



Annual Report on Chinese Young Activists (2019)

Young Activists Alliance
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Introduction

The research subjects of this report are youth activists in China. “Youth” refers to those who were born after 1990. “Activists” are those, either in a group or as individuals, who strive to effect social, systemic, and policy changes online or offline. For the ease of discussion, we identify the groups according to the issues they focus on, including young labour activists, young LGBT+ activists, young activists with disabilities, and young feminist activists, etc. Certainly, the boundaries of the groups are not absolute. Members of these groups overlap to some extent.

This report is divided into four parts. Each part, which focuses on different youth activists group, includes four dimensions. They include an overall portrayal of the young activists and the make-up of the group; the situation of the group and the activism started by the group in 2019; the tactic and channels used by the authorities to control and suppress the youth activists, and; future directions for youth activists and other external stakeholders to develop civil society and drive social progress.

The report is written by activists or observers specializing in each issue. Below is a summary.

Young activists with disabilities in China

The situation of disability groups in recent years can be summarized as follow: rights-based organization are almost all obliterated. The remaining few shifted their focus from policy advocacy to community organizing practices. Mainstream disabilities groups develop their work in forms of foundations, social enterprises and service enterprises. The key ways of work include nurturing grassroots organizations, disseminating information via media, educating the public, and providing direct employment services for corporations and employers. In such social context, a lot of young people with disabilities started to explore diverse ways of organizing in order to study the rights of communities with disabilities and carry out rights advocacy. Two examples are S, a youth disabilities online group with over 700 active online members; and B, the first charity in China distinctly emphasizes on the double marginalized identities- “with disabilities” and “women”.

In 2019, the key methods used by young activists and groups with disabilities to mobilize for activism was to ignite the sense of identity and educate the public through narrating personal and community stories in the forms of exhibition, theatre, broadcast, new media, oral history, documentary, etc. At the same time, they supported cases and did policy advocacy on specific rights issues such as the admission of people with hearing disabilities in graduate schools and discrimination against people with visual disabilities in the recruitment of teachers. Organization B published a report on the needs of Chinese women with disabilities in 2019. The report revealed workplace discrimination such as the problems of access-free environment in workplace, recruitment discrimination and wage disparities. It also highlighted problems such as the lack of support to protect the right to education. The report made a series of recommendations on how the government can support and improve charity services that support people with disabilities.

Although the government was gradually limiting the space for independent civil forces to survive, individual young activists with disabilities rarely faced control from the local governments or the universities in which they study. It was because their activism was mostly online, not offline. The authorities tend to see the demands from communities with disabilities as welfare needs rather than rights-based needs. At the same time, the authorities tend to use the sustainable development goal narrative, rather than the human rights standards narrative, to frame disabilities issues. Many young activists with disabilities were more sensitive to political risks and support from external stakeholders because of the difficulties they faced when they grew up. Although many disabilities groups lacked resources, provision of funding may not be the best way to support young activists with disabilities. External stakeholders can facilitate their activism by building their capacity in storytelling and basic research.

Young feminist activists in China

In 2019, Chinese government strengthened existing ways to control young feminist activists. The most common way was to employ police and state security personnel to harass people related to the activists, including their apartment owners, parents and relatives. Apart from harassment, the authorities increasingly pressured young feminist activists and summoned them for meetings more frequently. In 2019, as a new measure to monitor the whereabouts and communications of activists, the authorities installed surveillance cameras in the activists' neighbourhood and next to the elevators outside of their apartments. The most notable ways of control in 2019 was the crackdown targeting individuals and organizations doing organizing work. The authorities annihilated groups and isolated individuals by frequently harassing them. For example, a lot of organizations had to stop running due to the targeted crackdown and public smearing campaigns after the MeToo movement.

Compared to the high profile and provocative activism before 2015, activists adjusted their strategy to more low-profile and dispersed curation of activism and organizing due to the current social environment. On the organizing level, mobilizing on a large scale became extremely risky. However, activists still took action decisively when the opportunity came. In 2019, there were a lot of trending social incidents related to sexual harassment and domestic violent issues. Activists followed up on these issues proactively. They increased the communities' understanding of these issues through livestreaming on the internet and organizing timely online discussions. They also wrote articles, did radio shows and produced audio courses to tease out theories and deepen discussions. The young feminist activists also re-organized resources and explored new spaces by attempting to collaborate other groups in other fields. On specific gender issues, young feminist activists did in-depth work on employment discrimination, reproductive rights of single women and sexual harassment. Activists used a two-pronged strategy to follow up on relevant cases. One was to push for legal and policy changes by increasing the legal and social impact of these cases. The other strategy was to provide case services and support. In terms of community building, despite the frequent obstruction of offline activities, activists explored innovative ways to connect young women online and offline. Apart from that, many activists cultivated overseas Chinese students to contribute to the feminist movement in China. Some of them organized large-scale mobilizing in the anti-sexual harassment movement.

Young feminists in China urgently need support from all sides, especially on the following three: first is support in terms of resources and funding, so that activists are no longer in a vulnerable position and the movement can continue; second is to invest in resources to maintain mental health of activists, so that they can address political trauma in a timely manner and find the motivation to continue their work. Last is the support for security and risks mitigation, so that activists and those who want to join the movement can receive adequate and comprehensive security training for response and mitigation mechanisms.

Young labour activists in China

After the Jasic labour and student movement in 2018, leftist associations in universities were severely hampered, if not completely uprooted. Young leftists became targets of all-encompassing surveillance by public security officials and universities. Some students were even criminally prosecuted. Apart from that, students continued to be summoned for meetings, asked to delete articles and opinions published on their own social media accounts, and required to attend thought education. Universities in general increased the use of technology and peer pressure to control students, such as facial recognition and students informants systems. Oppression outside universities has intensified over the years. The number of workers detained for “inciting subversion of state power” in 2019 reached historical high. A lot of labour organizations were forced to close down or transition.

In such political environment, young leftists were mostly quiet in the latter half of 2019. They seldom joined public activities. Even when they joined leftist and labour activities, they used pseudo names. Although this could protect their survival in the limited space, this strategy isolated them. In terms of organizing, leftist organizations in universities could no longer organize public activities on campus after the crackdown. However, a few of them still organized learning groups and other activities in a low-profile manner, such as organizing recreational activities and legal talks for workers near their universities. Some students interned at factories during summer and winter holidays in order to conduct research and organize workers. Some recent graduates decided to join the official union to understand how it works. On the other hand, they also wanted to change the status quo, in which the official unions did not stand up for the workers. However, most of them chose to leave in the end because of various restrictions in the union. For non-leftists youth, the professionals continued to be very involved in social events outside of work, while students joined labour organization through interning, doing part-time and volunteering.

Currently, a lot of labour organizations can no longer develop work using organizational capacity. Most of them continued their work in personal capacity and in an informal manner. This rendered labour groups and young activists invisible to each other, which resulted in a decrease in channels for young activists to join the labour movement. It also made getting relevant information more difficult, which imposed more obstacles and raised the threshold for young activists to join these organizations. Therefore, one direction for future work is to build formal and informal connections for young activists and labour groups. Another direction is to build platforms for connecting labour activists with activists in other fields. Cross-issues learning and exchanges can help labour activists to break the isolation and increase their awareness and capacities.

Young LGBT+ activists in China

Young LGBT+ activists can be split in two groups, one is the group of university students who joined LGBT+ groups on campus, the other is the group of recent graduates and students who volunteer in LGBT+ organizations. According to a survey of 50 university LGBT+ groups across China, most university LGBT+ groups were run by an independent group of students in respective universities. 14% of these groups were intervarsity joint groups. 80% of them were founded within the past 5 years and mostly located in Yangtze River Delta Region, Pearl Delta Region, Beijing, Tianjin, Wuhan, Xi'an, etc. Among the 50 university LGBT+ groups, less than half of them could successfully register as student associations. They faced more obstruction when organizing activities on campus because they lacked the 'legal' organization status. They could not recruit new members, use classrooms for events, nor organize talks or large-scale events on campus. Or else, they risked being summoned for meetings with counsellors and teachers from the Committee of the Communist Youth League.

Facing external pressure, young LGBT+ activists and groups persevered in organizing and participating activism outside and inside universities. Their activism included developing LGBT+ students communities, public education and dissemination of knowledge, research related to sex and gender, policy advocacy and support for student groups network. One of the highlights is the strength of young people using the internet to intervene public issues and consciously using individual actions to lead public participation. For example, during the campaign for the recognition of same-sex marriage in the Civil Code in November 2019, a large number of the young people who volunteered in LGBT+ groups participated in mobilizing. On one hand, they used their online dissemination skills to mobilize people online. On the other hand, they mobilized groups on the ground to participate. In the end, they mobilized 188,000 people to join the legislative process. This is an important breakthrough in the history of LGBT+ movement intervening legislative process. A lot of the participants said it was the first time they participated in the legislative process in China.

With the shrinking space for civil society to take action, activities of many LGBT+ NGOs were heavily affected. Many groups took a relatively conservative approach and rarely organized public campaigns. The impact of working discreetly was that young activists lacked a mature platform to join the movement. Therefore, in the future, external supporters need to build more platforms for young activists and LGBT+ NGOs to interact. At the same time, with limited space, external supporters need to instil the attitude of working on specific issues in an in-depth and continuous manner. This includes increasing their understanding of the status quo and the history of LGBT+ movement in China, the political and social environment they are in and knowledge in specific LGBT+ issues. External supporters also need to increase the capacity of young LGBT+ activists in having dialogues and collaborative discussions in a society and movement full of confrontation and isolation. External supporters can also create opportunities for activists to accompany and support each other.

Editors' note

This report aims to help external stakeholders gain a comprehensive understanding of the activism and organizing carried out by young activists working on different issues in China, and the existing challenges and difficulties they face. Due to limited resources, this report has not yet been able to cover all young activists working on different issues. We very much hope that the future reports can be strengthened and expanded in this aspect. We welcome you send us any questions or comments you may have to youngactivists20192019@gmail.com .

Part 1 Report on young activists with disabilities in China

Author: Observer of disabilities movement in China

The crackdown on civil society, especially rights-based groups, had undoubtedly tightened the space for the disabilities rights movement in recent years. At the same time, more young people with disabilities started to explore diverse ways of organizing to study the rights of communities with disabilities and carry out rights advocacy. This report focuses on the analysis of two disabilities groups founded by young activists with disabilities and the activism organized by the core members. The two group are S, a youth disabilities online group with over 700 active online members; and B, a registered NGO that focuses on women with disabilities. This report also looks at impactful activism of young people with disabilities that took place in 2019.

1. Changes in mainstream disabilities groups

After 2015, many rights-based advocacy groups, including Beijing Yirenping, dissolved due to political pressure. The only one survived was Shenzhen Hengping, the organization that took part in the amendment of the Mental Health Law. Hengping also shifted the focus of its work from advocating for the autonomy of people with mental illnesses on legislative and legal levels to joining and supporting the realization of the social integration of people recovered from mental illnesses. The four young people with disabilities who were deeply involved in campaigning then formed a relatively loose campaign team. They pushed for the right of people with disabilities to participate in all kinds of recruitment exams by pitching media with their Weibo public account “The Voice of Disabilities” and mobilising the community online from 2015 onwards. Cheng Yuan, who used to be in charge of one of Beijing Yirenping’s subsidiaries, organized and formed “Disabilities Lawyers Group”, who provided legal aid for people with disabilities across the country. In July 2019, Cheng Xuan was put in criminal detention for “subversion of state power”. The campaign team and the “Disabilities Lawyers Group” were also affected.

Apart from that, “traditional” disabilities group also transitioned in recent years. One Plus One, the NGO representative that submitted a shadow report to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2012, established the One Plus One Charity Group with subsidiaries like Youren Culture and Qishi Disability Research Center. Youren Culture provides trainings and promotions related to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to community organizations. It had extensive collaborations with Harvard University and Renmin University and provided small-sum project funding for registered grassroots disabilities groups. Qishi Disability Research Center mostly provided employment service for people with visual disabilities. Yinengyixing was a subsidiary that had an industry and commercial registration in 2009. It used to focus on legal service programmes and barrier-free advocacy. It faded out in around 2015. In 2016, founder of Yinengyixing Zhang Wei established a social enterprise that provided consultation on integrated education. Lv Fei, core member of Yinengyixing, founded an enterprise that supported employers to cultivate new positions for people with disabilities and revamp workplace for more accessibility.

In 2014, China Dolls saw the viral Ice Bucket Challenge as an opportunity to transition. It established the Illness Challenge Foundation that focused on the right to treatment and rehabilitation of people with rare diseases. They nurtured groups of people with rare diseases in different parts of the country. They also strengthened the self-acceptance and self-identification among the groups through public education in forms of audio-visuals and theatre.

The former Wuhan University Charity Law Center used to collaborate with civil rights-based society in ways of legal training and research. In 2018, Zhang Wanhong, who was in charge of the Center, was elected as the head of China Disabled Persons' Federation (CDPF). He represented China in state-level dialogues on disabilities rights, took part in the drafting of the CRPD country report and relevant chapters in the China Human Rights Report. He was also in charge of the CDPF's legal reasoning work on the amendment of laws related to employment of people with disabilities. He acted as a bridge between the government and the civil society on the issue of disability rights. Yet, his ambiguous position restricted the independent development of the organization.

To conclude, the state of disabilities groups in recent years can be summarized as follow: rights-based organization were almost all obliterated; the remaining few shifted their focus from policy advocacy to community organizing practice. Mainstream disabilities groups develop their work in forms of foundations, social enterprises and service enterprises. The key ways of work include nurturing grassroots organizations,¹ disseminating information via media, educating the public, and providing direct employment service for corporations and employers. New young activists with disabilities and their groups were founded and nurtured with this backdrop.

2. The birth and development of new young people with disabilities groups

From online to offline: the birth and growth of organization S

In 2016, Y, an overseas doctoral student researching disability study who had experienced epilepsy, founded the column “Disability Studies Discussion” on Chinese social media Zhihu. It aimed at providing the public with information related to the rehabilitation of autism and overseas disabilities research. Y chose this platform because the target audience of Zhihu is mostly young people. Among them, many have higher education attainment. The articles published by Y reflected on the use of the monotonous lens of “empathy, sympathy and inspiration” to understand people with disabilities in mass media. The articles also analysed social models of people with disabilities, which resonated with young people with disabilities who shared the same lived experience. Soon after its launch, the column attracted a few core members who were involved in the early stage. They also built a WeChat chat group S, where more interaction was possible. The core members also started to run a public WeChat account.

The content of the Zhihu column articles included introduction of the history of overseas

¹ Because of legal restrictions, foundations mostly support grassroots disabilities groups with formal registration. However, many of the grassroots groups could not register.

disabilities rights movement, community members reflecting on their personal experiences, and film critic with a disabilities lens. Almost all content on the WeChat public account was original. They included information that was relevant to people's lives and studies, such as options for assistive devices, travel advice, professional school admission recommendations. They also included some analysis of current affairs and trending videos with a disabilities angle. People with disabilities in different parts of the country discovered this minority that shared similar experiences and felt that they had "found their gang". They no longer saw themselves as outcasts.

When the organization was first founded, members encouraged each other to accept and acknowledge themselves. They also had dynamic and deep discussions about rights, status quo and self-identification. This active group gave members a sense of belonging. Peer support also gave confidence and self-recognition to members who felt inferior and timid because of their life experiences. X, key author of "The Voice of Disabilities" was also an active member of S. He said, "S changed me. It allowed me to begin real self-acceptance and liberate myself." At the beginning, his opinion about rights advocacy caused some push back from some of the more cautious core members in the chat group.² X was once kicked out of the chatgroup because he was mistaken for mobilizing people to petition (*shangfang*). He was only invited back to the group after the core members understood and investigated the matter. Now, X and the core members of S are good friends. Activism related to disabilities rights advocacy also started to impact S.

As of 2019, S had more than 700 active online community members. Approximately half of them were university students with disabilities. There were also researchers and public officials, such as staff members of the local Disabled Persons' Federation. All the core team behind S were people with physical disabilities. Q, a second-year university student, was among the first group to benefit from reasonable accommodations for college entrance examinations, which include extending the examination time for exam-takers having difficulties with writing. H, who studied information technology, was preparing for graduate school examinations this year. N was an editor of the public account. She had severe physical disabilities because of acute muscle atrophy. She had a designated disability support worker at home and in public. Because of her condition, she did not enrol in a mainstream school. However, her writing was widely acknowledged as gentle and powerful in the community. The other core members include programmers and employees of multi-national corporations. They all volunteered outside of work.

As a big group of the community was made up of people with physical disabilities, especially those with "severe disabilities" who relied on electric wheelchair for mobility, the community's demand for accessibility is very clear. In the first year of its establishment, S collected signatures from 337 community members to make recommendations to Gaode Map for the lack of markings of accessible facilities. Gaode swiftly responded and started to mark accessible facilities on maps. Members of S were encouraged by this first win.

With the expansion of the community, the core members started to have a clearer management

² WeChat administrators of the chat groups are legally liable for the political legitimacy of the converstaions in the groups they administer.

charter and planning for the development of the community. To join the WeChat group of S, one had to fill out an application form. The change of core member has to be agreed by other core members. Clear rules were established for chat group discussions. Apart from chat group discussions, S regularly organized roundtable sharing. It also invited guests to do text livestream courses in chat groups. These courses included sharing experiences in starting a business, employment, and travelling alone. The guests also answered questions from community members. There were also sharing sessions on rights ideologies and debriefing of activism.

Apart from sufficient online interaction and regular online activities, S also organized offline annual celebrations and meetings within a small area. The meetings were organized at the members' own expenses. Offline meetings can be challenging for members with severe physical disabilities. As they had to break through the limitation of self-identification and fear of the unknown environment. At the same time, they had to respond to their family's obstruction, which often stemmed from worry and a lack of trust. According to Q, who started to run S since high school, the act of members leaving home alone to meet other members was in itself a breakthrough and an awareness of their own abilities and rights. At the same time, the presence of over ten electric wheelchair users in a public space could also challenge some perceptions of the public.

A local Disabled Persons' Federation in Guangdong wanted to support one of the offline activities organized by S. The Federation asked for its name to be added to the title of the event but was rejected by the core members of S. Youren foundation also expressed interest in supporting S. However, the core members of S insisted in keeping the independence of the organization, "we are fine now paying for ourselves. We do not want to be 'nurtured' or 'bought'"³.

The first appearance of multiple identities: the establishment and development of organization B

J is a post-90s woman with disabilities. Upon graduation, she joined Youren Foundation. She subsequently founded NGO B with Y, another university graduate with disabilities caused by a rare disease. This was the first time a disabilities group in China clearly highlighted the intersectional difficulties caused by the multiple identities of women with disabilities.

Near the end of 2018, B launched an offline exhibition of women with disabilities, publicly displaying the portraits and life experiences of more than ten women with disabilities in the forms of visualised posters and short paragraphs. This is the first time a civil society organization in China officially and openly emphasized the identity of women with disabilities. It stirred the disabilities communities.

In March 2019, B successfully registered as a social workers organization focusing on women with disabilities. Most of the interns and members of B were post-90s women with disabilities. They used new media as platforms for dissemination of information. They tried to analyse the lived experiences of women with disabilities using a feminist angle. They also continued to document and edit the oral history of women with disabilities. B also collaborated with organizations that

³ Interview with Q, core member of S in its beginning phase.

provides legal services related to women domestic violence and P, a foundation that provides community capacity training for women with disabilities. Although B was formally registered, fundraising remained a challenge.

3. The activism of young disabilities groups and individual activists

Organization S: Progress in Media Campaigning

The 2019 graduate school admission prospectus of Sichuan University explicitly stated that the university rejected people with hearing disabilities from enrolling as it could not provide the support they needed. S lodged a complaint via phone with the Sichuan Province Disable Persons' Federation after reading the admission prospectus shared in the chat group. It also mobilized other members in the chat group to make complaints with calls. Q also spoke to his teacher, who subsequently found a friend from the Federation to coordinate and resolve the issue. The sentence in question in the prospectus was also deleted in the same day. Through the teacher, Q was connected to an alumnus working at the China National Radio. Q collaborated with the alumnus, who aired the stories of people with disabilities collected and edited by S in a radio programme.

Organization B: from storytelling to needs assessments

Apart from collecting stories from the community and conducting offline training, B's founder J also collaborated with a foundation that also focused on women with disabilities. They carried out an assessment of the needs of women with disabilities. B collected a few hundred replies and published a report on the needs of women with disabilities in China on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.⁴ The report revealed problems with workplace accessibility and workplace discrimination such as differential treatments in recruitment and wage disparities. It also revealed other problems such as the lack of support for realizing the right to education. The report made a series of recommendations for government departments to support and improve services supporting people with disabilities.

The resistance and voicing out of young individuals with disabilities

Apart from organizing activism, the influence of individual young activists with disabilities can be found in some of the incidents that were impactful to the entire disabilities field in 2019. First one is the resistance of two young people with visual disabilities against direct discrimination in the recruitment of teachers. Below is a summary of their activism.

Zheng Rongquan was a young person with visual disabilities. He passed the first college entrance examination in which people with visual disabilities could have the equal opportunities to take part and subsequently entered university. He graduated in 2019 and passed that exam for teacher qualifications in Zhejiang province. He joined the teacher recruitment process of a school for

⁴ Noon Stories: International Day of Persons with Disabilities: No letting one woman with disabilities fall, sisters with disabilities have some recommendations (正午故事：《國際殘障人日：不讓一個殘障女性落下，殘障姐妹們有建議》), 2019-12-04, <http://dy.163.com/v2/article/detail/EV19M5GO0534A4SE.html>

people with visual disabilities in Nanjing city. He was among the best performing candidates in the written exam but failed to get a position because he could not pass the medical check.⁵ Zheng contacted Youren Foundation for help. The foundation contacted the China Disabled Persons' Federation and Jiangsu Province Disabled Persons' Federation to coordinate with the school for his recruitment. The incident was widely reported in mainstream media. It was featured on the China Central Television News Channel. In the end, Zheng Rongquan was employed by the school for people with visual disabilities and the case was resolved.

However, this incident did not change the medical check-up criteria for the recruitment of teachers in Nanjing city. Perhaps Zheng Rongquan himself did not intend to take up the role of a pioneer to steer systemic change. According to sources, he personally knew the disabilities campaigning team but did not reach out to them for help. According to people who were familiar with the standards of the teacher qualifications examination in Zhejiang province, Zheng was actually not eligible for taking the examination, because his medical check-up would also be seen as fail. Therefore, his obtaining the teacher qualification could be seen as a special case.

Another person challenging the teacher recruitment medical check-up criteria in 2019 was female university student Wang Xiangjun. She was the first student admitted into university through college entrance exam in Anhui province.⁶ Her application for a music teacher position in a special school was rejected because she also failed her medical check-up. She reached out to the disabilities campaigning team, hoping to push for change in the medical check-up system with her case. During National Teacher's Day, the disabilities campaigning team coordinated a signature campaign for recommendations. This method, which used to be frequently used by rights-based NGOs, was not mentioned in the reports in mainstream media. Just like other reports on incidents related to disabilities, the upbringing and school life of Wang were the focuses of the reports.

With the same experience, the two university students with disabilities chose different ways to resolve their problems. To trust the power of the mainstream or to trust the strength of civil society? One of the considerations was of course the risks involved in individuals with disabilities defending their own rights (*weiquan*).

Apart from those who fought for equal employment opportunities, there were also young people with disabilities who are well known even outside of their own communities.

Panpan was a person on wheelchair who left hometown to work in a medical institution in Beijing. She was also the part-time editor of the social media public accounts of B, an organization that focuses on issues related to women with disabilities. In July 2019, the founder of Home for People with Paraplegia Wen Jun accidentally died because an accessible facility was occupied. Panpan

⁵ Democracy and Legal System Times: the tough path to employment of Zhen Rongquan, a university student with visual disabilities from Wenzhou: “failed” even when he ranked first in recruitment exam (民主與法制時報：《溫州視障大學生鄭榮權坎坷求職路：入職考試第一仍「不合格」》), 2019-05-03, <https://new.qq.com/omn/20190503/20190503A08MBB.html>

⁶ China Daily: I have never seen light, but I have seen love – first college entrance exam taker with visual disability in Anhui to realize the dream of entering university (中國日報：《我從未見過光明，可我見過愛——安徽首位盲人高考圓大學夢》), 2015-07-16, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/micro-reading/interface_toutiao/2015-07-16/13991157.html?tt_group_id=4727354414

started a ‘take picture as you go’ campaign with the hope to raise public awareness on the use and construction of accessible facilities. Niche but highly regarded independent media Story FM also ran the story of Panpan.⁷

Dachengzi, owner of an online blog in Bilibili, a Chinese video sharing website, worked at an internet company in Hangzhou. She was a member of the online community S. She also joined the offline training offered by Youren Foundation. In 2019, outside of her day job she became famous for doing online livestreaming that showed the daily lives of wheelchair users, such as going to work in wheelchair and revealing how rehabilitative surgery was done. She also livestreamed the assistive devices expo. Dachengzi was known to more people with disabilities. Many people also frequently asked her for advice and help. One of the biggest medical online key opinion leader Doctor Dingxiang wrote for Dachengzi, so that more readers knew about her story and understood her vision of “living with disabilities is just another way of living”.⁸

From the activism of 2019, it is easy to see that storytelling was a key way of activism adopted by young disabilities group and activists. It was widely accepted by mainstream media and public. Be it exhibition, theatre, broadcasting, disseminating articles on new media, oral history and documentary, they were different ways for the individuals and communities with disabilities to tell their stories.

4. The opportunities, challenges and way out for young activists with disabilities

Opportunities: ample space for developing issues and low political risks

Although government is gradually tightening the space for civil society organizations to survive, individual young activists with disabilities mentioned in the report were rarely controlled by local governments or universities. There are three reasons for this.

First, because of their physical condition, a lot of the activism organized by universities students with disabilities were online. They rarely organized offline activities in the same area or in the same campus. Also, half of the offline activities organized by S were group meet-ups that were not related to any activism for specific issues. Therefore, these activities were not intervened by the authorities for ‘maintaining stability’ (*weiwen*) purposes.

Secondly, disabilities issues were not politically sensitive. On one hand, in the authorities’ perspective, the longstanding underprivileged social position of people with disabilities made their voices legitimate and legal. On the other hand, the local governments had long been using welfare as a means to keep the disabilities communities and their family members ‘stable’. Therefore, when people with disabilities demanded for barrier-free environment and support for reasonable accommodation, authorities tend to see their demands as welfare-based rather than

⁷ Story FM: Challenge of a Beipiao (a person left home to work in Beijing) consumer in wheelchair (故事 FM : 《一個輪椅消費者的獨立北漂挑戰》), 2019-07-15, <http://storyfm.cn/episodes/e241-wheelchair-accessible/>

⁸ Doctor Dingxiang: Story: The flyin live of the girl in wheelchair (丁香醫生 : 《故事|輪椅少女的飛馳人生》), 2019-08-12, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/77701775>

rights-based. As a result, the authorities did not control them like how they controlled petitioning communities or other mass incidents. Even when the authorities saw the change of external political environment in 2019 as an opportunity to crack down on local NGOs, an official in charge of maintaining stability who stopped a core activist with disabilities from leaving the country said “there’s no problem with defending the rights of people with disabilities, but there can be no mistakes about ideologies”.

Other than that, as discussed above, the Chinese government usually adopted some measures as a response to the upcoming United Nations review conducted by treaty bodies. Instead of the human rights standards framework, local governments and Disabled Persons’ Federation pushed for the improvement of relevant systems and policies using the framework of sustainable development goals. Judging from the activism in 2019, there is a great chance of disabilities issues moving towards the mainstream.

Challenges: lack of resources and low ability to mitigate risks

Both independent youth-led disabilities organizations analysed in this report lacked resources. Members had to pay for the annual gathering of S. They only had a few thousand dollars (*yuan*) funding from the small-sum support provided by Youren Foundation. However, only luxurious hotels in first-tier cities in China provide accessible facilities. This means individuals had to bear more costs. Also, compared to other people, young people with disabilities faced more difficulties in enrolling into schools and getting jobs. When members of the organization were mostly university students and fresh graduates, their difficult upbringing made them more sceptical of external support and political risks. Organization B shared the same situation. Although the organization is officially registered, they did not have more resources to further explore ways for promoting the issues.

Way out: capacity building provided by external stakeholders

The entry point for supporting young activists with disabilities can be capacity training rather than funding. This includes two areas of training: storytelling and basic research.

As mentioned above, the key way of activism carried out by young disabilities groups and activists is story telling. It is extremely important for them to tell stories well. It is also pivotal for young groups to nurture community members who can tell interesting stories that exemplify difficulties shared by the community without being tear-jerking and “inspiring”. The groups also need more professional capacity training. Good storytelling can also increase the self-acceptance and self-recognition of young people with disabilities. The community can then find more energy in body politics, face their own needs and have the strength to seek change. At the same time, good storytelling can also promote change of public perception and increase awareness.

After young people with disabilities become more conscious and aware, the activism with the lowest threshold for them to join would be basic research, such as research focusing on the local accessible facilities, especially in designated public spaces such as universities, hospitals, and public transportation. In the next few years, the central and local government may initiate the construction of accessible facilities. However, this initiative must involve the participation of the

disabilities communities, as they are the ones who know their own needs best. The communities are the most qualified to evaluate whether the design and construction of the facilities make sense. Therefore, such low-threshold participation is meaningful to a certain extent.

Part 2 Report on young feminist activists in China

Author: China feminist activist Zhang Leilei

The emergence of young feminist activists in China created a new chapter for the development of the feminist movement in China. However, with the tightening of the political environment and the strengthening government control, feminists faced tremendous obstacles and endless harassment in their individual and group activism. Even so, they were looking for opportunities in the tight spaces and exploring a way out. This report first reviews the overall make-up of the community and explores the reason for them to join the feminist movement. It then shows the key ways of activism, the key issues they work on and ways they build communities. The report also discusses how the new ways of control imposed layers of obstacles for activists to develop their work and mobilizing their communities. In the end it highlights the biggest challenges faced by this group of activists, the areas in which they need support and how they can seize the opportunities that still exist.

1. The landscape of the young feminists communities

This group of activists are 22-33 years old. They all grew up in different cities, towns and villages. Not all of the young feminist activists come from middle class families. A lot of them used to live in impoverished villages. Most of them received tertiary education and started their involvement in the feminist movement in university. Now, they formed the core group of feminists in China as NGO workers, freelancers, and entrepreneurs etc. Unlike people in their age, they did not become elites and instead chose a marginalized and thorny road of resistance. Their different starting points and experiences are the reasons that eventually brought them together.

Although most of the activists said they had not experienced very “serious” gender oppression, they realized they had personally experienced or witnessed the reality of gender inequality in the past. Unconsciously these facts stayed with them. Feminists theories allowed them to explain and understand these facts. One of the activists realized that “women do not possess any property” since she was young. However, as a woman who thinks she has no other option but to get married, her ideal future husband is “a man who does not commit domestic violence”.⁹ These activists witnessed how parents of their classmates favoured sons over daughters, the unreasonable division of chores at home, the brainwashing and heterosexual-centric romance literature and the instructions on “how a girl should behave” in different areas of life. Some experienced sexual harassment, bullying incited by class differences and childhood domestic violence. These activists tirelessly looked for resources and information to understand the world and pursue their own dreams, such as reading and joining feminist trainings and workshops. They used the feminist lens to examine the power structure in the patriarchy.

⁹ From individual interview with the activist.

Tertiary education equipped the activists with tools and sources of information. This is because women in this generation have more opportunities to receive education. Data shows that over 50% of university students are women.¹⁰ They grew up when the one-child policy was most strictly applied. Although the evilness of robbing women of their reproductive rights and the oppression on women brought by family planning cannot be overlooked, to a certain extent the one-child policy forced many families to devote their resources to the only female offspring in the family. This allowed them to have more opportunities to learn about theories and activism, as well as to fight for their own rights.

On the road of exploration, the pursuit of visions and values by these activists stood out most. Many of them had a fighting spirit since young. They opposed all kinds of oppression against their personalities and pursued personal freedom. Some of them are firm believers of “one must have vision in order to live”. They needed to find “the young passion”. Some tried the route of being an elite and realised it was not for them. Some wanted their career to be helping others. In the end, they found their mission in a space full of understanding, mutual support and frequent reflection. From practising personal politics to advocating in public arena, they built tight communities. These young feminists were different from the feminists from the last generation, who were mostly elites like academics, lawyers and experts. These young feminists had a relatively grassroots background and were more marginalised. Yet they were extremely provocative, physical, critical and creative. They brought feminism out from a small circle into the eyes of the public. However, this high-profile activism and ability to organize and mobilize mean that they experience different kinds of obstacles and struggles, especially when various social forces are facing oppression.

2. The activism and organizing of young feminist activists

With the worsening of the political environment in recent years, the space for young feminist activism suddenly reduced. In 2019, this trend continued. This means that while facing unremitting political crackdown, feminists had to change the methods and strategies of their activism in order to continue to push for gender equality in the limited space.

Mobilizing on a large scale has become extremely risky. However, activists still acted decisively when the opportunity came. In 2019, there were a lot of trending social incidents related to sexual harassment and domestic violent issues. Activists followed up on these issues proactively. They increased the communities' understanding of these issues through live streaming online and organizing timely online discussions. They also wrote articles, did radio shows and produced audio courses to tease out theories and deepen discussions. The young feminists also re-organized resources and explore new spaces by attempting collaboration with other groups in other fields. For example, in 2019, in the Metoo exhibitions held in different parts of China, many performers and curators collaborated to document and show the history of the Metoo movement. This was also a way to continue the promotion and exposure of the movement. Also, young feminist

¹⁰ Remin Wang: Female undergraduates and graduates are not 51.7% and 48.5%, (人民網：《女大學生和研究生比例達 51.7% 和 48.5%》), 2013-10-28, <http://edu.sina.com.cn/kaoyan/2013-10-28/1125399511.shtml>

activists organized activities with women workers groups and other small organizations in other parts of the country in order to increase the visibility of gender issues in other areas.

On specific gender issues, young feminists did in-depth work on employment discrimination, reproductive rights of single women and sexual harassment. On employment discrimination, they pushed for legal, educational and policy breakthroughs by providing legal assistance, case assistance and promotion. China is now facing the crisis of an aging population and needs a bigger workforce to accelerate the economy. This gives the issue legitimacy. In early 2019, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, Ministry of Education and seven other ministries issued a notice, prohibiting employers asking female candidates about their marital status in the recruitment process.¹¹ This notice also showed the legitimacy of the issue of employment discrimination. Such a female-friendly policy is the fruit of the work of feminist activists. It also created space for them to do more work on this issue, allowing them to gain breakthroughs in some cases and gain resources in media exposure, including on platforms such as China Channel Television. The issue of reproductive rights of single women also gained more exposure and support due to the great pressure of the population structure in China and the relatively friendly policy environment. As for issues such as sexual harassment, although the issue became more sensitive, it still had a lot of attention because of the increased public awareness. There was a trend of consolidating the energy of the communities to drive policy change.¹²

The activists adopted two strategies to follow up on individual cases. One strategy is to push for legal and policy changes by increasing the legal and social impact of the legal cases. They followed up on cases such as pregnancy discrimination at work, sexual harassment at workplace and discrimination against single women pregnancy through providing legal, psychological and media support. Some of these cases achieved breakthroughs.¹³ The second strategy is to provide case services and support, such as support for survivors of domestic violence. Through reporting to the police and going to the hospital together, the survivors could get the maximum support. This service could also improve the gender sensitivity how police and hospitals handle cases related to domestic violence.

In terms of community building, although offline activities were stopped in a lot of cities, activists found many ways for young women to connect online and offline. For example, they increased the communities' connection and promoted more in-depth and sophisticated discussion on feminist issues through more legitimate means, such as conducting women leadership training, building women co-learning communities and launching feminist courses. On the other hand, in

¹¹ China News Service, No restrictions on gender for recruitment, cannot ask women about their marital status! 9 state department just issued a notice (中新網：《招聘不得限制性別，不能詢問婦女婚育情況！國家九部門下通知了》)，2019-02-22，<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1626139573790430069&wfr=spider&for=pc>

¹² Shanghai National People's Congress: Establish anti sexual harassment mechanism, Shanghai National People's Congress coordinated with factories and corporations to start research on legislature (上海市人大網：《構建“性騷擾防治機制，上海市人大聯合協力廠商開展立法調研》），2019-04-01，<http://www.hainanpc.net/hainanpc/xxgk/dwxy/954338/index.html>

¹³ All China Federation of Trade Unions: Discovered pregnancy in the morning, laid off in the afternoon, this is what the first trial court decided! (全國總工會：《上午查出懷孕下午就被炒，法院一審這樣判！》），2019-11-17，https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?_biz=MzI0MzU3OTI5Mw==&mid=2247501504&idx=2&sn=f628bcf1df2ec4fd0d546042df414&pass_ticket=5rjXDEvUnyeWTUZUKPSmxF%2BxJNHeJAJL%2BmlVwF6Zsk4nCcQCzSo%2FjYWFaY%2F6rgx

face of the shrinking space for online operation, they also explored new spaces to foster discussions of feminist issues face to face, such as hiking and taking walks. The existing offline activities and theatre performances continued in suitable circumstances. It is also notable that activists were nurturing the overseas Chinese students communities. Through theatre, workshop and discussions, the activists increased the ideology and social movement awareness of the overseas students, so that they could contribute to the feminist movement in China. Some of them coordinated large-scale mobilizing during the anti-sexual harassment movement.

Compared to the high profile and provocative activism before 2015, activists adjusted their strategy to more low-profile and dispersed curation of activism and organizing due to the current social environment. Activists thus adjusted their strategies. First, they were more devoted in in-depth work in issue discussions, advocacy, and nurturing of activists, so that change could continue to happen in a worsening political environment for gender equality. They could also nurture more activists to mobilize in larger scale. Second, years of experience in the movement equipped these activists with the ability to independently nurture communities. Even though they were more dispersed physically, many activists continue to nurture communities in their own neighbourhood. Other than that, the change in environment helped activists to break through from their own circles and interacted with more diverse communities, so that they could try to reposition themselves in the movement and realign the direction of the issues.

3. Gouvernement control and crackdown

In universities, the control of teachers and students became stricter. Therefore, the space for activities and spreading ideas kept shrinking. The participation of students faced more restrictions and risks. Some university activists were reported by staff members of All-China Women's Federation when the students tried to get in touch with the Federation to discuss specific topics. The students were subsequently condemned and criticised.

However, most of the young feminists had left universities for a long time. Hence the more concentrated and frequent surveillance and harassment focused on the core activists who were not university students. In 2019, the Chinese authorities strengthened the control measures they had adopted in the past few years. The most used measure was employing police and state security departments to harass people related to the activists, such as threatening their flat owners in order to force the activists to move out. They even forced the activists to move out of the city through frequent harassment of which the activists could not get rid. This year, the authorities increased harassment of families of the activists. Out of fear of punishment, families would limit activists' personal freedom and did not allow them to go out.

Apart from harassing people related to the activists, the authorities also summoned the activists and put pressure on them a lot more intensely. In the latter half of 2019, most of the core activists were constantly summoned for meeting. Their personal and professional activities were constantly restricted. In 2019, as a new measure to monitor the whereabouts and communications of activists, the authorities installed surveillance cameras in the activists' neighbourhood and next to the elevators outside of their apartments. With the development of surveillance

technology and application of such technology in social control (such as facial recognition), the authorities could easily and immediately find out the whereabouts and personal information of the activists. The police could harass activists in a targeted way by tracing their whereabouts.

Apart from harassment targeting individual activists, the space for activism online and offline had also been shrinking. Apart from closely monitoring and immediately obstructing activities organized by activists, a lot of the cultural space and venues were constantly monitored, especially those that hosted activities related to relatively “sensitive” topics. Many cultural spaces were closed, making it a lot more difficult for activists to organize activities and finding venues. Online censorship constantly became stricter and more nuanced. The constant censorship and restriction has made people afraid of raising different opinions. Activists used different ways of dissemination to extend the life of the content before it was censored. However, content related to relatively sensitive issues still could not stay online for long.

The most notable way of control in 2019 is the crackdown targeting individuals and organizations doing organizing work. The authorities annihilated groups and isolated individuals by frequently harassing them. After the MeToo movement, A lot of organizations had to stop running due to the targeted crackdown and public smearing campaigns (government identifying the organizations as illegal). For the remaining groups, the authorities harassed individuals in a targeted manner, leaving activists in a very vulnerable and passive position. In the end, a lot of activists had to leave the city in which they lived. Although these activists continued to support each other and started activism in new cities, this dispersing crackdown had caused huge loss and hindrance to the movement.

These suppressive measures had an immense impact on the work and personal lives of the activists. The constant moving around and harassment greatly affected the fundamental safety for rest and accommodation. Tension with their birth family put immense pressure and stress on the activists. Apart from that, the work of activists was constantly interrupted. A lot of activists were called off before or during the event. This also made activists hesitated and started to self-censor. As the government constantly labelled activists and the entire feminist movement as sensitive and marginalized, “activist” as an identity became a negative asset, causing a lot of worries when they tried to call for more participation from the communities. As a result, a lot of resources did not go to feminist activists because of their identity. Although a lot of new communities felt very passionate about the cause, the lack of security measures and training resources created future troubles for the individuals and the movement.

4. Challenges and way out for young feminist activists

Young feminists faced challenges on three fronts. First, because of the crackdown, activists were forced to spread out in different cities. They even needed to develop work in a more personal (non-organizational and non-institutional) way. This brought huge challenge to the activists. As individuals, activists could not get more resources. When building communities, individual activists also faced a lot of difficulties in terms of legitimacy. At the same time, they became vulnerable more easily as they had to devote more energy and time into the movement. Also, a

lot of activists and organizations lacked funding. Many of them had difficulty getting domestic funding because of their sensitive identities. Overseas funding was under tight control. Although a huge proportion of the population base were interested in feminism, the deterioration of the environment led to the simplification, radicalization and sensationalizing of the perception of feminist groups in public discussions.

In view of this, young feminists in China is in dire need of support from all sides. One is support for resources and funding to sustain the movement and lift activists out of vulnerable situations. Another kind of resources is providing psychological support, so that activists can process political trauma in a timely manner and find motivation to continue their work. Activists also need support for security and risk mitigation training, so that activists and those who want to join the movement can receive adequate and comprehensive security training for response and mitigation mechanisms.

Although the feminist movement in China and the activists involved are facing an extremely challenging environment, there are still opportunities and way out. First, the legitimacy and legality of some gender issues leave room for action. As a lot of fields lack resources and devotion, these issues are filling the gaps in the development of gender issues in China. Second, nurturing communities became increasingly difficult, but a lot of young women are very passional about feminist work. The right opportunities and devotion in nurturing them give vigour to the feminist movement. Third, although feminism and activism were labelled as negative and sensitive, transforming some issues and themes or cultivating new topics such as women leadership, sex education and women psychological health can still cultivate different possibilities. Fourth, although isolation and dispersion are inevitable, these phenomena prompted activists to step out of their comfort zone to start collaboration with other fields, free themselves from the existing work model for creating new ways of activisms and leaving their original neighbourhood to cultivate new communities in other neighbourhoods.

Part 3 Report on young labour activists in China

Author: participant of China labour movement

2019 marked the 70th anniversary of the founding of the regime of the Communist Party of China, which has a significant meaning for the existence and continuation of the current government. At the same time, 2019 marked the 100th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, which originated from Peking University, the top university in China. At these two key occasions, the authorities escalated the crackdown on young activists and control over universities in order to prevent any “unstable factors” from spreading and causing disturbances. Therefore, for young labour activists in China, 2019 was the year to “survive between the cracks” and it was very difficult for them. This report attempts to comb through the activisms and organizing of young labour activism in 2019 and the difficulty and challenges they faced. It also identifies the direction to which activists and supporters can work towards.

1. The landscape of the young labour activists communities

This group of young people were born between 1990 to 1998. They are all youthful and energetic. Some of them came from urban middle-class families and are usually the only child of the family. Their parents were teachers or civil servants, and they grew up in a relatively liberal family. At the beginning they did not know much about workers and did not think that the workers have much to do with themselves. However, since joining the research on janitors in schools, they realised their lives had always involved workers. They realized they enjoyed all the convenient services provided by these workers every day. At the same time, they realised that although their parents were not workers, many of their relatives were working in other parts of the country but they did not know much about these relatives.

Many other young labour activists came from ordinary families. Their parents were street vendors, factory workers. If they are from third-tier coastal cities such as Zhanjiang, Maoming and Chaoshan, their parents would work in the planting and fishing industries or do repair work at the piers. Usually these young activists grew up with their grandparents and seldom saw their parents as both of them worked in other parts of the country. They belonged to the generation of the “left-behind children”. Some of the young people stayed with their parents in the cities. They were born and raised in the cities. Unlike their peers from middle-class families, they grew up on three-wheeled carts or in vegetable stalls, living lives that turned nights into days.¹⁴ Young people grew up in this environment knew how much hardship one had to overcome in order to go to the city from other parts of the country to make a living. They also knew how difficult life could be. The upbringing of the “left-over generation” and the “nomad generation” helped them understand the workers communities.

¹⁴ Vegetable stalls open at 4am, therefore parents had to start the preparation work in the market at 3am. When the child is sleepy, they sleep on the three-wheeled cart.

These young labour activists shared another thing in common - they had received or were receiving higher education. Many of them graduated from top universities or studied overseas. Interestingly, they had different visions and started their activism at different junctures. Some of young people studying sociology and social work came across ideas of social structure and social classes. They realised that there was a widespread and severe inequality in society and this inequality could be changed. Young people studying law and journalism came across issues related to workers during their placements, thus they understood more about the workers' rights situation. Another group of young people were more affected by leftist ideologies. They studied Marxism and Leninism. They believed that young people should care about the national economy, people's livelihood and fellow workers and peasants. The third group of young people found university life too boring, so they wanted to find something to do. They gradually participated in some activism as they joined charity activities outside school. There were also some students who interned or volunteered at labour organizations in order to polish their resume for future job hunting or further studies.

On the level of participation, the young activists can be divided into two groups. Those who were more impacted by leftist theories were more involved in the activism. They used Marxism to legitimize their actions. Their communities had relatively stable network and organizing. Another group was the “non-leftist youth”. They cared about the society, the underprivileged and injustices. They wanted to pursue democracy and freedom. The activism of this group of young people was more individualised. They connected with each other through the participation of events. After the event or activism, they only kept loose contact. Therefore, there were no clear network and leader for the group.

2. The activism and organizing of young labour activists

Leftist youth

Observing from the outside, “quiet” best describes leftist youth in the latter half of 2019. They seldom joined public event. Even when they did join leftist or labour activists, they used pseudo names. Even people who worked on labour issues for years could not easily get in touch with the core members of the leftist youth. This strategy could protect them and allow them to survive in the limited space. However, it also cut them off from the outside world, isolating them further.

In terms of organizing, leftist associations in universities could no longer organize public activities on campus in organizational capacity after they were suppressed. However, a few students continued to organize learning groups outside campus through individual invitations sent via messaging apps. They learnt about agriculture, villages, peasants, state-owned enterprises, ethnic issues, workers issues, democracy and issues related to people's livelihood such as healthcare, education and housing. These learning groups also launch discussions and thematic studies on trending social issues. They were familiar with a series of writings by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Mao Zedong, such as Capitalism, Communist Manifesto and On Contradiction, and also studied the history of labour movement in China. These students also learnt workers organizing

through watching movies related to labour movement across the world, such as Cart (Korean), A Single Spark (Korean), Made in Dagenham (British) and The Take (Argentinian).

Although the activism could only exist in informal ways, leftist youth continued to roll out different types of activities. During weekends and in the evenings, they played movies, read news and helped the workers' children with their homework in community organizations for migrant workers or construction sites near their universities. Other than that, they spent their summer and winter holidays working in factories located in Pearl Delta Region and Yangtze Delta Region. They usually chose to work for more well-known corporations such as Foxconn in Shenzhen, Biel in Huizhou and other famous corporations in Suzhou. During their time in the factories, they chatted with workers, made friends with them, interviewed them and learnt about their situation on the ground. They also developed mobile applications or mini programmes for workers in some industries. Now there are 50,000 active users. Some young people chose to be a factory worker. They lived, learned, worked with the workers and did some labour organizing work in the factories.

Interestingly, some of the recent graduates chose to join the official unions. On the one hand, they wanted to understand their operation. On the other hand, they wanted to impact and change how these unions currently refused to work for the workers and explore some space for their work. However, the official unions later learnt about the "real motives" of some students joining them. These unions started to be more careful with recruitment or carried out stricter background checks of university students. Some of the young people who had joined these official unions gradually left as they felt a lot of restrictions. The official unions also changed their policy of recruiting young people to "only out, no in".

Non-leftist youth

Different from leftist youth, some young people in school got in touch with NGOs or activists through the internet (mostly Weibo, WeChat or Facebook) or organizations on and off campus. These young people were attracted by the visions of civil society. They wanted to pursue values such as freedom, democracy and equality and eventually participated in activities organized by these organizations. In the process, they developed strong interests in labour issues and proactively sought opportunities for more involvement. Compared to leftist youth, their organizing was a lot looser. Usually they maintained connections and networks through meetings, hiking, book clubs and incidents of common interest.

Some of these young people worked full time. They personally experienced at work how corporations exploited employees. They used their spare time to continuously and deeply partake in public events. For example, they went to the workers protest sites to do reporting. They also took part in rescuing labour activists who were under arrest. At the same time, they had more communications and exchanges with the more experienced activists who were still active and impactful. As a result, these young people received information and support.

Part of this group of young people are students. These students assisted workers with their legal cases when interning, part-timing or volunteering in labour organizations. They visited workers who suffered from work injuries, provided legal consultation and wrote legal documents for

workers. The students hoped that they could raise the rights awareness of the workers as they accompanied and supported these workers.

3. Government control and suppression

Leftist youth

After the 2018 Jasic labour and student movement, university leftist organizations were severely hampered, if not “uprooted”. A lot of associations that operated for years could no longer organize public activities. For example, the Peking University Marxist Society were forced to go through restructuring because of its active participation in the labour movement. The Renmin University of China Xinguang Pingmin Development Research Association, an association that served workers in the university, had to stop all activities and be rectified before a given deadline.

Leftist youth were put under all-encompassing surveillance as targets of public security officers and universities. Before the May Fourth Youth Festival on 28 April 2019, five members of the Peking University Marxist Society (Qiu Zhanxuan, Jiao Bairong, Sun Jiayan, Li Ziyi and Wang Hanshu) went to work at a construction site at Yizhuang to gain experience as a worker. At 8 a.m. next morning, all of them “went missing”.

Not only that, leftist students faced further criminal prosecutions. Yang Zhengjun is a bachelor graduate of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics and a masters graduate at the Central University for Nationalities. On the evening of 8 January 2019, police barged into his home in Guangzhou and forcibly took him away. He was later detained in Shenzhen No.1 Detention Center and formally arrested in August. Apart from that, authorities continued to adopt existing control measures, such as summoning leftist youth for meetings, requesting them to delete articles and opinion published on social media, and conducting thought education, etc.

It had also become more common for universities to reach its objective of control with technologies and peer pressure among students. For example, people outside of the universities had to scan their faces and identity cards to get in and out of campuses; schools usually launched the “student informant” system, which incentivise students to be informants that collected the opinion and thoughts affiliations of teacher and classmates. Surveillance cameras in classrooms had become a default. They were installed to collect evidence of teachers expressing inappropriate opinion, imprisoning the freedom of speech of teachers and students by creating an atmosphere of fear. Ten teachers were reported and punished by universities in 2019 alone. The crackdown on associations, leaders of these associations, teachers and students in universities created a chilling effect, forcing normal student activities to go underground.

Labour organizations

Right now, in China, any independent organization with any impact among communities would face suppression from the authorities. More workers had been detained for “inciting subversion of state power” in 2019 than ever before. Compared to the crime of “assembling crowds to disturb social order”, although the sentencing range for both crimes are similar, “inciting subversion of

state power” is a greater deterrent because the authorities can derive individuals the right to access lawyers for a long period of time as they “endangered state security”. In mass media, the narrative of inciting subversion of state power particularly gained the trust of people who were not aware of the truth. It could also fully mobilize the nationalistic passion of the “Little Pink” (young nationalists in China).

Some activists left after joining the movement for a while as they felt helpless. There were many reasons behind, such as the meaning of the activism, doubts around changes brought by the activism, facing heavy discussion every day, lack of understanding from their family, security concerns, concerns about their own physical and mental health, as well as the difference between the financial status of themselves and that of other people in the same age. However, some activists gradually understood and acknowledged the work and vision of the workers after being deeply involved in rescuing them. These activists continued to help and support workers after finishing the rescue work by entering labour organizations or establishing new organizations rooted in workers communities.

Although the authorities continued to escalate the crackdown on labour activists, the impact was not entirely negative. For example, activists livestreamed, discussed, and talked about their personal experience of the crackdown, making the suppression visible. These woke those who were “sleeping” and connected the activists with other activists who shared similar experience. Other than that, the crackdown also let activists personally witness and experience the obscurity and injustice of this social system. They used to join labour movement with the intention to help “the underprivileged”, which was fighting for someone else’s injustice. When the crackdown happened to themselves, that real and personal experience transformed into a catalyst for personal growth.

4. Challenges and way out for young labour activists

Objectively speaking, there is a huge space for young people to work on labour issues, as there are 280 million workers in China, 6 million workers with pneumoconiosis, 40,000 fingers lost to work injuries, and thousands of collective worker actions in different scales. When the labour conflicts were not resolved and unions failed to act, as long as we are willing to find opportunities, both organizations and individuals can find ways to participate.

However, the authorities had started the constant crackdown on labour organizations since 2015. Many of these organizations can no longer continue their work in organization capacity, because they wanted to mitigate risks and were limited by the decrease in resources. They spread themselves out to work in personal capacity and in informal ways. For those who could continue to work in organizational capacity, they adjusted the body and focus of work, taking out issues that were considered “sensitive” or cutting promotion. This marginalized and isolated labour organizations, making them go underground.

Such changes rendered labour organizations and young activists invisible to each other. There were less ways for young activists to join the movement. It became more difficult for them to receive relevant information. As a result, there were more obstacles and hurdles for young

activists to take part in the activism. In the future, one direction is to increase the formal and informal connection between young activists and labour organizations.

Another direction is to increase the synergy of labour issues and other issues. For a long time, labour issues have been the “most marginalized of the marginalized” and the “most grassroots of the grassroots” in the social movements in China. On top of that, the “battle between the leftists and the rightists” made even less people care about the issues and participate in the movement. Also, many labour activists are workers. Their education qualifications, resources, narratives and creativity are not as strong as activists in other fields. Their thinking is also less open and diverse, thus relatively weak in terms of accepting new things and adapting to changes. Therefore, creating platforms that enhance interaction and learning between labour activists and other activists can help them get out of self-isolation. It can also help increase the awareness and capacity of the labour activists.

Part 4 Report on young LGBT+ activists in China

Author: Participant of LGBT+ movement in China

In November 2019, 180,000 LGBT+ people participated in the legislative process of amending the Marriage and Family section of the Civil Code by submitting the legal opinion of “recognizing same-sex marriage”. A lot of young activists took part in mobilizing members of the communities to submit opinion online and mailing letters offline. On the other hand, in a closed-door self-care workshop held in early December 2019, 22 out of 26 participants said they were at least summoned once for meetings with “relevant authorities” in 2019.

These two incidents show the situation of the young LGBT+ activists in China. On one hand, young activists were more directly exposed to external political pressure. Many of them faced strong external political pressure when they first entered the field of activism. On the other hand, young activists were actively gathering online and offline to explore tirelessly in the limited space for civil society. They mobilized community participation or took part in online discussion. These contests and gambling in last year made activists feel challenged, helpless and isolated. At the same time, they felt more connected and united whenever they could find the opportunity to achieve breakthroughs.

This report summarizes the types of activism and organizing organized by young LGBT+ activists. It also examines the challenges young LGBT+ activists face and the future direction to support these young LGBT+ activists.

1. Young LGBT+ groups and organizations

Young LGBT+ activists can be divided into two groups. The first group is university students who joined LGBT+ groups on campus. The second group comprises of university students volunteering in LGBT+ organizations and recent graduates working full time. Some members of the two groups overlapped and transitioned, while some never crossed paths.

China SOGI Youth Network interviewed the core members of 50 university LGBT+ groups in China and highlighted the current situation and characteristics of LGBT+ youth groups on campuses. These groups were mostly independently run groups in different universities. 14% of these groups were intervarsity joint groups. 80% of the groups were founded within the last 5 years. Geographically, most of these groups were located in Yangtze Delta Region, Pearl Delta Region, Beijing, Tianjin, Wuhan, Xi'an and other cities. The report shows that core members of these groups were approximately 20 years old in their second or third year of undergraduate studies. Most of them studied humanities, especially sociology and law. There were also students in business and science stream. As for sexual orientations and gender identities, most of the core members are cisgender. 32% of them were gay. Lesbian members made up 16% of the members. Another 16% of the members were heterosexual. A lot of the members also self-identified as queer.

Apart from university LGBT+ groups, many young people, including university students and

recent graduates, also promoted LGBT+ issues by joining platforms organized by civil society non-profit organizations. These young people took part in the actual work of NGOs by volunteering, interning or working full-time. Some university students with vision would proactively join platforms formed by NGOs. Other young people were attracted by the work and the issues promoted by the NGOs. Their body of work was different from that of university LGBT+ groups, such as transgender issues and legal campaigning. These NGOs provided professional platforms for young people with the relevant profession and interests.

The first batch of LGBT+ groups in universities were founded as early as near 2005. The Rainbow Society of Sun Yat-sen University and Zhihe Society of Fudan University were among the first student groups to organize activities related to sex and gender. However, most of the university LGBT+ groups were founded and developed in the past 5 years. The founding of student groups was closely related to the development of LGBT+ NGOs in civil society. On one hand, LGBT+ NGOs organized training for young people and volunteers. Many young people founded LGBT+ student groups in their own universities after attending training for young activists. On the other hand, teachers in universities started courses related to sex and gender (these courses were initiated by teachers or were a collaboration between NGOs and teachers). Because of these courses and the support from teachers, university students developed young LGBT+ groups. Also, the campaigning and training work done by LGBT+ NGOs were open and visible, providing channels for young people to join the LGBT+ movement as volunteers and interns.

However, it was when young LGBT+ groups were founded in universities and gained widespread attention that these groups experienced difficulty in development because of the duo identities: youth and LGBT+. According to the interviews conducted by China SOGI Youth Network, among the 50 university LGBT+ groups, less than half could register like other student associations. Just like LGBT+ NGOs, a lot of the student groups could not register. Two of the university LGBT+ groups were even forced to revoke their registrations after they registered as student associations. Without the “legal” status as student associations, these groups faced more difficulties when organizing activities on campus. First, they could not openly recruit new members on campus. New members could only be recruited online or through other events. Second, these groups could not book classrooms for events. They could only book rooms through other societies or host their events outside of campus. Third, they could not organize large-scale events or talks on campus. Or else, they faced the risks of being summoned by counsellors or teachers from the Committee of the Communist Youth League.

However, young LGBT+ groups continued to recruit LGBT+ students and allies in various ways to help with their operation. Some groups had less than five active members, some had nearly a hundred. As most of the society committees switched every year, people in these societies changed very quickly. Therefore, most of the active members were usually students in year 2 or year 3. Only a few joint-university groups were run by more senior students or people who had graduated.

2. Activism of young LGBT+ activists

In the past two years, with the shrinking space for civil society activism, activities organized by

many LGBT+ NGOs were greatly impacted. Many of them adopted relatively conservative activism strategy and continued their work in a low-profile manner. There were fewer public campaigns compared to previous years. Young activists lacked mature platforms to join the movement. However, in face of various external pressure, young LGBT+ activists and their teams continued to organize activism mobilization and participation outside and inside universities. Their activities included gender studies, communities services, public campaigning and other diverse kinds of work.

In the past, one important positioning and objective of young LGBT+ groups was to increase the visibility of LGBT+ students. The activities they organized included waving rainbow flags in universities, riding rainbow bikes, and organizing large-scale pride events on special dates such as 517 International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, Bisexual-phobia and Intersex-phobia. The aim of these activities was to draw the attention of teachers and students on LGBT+ issues. However, in the past few years, these activities brought great risks to the students. They were summoned by teachers or their parents were informed by the universities. For example, waving rainbow flags used to be a very important event in LGBT+ movement. Now, students would be targeted once they waved the rainbow flag and could no longer organize activities. Therefore, the activities organized by LGBT+ groups on campus went underground and became more quiet offline discussions and meetings (not chanting slogans). One of the young conveners said in the China SOGI Youth Network report, “we had to live the spirit of the rainbow flag in every offline community event, letting different people join the discussion”.

Currently, the work of different young LGBT+ groups included the development of LGBT+ student communities, public education and dissemination of knowledge, investigative research, campaigning on issues and supporting network of student groups.

Development of LGBT+ student communities includes offline meetings, meeting new friends and thematic salons etc. For example, Peking University and Tsinghua University jointly organized a sharing session on appointed guardianship, helping students understand laws that were important to the LGBT+ communities. Apart from that, some LGBT+ groups provided HIV health services for gay students, as well as hotline and counselling services. For example, the LGBT+ groups of Huazhong University of Science and Technology and Peking University had invited teachers specializing in counselling to conduct support groups for their members.

Public education and dissemination of information included sex and gender classes for university and high school students. These courses were conducted online and offline. Some university LGBT+ groups also used information related to bullying and understanding LGBT+ people produced by NGOs. These young LGBT+ groups usually published articles on their WeChat public accounts. For example, one university LGBT+ group in Shandong often published articles commenting on social issues related to the LGBT+ communities in order to initiate public discussion. One LGBT+ group in Beijing tapped into the strengths of its members to publish “6 Queer Lessons” to promote knowledge related to queer theories. Some young LGBT+ activists in Changsha chose to promote LGBT+ related information on “QQ Love wall”, an interface popular among students. The information they published gained good exposure. Some young student groups put knowledge related to sex and gender into sex education and promote them to

university and high school students through peer learning. More young people took part in gender education by volunteering through platforms organized by LGBT+ NGOs. With the leadership of these NGOs, they received education and training related to gender education and shared their life stories and knowledge in gender diversity in high school classes.

A new way of work developed by LGBT+ youth in recent years is conducting research related to sex and gender. Some of them started to research students coming out of the closets and school bullying. Some studied and researched issues related to gender theories with the guidance of teachers. Some used their legal knowledge to conduct research on legal campaigning. These researches were mostly academic. Some people repurposed their research into articles for publications that initiated further public discussion. For example, when LGBT+ groups were promoting legal cases related to employment discrimination, young activists in the legal profession showed their strength by coordinating comparative legal studies and pushing public discussions on the issue by writing legal articles.

Young people also showed great strength in promoting public discussion. The core activists were usually those trained or related to NGOs. For example, in April 2019, Sina Weibo censored topics related to the hashtag #Les (shorthand for lesbian). A lot of young people started to discuss and share online. At the same time, during an activism discussion session in one workshop, volunteers from one LGBT+ group curated a performance art targeting this Weibo incident, drawing an “X” on their lips with a lipstick to represent the silenced lesbian community. They also called for the online community to join them. This action received very high online exposure and community participation. Other volunteers continued to write stories about the censored internet space. The series of activism brought a lot of energy to the development of the incident. This kind of campaigning has two characteristics. First is the massive online participation by young people. Staying online constantly, these young people were very good at internet-related skills and were not afraid to speak up in the virtual world. Secondly, those activists who intervened public discussions with individual actions were usually young people trained by NGOs. They also had the awareness to generate more participation.

Below are two more examples of youth activism for issues campaign. In the movement to protest smearing in textbooks, youth groups across the country formed activism networks with the leadership of NGOs. These groups organized activities to anti-demonization of LGBT+ people in textbooks in their own schools. Some initiated investigation into how books in the libraries of their own schools depicted being gay and lesbian, then submitted the findings to schools. Some lobbied the school offices and teachers and successfully disseminated information that correctly described LGBT+ communities to all the teachers and students in their schools. Some communicated with editors and publishers, pointing out the errors in the textbooks and asking for corrections. Some became litigants of lawsuits. In this series of activism, all groups rolled out their activities with clear objectives and strategies, which is different from the ad hoc and one-off public events. In another example, during the campaign for recognizing same-sex marriage in the Civil Code in November 2019, a lot of volunteers participated in mobilizing. All of them were young people volunteering in different LGBT+ groups. On one hand, they used their own online communication skills to mobilize people on the internet. On the other hand, they mobilized more participation from other offline communities. In the end, they mobilized 188,000 people to join

the legislative process. This is a huge breakthrough in the LGBT+ movement's participation in the legislative process in China. A lot of participants said it was the first time in their lives to participate in the legislative process in China. All this organized youth activism obviously benefitted from the coordinated push by LGBT+ NGOs in the background.

The last type of LGBT+ activism is the formation of networks among different groups, the provision of resources and conducting capacity training. Several young network and platform groups positioned themselves as young people supporting young people. Some groups are in the official network for sex education. They could gather more resources to develop youth activism networks for sex education and provide resources and capacity training for the network members. Some groups operated as NGOs to promote interaction, learning and capacity building among youth groups. These NGOs also launched reports on the current situation of young LGBT+ groups in order to promote issues related to their own development.

With the increasing visibility of LGBT+ people, LGBT+ youth had been coming out at a younger age in recent years. Many high school students started to volunteer for LGBT+ NGOs and even became monthly donors. A big group of young LGBT+ youth were used to expressing themselves in online discussions. Although LGBT+ youth faced pressure from their families and the society, they were fairly at ease in their day-to-day lives (especially in the cities). They were willing to take one further step to be in the movement. This shows that the visibility of LGBT+ movement and the accessibility of information and knowledge related to the gender movement greatly impacted the level of participation by these young people.

3. Challenges faced by young LGBT+ activists

The existing limitations on the LGBT+ movement restricted the participation of young activists

The LGBT+ movement affected young activists in three ways. First the movement provided platforms. In the past two years, the large-scale mobilization in the marriage equality movement in Taiwan resulted in many young people participating in different parts of the movement. In comparison, the shrinking space in China made it difficult for LGBT+ NGOs to start large-scale activism. A lot of LGBT+ groups shifted to more internal or small-scale ways to carry out their work. On one hand, this hindered the groups from disseminating information related to LGBT+ NGOs to young people. On the other hand, even though some young activists wanted to be more involved in the movement by entering LGBT+ groups, they might not have a spacious platform to use their talents.

Second, the movement provided visions and paths. It is not easy to start rights-based work in the current movement environment. This limited LGBT youth's imagination of the activism and the movement. On the other hand, it became difficult to discuss about the structural root of the discrimination faced by LGBT+ people. Hence it was also difficult to address the real problems and push for change.

Third, the movement gave depth and sustainability to the promotion of issues. In the limited space for grassroots activism, trendy activism such as social innovation had more room for

development and caught the attention of young people. However, this type of activism often avoided the structural problems faced by LGBT+ communities. The young activists also lacked a secure atmosphere and motivation to drive issues in a sustainable and sophisticated manner. With so many choices, young people focused more on new and exciting experiences. Therefore, they could not be deeply involved in the continuous promotion of LGBT+ issues.

The shrinking space for civil society raised the threshold for the activists' ability to mitigate risks

For young activists, the control and pressure usually came from schools, parents and security departments. Schools usually intervened through the counsellors, the Committee of the Communist Youth League, the Community Party Committees or the department of security in school. A lot of student groups did not have any experience in risks mitigation and assessment. Some groups were targeted after organizing one activity. This did not only put the group onto the list for focused monitoring and restriction of activities, it also imposed huge psychological pressure on group members who were simply not prepared. If activists could manage the control from schools, their identity as students could benefit them because schools became their shelter from direct external pressure. If they could not manage the control from schools, they would face increased pressure from national security officers or family.

In the past few years there were plenty of examples of young LGBT+ activists being pressured on all fronts. For example, Qiu Bai was a university student suing the Ministry of Education. At the beginning, counsellors persuaded her multiple times, aiming to stop her actions. When the counsellors failed, they disclosed Qiu Bai's LGBT+ identity to her mother, hoping that her mother could stop Qiu's action. This put huge pressure on Qiu Bai. A similar situation happened to another LGBT+ student in a university in Guangdong. After joining activities organized by LGBT+ groups, the student was confined to a classroom by counsellors and teachers from the Committee of the Communist Youth League. They asked the student's parents to travel by plane overnight from another city to bring the student home. In the end the student could only helplessly drop out of school. A lesbian student from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies openly kissed someone when she graduated. Her action caught the attention of the university, which then called her parents, resulting in the parents calling the police. This created immense pressure for the student who was volunteering at an LGBT+ organization. Young activists faced multiple layers of pressure, including having their LGBT+ identity exposed, being forced to dropout, political pressure and pressure from family. A lot of young activists could not face the stress and were constantly in a state of anxiety. Some even chose to quit the movement. Risks assessment had gradually become an essential, if not the most important, factor for consideration when young LGBT+ activists and groups planned every activity.

4. The needs of young LGBT+ activists and the way out

Opening up the imagination of the movement and getting back to continuous action

In face of the limited space, we need imagination for more possibilities. This imagination of the movement can come from broadening of horizons and seeing the possibility in every activism. It

can also come from breaking through from the existing impression of the restrictions on activism, identifying the space for activism and seeing untapped opportunities. However, opening up imagination does not mean doing work that pulls away from the reality. Not pulling away from reality has a two-fold meaning. First, the young LGBT+ activists should have deeper understanding in the actual problems faced by LGBT+ people in China. They should also know more about the ongoing LGBT+ movement in China and reflect on the social and political environment they are in. Second is having a deeper analysis on issues that these activists feel passionate about or feel the need to make a response. These activists also need to have the intention to do continuous work when they plan their activism. This way of thinking also indirectly respond to the need for risks mitigation. This does not mean activists should avoid work that brings risks. It means that from a long-term planning point of view, activists should identify which pieces of work have urgency and what risks are unnecessary. This is certainly a process, in which activists learn and understand the issues on which they are working. Doing small-scale and down to earth work is a work vision that should be encouraged in the current environment.

Fostering interaction and collaboration between young activists and LGBT+ NGOs

As discussed above, the development of LGBT+ NGOs is closely linked to the participation of young activists. The LGBT+ groups' continuous drive on different issues can benefit the activism of young activists. As a result, they can push for change on a particular issue more effectively. If the body of work and the agenda of young activists can align with those of NGOs, the effectiveness of the activism can be amplified. In terms of nurturing the youth, the interaction between NGOs and young people can help young people to receive support and continue to develop. The fostering of interaction between young activists and LGBT+ NGOs can be realised through internship programme, mentorship, and joint activism, etc.

Learning to work in an empowering manner

Apart from the capacity to curate activism, it is important for young activists to learn how to start dialogues, discuss and communicate, especially in a society and in a movement full of conflict and isolation. Learning how to conduct empowering conversations and group development can help young activists to grow into movement convenors with leadership.

Creating opportunities to connect

None of the above recommendations were about risks mitigation. Basic risks assessment skills are of course necessary. However, it is not necessary to delve too deep into this problem. Apart from the above three points, it is also very important to create opportunities for young LGBT+ activists to connect. Stressful environment made activists lonely and isolated. The companionship among activists becomes necessary. Finding people with the same mission can give young activists energy and motivation. When activists can chat and discussion, many possibilities will naturally surface.

- The End -