cynthia, project manager)

Both her online and offline actions sparked a fierce discussion on Alibaba's internal employee forum as well as the Chinese social media platforms WeChat and Weibo, and immediately escalated the incident beyond the managers' control in the workplace. Other Alibaba employees started to dig into the details of the business trip; her manager's personal information was disclosed and circulated.

Vivian recalled her day at the office on August 7:

Suddenly I noticed hundreds of new notifications on my phone. People [Vivian's colleagues] created numerous new chat groups to discuss this event, ... Some even proposed to march inside the company's headquarters.

(Vivian, marketing specialist)

On August 7, midnight, Daniel Zhang, the current Alibaba CEO, made his first comment on the internal employee forum. He described himself as "shocked", "angry", and "ashamed", and promised to give a comprehensive response to employees and concerned members of society. Jinan police, meanwhile, released a statement saying that they would actively investigate the incident.

These responses did not stop Alibaba's employees from organizing themselves for further collective actions. Soon, someone created an employee chat group called the "Brave cows help group" (*Yonggan niuniu bangzhu xiaozu*) that aimed to promote an anti-sexual harassment culture and establish a mechanism against workplace sexual harassment. "Brave cows" (*Yonggan niuniu*), a popular slang term (i.e., meme) on China's social media, refers to people who are courageous with a sense of naivety. This chat group attracted over six thousand Alibaba employees within a day and, collectively, they drafted an open letter to the company.

4.3 | Demands and conditions

The two-thousand-word open letter, titled "The Joint Initiative of 6000 Ali-People on the 807 Incident", was published on the evening of August 8. It contains five key messages (the original petition is published in People's Daily, 2021). First, the petitioners urged the police and the company to investigate the incident impartially. Also, answers and compensation need to be provided to the victim, Ms Zhou; second, they urged the company to reflect on its business culture, especially in how complaints are filed and responded to. The company also needed to reflect on the protection of women in the workplace.

Third, they urged the company to consider six collective demands:

- The company should engage with the victim's original complaint: provide her with 3 months of paid leave and if an investigation determines that wrongdoing occurred, terminate the alleged rapist;
- The company should provide extra support to the victim and her family, including counseling service;
- The company should publicize information related to the investigation process, including who, exactly, is conducting the investigation and what the investigation mechanism is;
- More generally, the company should establish a mechanism against workplace sexual harassment against women, including more training for new employees, production, and distribution of policy guidelines, elimination of the business drinking culture, and establishment of a hotline where workplace sexual harassment could be reported;
- The human resource department should serve the employees and not only the employer;
- Top management should meet workers in person instead of online, addressing their concerns. To this end, a communication mechanism between senior managers and workers should be built up.

Fourth, the petitioners asked that personal information of the victim not be publicized, in order to protect her privacy; they had seen a lot of personal information on the Internet forum; Fifth, they urged the company to pay continuous attention to sexual harassment in the workplace.

By the time this open letter was published online, it had been signed by at least six thousand Alibaba employees. Many of the petitioners shared the letter on the employee internal forum and other social media platforms, such as their personal WeChat accounts. While researchers (e.g., Gleiss, 2015; Xu, 2014) argue that in China, social demands and criticism online must be articulated in a language that is indirect and ambiguous in order to avoid censorship, the "807" open letter gives direct and public voice to the workers' demands. The benefits of this action are twofold: high transparency can let outsiders understand the workers' demands, which is the first step to obtaining public support; and an open letter is highly provocative and, as such, requires immediate attention and response from the employer. This strategy can prevent the worst-case scenario: the employer giving no response. In addition, in order to avoid state repression, the open letter was drafted in apolitical language and contains no criticism of the authorities, the police, or the Union.

Cynthia said that she signed the petition because she is sympathetic to the victim and wanted to do something: "*This is how you make your employer listen to your demands,*" she said. Beyond signing, Cynthia also shared the petition on her social media and solicited additional signatures. Her response represents the rising feminist consciousness in China today, in which female professionals are more committed to defending their rights, without affiliating themselves with the political organizations nor reciting the state's doctrine of women's liberation. In fact, actions such as this petition campaign are seen as radical and often constrained by the ACWF, which is funded and led by the Chinese Communist Party (Cooke, 2010).

Some interviewees chose not to sign the petition:

Actually, I was not paying much attention to the incident, I think it is just an individual event... It is some perverts committing indecent crimes... Over my years working in Alibaba, I have never experienced any sexual harassment in the workplace.

(Vivian, marketing specialist)

As seen from Vivian's response, while rising feminist consciousness in China provides legitimacy to activism and support to activists, the extent to which this consciousness can motivate workers to organize also depends on external factors, such as the everyday work experience. In addition, others expressed concerns that there might be consequences if they signed the petition:

I don't want to sign the letter because it may damage my employment record... It might affect my promotion in the future. I can't risk my career for this.

(Daniel, senior programmer)

These responses might also explain why only six thousand employees signed the petition in an organization with over one hundred thousand workers: if workers only see this as an individual event, then institutional changes are not necessary. Daniel's response also highlights a major weakness of (online) labor activism in China: without institutional protection, activist workers constantly face the danger of retribution from their employer. While online petitions do not require participants to reveal their true identities, the reality is that Internet service providers and social media platforms in China require all users to register their accounts with real identification, which makes self-given social media pseudonyms traceable. As a result, some workers choose not to participate in labor activist events and others choose not to discuss the activism online (Liu, 2022b); both elements reduce the impact of labor activism.

4.4 | From workplace to society

The open letter and the entire discussion surrounding Ms Zhou were quickly picked up by the general public on social media, and "807 incident" became a trending keyword in China's search engines. People began to talk about business drinking and "ice-breaking" cultures (a common practice where newcomers are compelled to play intimate games during their new employer's orientation week) in China's tech industry, and most comments showed sympathy toward Ms Zhou. This indicates that online labor activism can provide opportunities for people to express their concerns and challenge the dominant social discourse, which claims that each woman, individually, is responsible for ensuring that she does not become the victim of a sexual crime. Some shared their experience as ex-practitioners in the tech industry, criticizing the result-oriented business culture and gender inequality in the workplace. Other trending keywords include "how to keep evidence after being raped", "Alibaba's announcement", and "Alibaba suspect male workers" (Baidu.com, 2021).

The state took an interest in the case almost from the moment it was made public. On August 9, a *People's Daily* column slammed the "sexual harassment incident that happened recently" and the corporate culture in China, without directly mentioning Alibaba. A more critical commentary published by *YouthSurfing*, a branch of the *People's Daily*, warned Alibaba not to believe that it is too big to be regulated by the state. Also, the All-China Women's Federation, the official political organization for women in China, released a statement saying that it is paying close attention to the movement. Without any doubt, these public interjections by powerful political actors created an enormous amount of pressure on Alibaba's senior management.

Meanwhile, the ACFTU was silent, which may be due to the fact that Alibaba, like most privately owned companies, does not host an ACFTU branch. This is because the labor federation traditionally has been seen as part of the political organization. Private enterprises in China usually have low interest in establishing an ACFTU unit in order to maintain an apolitical business environment. Wright (2018, p. 390–392) also notes that ACFTU branches in private enterprise are viewed by workers as ineffective and illegitimate representatives. In addition, as shown by AUTHOR (YEAR), Unions in China are often associated with helping the economic and socially marginalized communities. Tech workers are not members of the organization nor are they members of the communities the organization is most interested in serving. Hence, it is not surprising that no interviewees mentioned unionism when discussing the 807 movement. Past case studies (e.g., Chan & Hui, 2012) on labor activism in China reveal workers' interests in having their own representation or a (re)formation of the union during or after the actions, but these demands are not seen on the 807 movement. Perhaps Alibaba workers lack consciousness of their labor rights, but it is more likely that they are pessimistic that unionism can contribute to improved industrial relations in China's Internet industry.

4.5 | The outcome

On August 9, Daniel Zhang announced on Alibaba's internal online forum that the accused manager had been dishonorably discharged, the senior managers who refused to follow up on Ms Zhou's complaints had been compelled to resign, and the human resource director would receive a demerit penalty. To answer the concerns raised by the general public, especially from those former employees who shared their own experiences of gender discrimination, Zhang stressed that there is zero tolerance of sexual crime in Alibaba (People's Daily, 2021). On August 12, Alibaba established a special working group that reports directly to the board of directors. The group is tasked with fighting against workplace misbehavior and unconditionally supports workers against workplace sexual harassment and business drinking culture (China News, 2021).

All interviewees described this outcome as a "success": the action attracted the attention of the top management, and the top management responded in a meaningful way. Vivian believes this petition made the senior management more aware of sexual crime in the company, and they might pay more attention to women's rights in the future. This response supports the idea that a successful activist movement need not include institutional change. This perspective fits into what Chen (2021, p: 6) describes as moderate activism, as it seeks to protect and promote workers' individual rights within the existing legal framework and correct labor practices that deviate from the laws rather than advocate for collective bargaining or worker representation.

Indeed, interviewees were skeptical about the ability of the one institutional innovation that emerged from the incident. When asked whether she believed this group would be able to fight gender discrimination against women in the workplace, Amber said, *'it all depends on what policy is implemented in the future.'* Cynthia was grateful that, *'at least ... it shows that the senior management is paying attention.'* Table 1 summarizes the workers' demands and the management's responses:

4.6 | Dilemmas in online activism

On August 14, Jinan police announced the results of its investigation: while they confirm that Ms Zhou's client and her manager did indecently offend her, the client carried condoms with him and her manager purchased condoms before entering her room. There is no evidence showing she was raped, so their indecent actions did not rise to the level of a criminal offense. Further, analysis of Alibaba's business record indicated that Ms Zhou went on this business trip voluntarily and that she drank alcohol of her own free will (China Daily, 2021).

Two weeks later, on September 6, 2021, the procurator's office released a similar statement: its own investigation led to the conclusion that the "indecent actions" (*qiangzhi qeixie*) committed by the client and the manager did not constitute a criminal offense, so arrest warrants would not be produced. However, neither the procurator nor the police provided details of what actually happened during the business trip, for instance, what 'indecent actions' had been done. The 807 incident has become Alibaba's "Rashomon" and the truth remains untold.

On its face, the logic of the procurator's statement is contradictory: A person who is drunk is incapable of giving meaningful consent, so indecent actions under these circumstances must constitute a criminal offense. However, some interviewees disagree, because

in China, when someone sexually offends you, but you do not explicitly reject him, for example, when you are drunk so you are not capable of saying no, then people assume this act is not against your own will.

(Lily, assistant manager)

TABLE 1 Alibaba workers' demands and the management's responses

Demands	Responses
The company should provide answers and compensation to the victim.	Key players were fired, forcibly retired, or given demerits; compensation is not mentioned in the announcement.
The company should reflect on its business culture and the protection of women in the workplace; and improve the channel of complaints.	A working group against workplace sexual harassment has been established, which consists of five female senior managers.
The company should consider their collective suggestions:	
1. Terminate the suspect after the investigation and offer her a paid leave of 3 months;	1. The suspect was dishonorably discharged; paid leave is not mentioned;
2. Provide extra support to the victim, including counseling service;	2. No extra support is mentioned;
3. Publicize the information related to the investigation process;	3. Investigation results, if any, have not been announced;
4. Establish a mechanism against workplace sexual harassment on women;	4. An email and hotline for reporting workplace sexual harassment was established;
5. The human resource department should serve both the employees and the employer;	5. The human resource director received a demerit penalty;
6. Top management should meet workers in person.	6. No special arrangement was made to meet workers in person.
The company should not publicize personal information of the victim in order to protect her privacy.	The personal information of the victim and the alleged culprit have not been publicized (except their surnames).
The company should pay continuous attention to sexual harassment in the workplace.	A working group against workplace sexual harassment was established.

As the author observes, the procurator's statement undermined the legitimacy of the petitioners and also had a chilling effect on Alibaba's employees. They no longer are certain about what actually happened, and therefore no further collective actions have been taken. This points to another disadvantage of feminist labor activism: the continuity issue. As discussed, feminist protests in China today are mainly mediated through social media platforms rather than official institutions, and online public discussions are easily monitored and censored by the state (China Labor China Labour Bulletin, 2021). When an activist movement is event-driven (e.g., a sexual crime in the workplace), the activism can lose its momentum once the conflict is resolved or the "deviant practices" have been corrected. In fact, Taylor et al. (2003, p: 29–35) argue that the strategies of mediation and arbitration have been widely adopted by the ACFTU to demobilize workers' collective actions and undermine their influence in society.

Last but not least, as observed by the author, the contention that surrounded Alibaba's 807 movement also set off alarms about workplace culture and misbehavior at other tech companies in China. For instance, Tencent released a statement affirming its official position that 'there is zero tolerance of sexual harassment in the workplace' (Sina Finance, 2021c). However, interviewees doubt that this incident will have a meaningful, long-term impact on women's rights, either in the tech industry or in society as a whole. This is because, to their minds, activism in the tech industry cannot solve the structural problem of sexism against women in society.

It is not only in the tech industry but also in other large enterprises, and the state-owned enterprises,... and it is not only in the workplace, but also in social activities after work. These activities [against women] are very common.

(Samantha, tech journalist)

This incident has inspired more Chinese women to defend their rights. But that is it. If there is no legal change nor institutional change, nothing will be changed.

(Karen, administrative officer)

The Chinese society gives very little space for women to give their voice... and the law is not on our side. That's exactly why social media platforms are so important: to defend women's rights.

(Amber, administration assistant)

By October 2021, keywords related to this scandal had been removed from the trending sections of Chinese search engines, and some of the online discussions on social media platforms have become inaccessible. As previously highlighted by Gleiss (2015), social media in China are closely monitored by the authorities and the platforms; when a case becomes too prominent and problematic, the government might limit access to online content, ostensibly to maintain social harmony (see also China Labor Bulletin, 2021). Meanwhile, public opinion started to turn against Ms Zhou. Some social media posts openly attacked her as a liar, a 'malicious scumbag' who ruined the careers of her managers and probably concocted the whole event (e.g., Zhihu.com, 2021). Researchers (e.g., Mao, 2020; Wu & Dong, 2019) note that 'feminists' tend to be unpopular on China's Internet and people who defend women's rights often face immediate and harsh criticism. In the same vein, this research finds that labor activism motivated by feminist consciousness also shares these challenges, both online and on the ground.

5 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the 807 movement is the largest labor activism event in the short history of China's Internet industry. Despite decades of government efforts to improve gender relations and work conditions, this event shows that labor activism remains essential to defend workers' rights and their dignity. What is unique about this activism, and what makes this activism so powerful, this article argues, is that it happens in tandem with rising feminist consciousness in China, which provides legitimacy for worker activism. This article also presents the challenges of conducting online labor activism in China, the strategies adopted by tech workers, and the state's responses.

The petition was a successful case of moderate activism, as it occupied the headlines of China's Internet, focused public attention on workplace sexism, and inspired more women to speak up about their experiences of workplace sexism in China. Theoretically, moderate actions have the potential to become powerful driving forces that generate the kind of legal/institutional changes that might reduce gender inequality and further protect women's rights in the future. The research findings of this study, however, show that such transition is challenging in reality, and activists often meet restrictions from the state's actors that demobilize the movement.

Moreover, this article argues that China's rising feminist consciousness has a contradictory effect on workers' power: on the one hand, the idea of gender solidarity provides legitimacy, motivates workers, and provides a moral basis for public and trans-industrial solidarity. These bargaining powers are important because workers in China, including tech workers, have weak legal and institutional protection. On the other hand, interviews indicate that workplace sexism is understood to be a highly subjective and individualized experience, and collective actions in response to sexism-related incidents tend to be event-based and thus noncontinuous. These disadvantages restrict the possibility of institutionalizing workers' bargaining power in gender-relevant industrial relation struggles, because workers see conflicts at work (in this case, a sexual crime), which are seen as a result of sexism rather than industrial relation issues. Nevertheless, the activism documented here contributes to a better understanding of the rising feminist consciousness in contemporary China. This increasingly influential social force is separating itself from both

the state's discourse on women's liberation and from the political organizations that had been constructed with that discourse at their foundation.

Lastly, the author acknowledges the article's limitations, particularly related to the methods employed. Conducting more interviews with Alibaba workers, especially with those involved in drafting the petition, would enrich the empirical findings, but additional interviews were not possible. Additional media reports also might enrich the findings, but these had been removed before the author could retrieve them. Finally, the tentatively introduced generalizations regarding gender relations in China's tech industry deserve a proper scholarly treatment, as do questions, to consider, related to worker motivations for activism against workplace sexism in different workplaces beyond the digital economy. These could be possible directions for future research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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How to cite this article: Liu, Hong Yu. 2022. "'When Nobody Listens, Go Online': The '807' Labor Movement Against Workplace Sexism in China's Tech Industry." *Gender, Work & Organization* 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12859>.