



**To cite this podcast:**

Huang, H., Araneta, K. (2023, October 17). Researching feminist movements in China and decolonising the media (No. 46). [Audio Podcast Episode]. In *Pedagogies for Social Justice*. University of Westminster. <https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj/tools/podcast/> DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34737/w8377>

**Podcast transcript:**

**Kyra:** Hi everyone, and welcome back to the podcast. For this episode, we are in conversation with PhD researcher Huanyu Huang. In the episode, we discuss Huanyu's journey into higher education and her motivations for embarking on a PhD. Huanyu's PhD thesis is titled 'Speak in Women's Way: Online Feminism Movements and Social Media Impacts of #MeToo China 2018'. Her research investigates the feminist narratives that emerged from the #MeToo movement in China and seeks to underline the associated feminist issues from a Chinese perspective within the global feminist discourse. With this understanding, and towards the end of the episode, we consider the ways in which media is used as a colonial tool and what it means to decolonise it.

So, where did you grow up and where are you currently?

**Huanyu:** I grew up in Wuhan, China. Wuhan is a big city in the central area of China. And now, I'm doing my PhD at the University of Westminster, based in London.

**Kyra:** How would you describe your upbringing in terms of how race was kind of seen and felt in your household?

**Huanyu:** Em...like, generally, I actually grew up in a highly homogeneous society, and actually there's no clear awareness of race issues because people around me, like 99% of them, are Chinese people, like East Asian Chinese people, and the foreigners we get in touch with during my childhood, during my growing up period, are the foreigner teachers who taught us the oral English, but they were white people, more specifically white men. So, like, em, like my upbringing, actually there's...there's like a lack of race issues to be discussed or to be talked about, and more specifically, in my families, although my...I think my parents always like guided me to read or listen or watch some foreigner...like foreigner TV shows or foreigner movies, but, again, they were all like white people narratives. So, I think, before I came to the UK to study my postgraduate course, I don't have a really clear race issues awareness. And, oh yes, and there's another part, is that...quite interesting, is that like, generally, we don't have a clear race issue awareness; however, at the same time, from the propaganda of our government, we always receive the...like the image and the message from like Africa and African people but they actually are stereotyped, and they're designed



images. They are all described like, we Chinese people are good friends with Africa people, we are brothers, we are sisters, but they are like...they need our help, they are less developed. Like looking back, looking back from now, I feel...you can see, it's kind of like a really, really stereotyped and biased images and representation about a race and...the... yeah, the race issue. So yeah...

**Kyra:** And I suppose one of the difficulties with growing up in a kind of environment where everyone looks like you and like, you know, you said like 90% of the population in your hometown was Chinese, so I think it's...it's easy for your perception of a certain community or group of people to be influenced by stereotypes.

**Huanyu:** I actually did my postgraduate course, [I finished a Master's], also in the University of Westminster, and that's the first time I go abroad, I went abroad, and studied another course in another country. And I still remember, the name of my course was Media & Development, which talks about the relationship between media and third-world countries, the media and the developing countries, and how the colonialism and the neoliberalism brought their impact on the development of those countries, how they affect the whole [...]. And I think...I think that is really...a very starting point for me to think about, you know, race issues and like...have a more clear and a more [?] image about the broader world.

**Kyra:** So, what or who were some of your major influences?

**Huanyu:** I think there are two. Like one is that, when I started my postgraduate course, my postgraduate course leader, he affect me, he influenced me a lot. He...he actually was from Zimbabwe and he taught me...taught us, Media & Development, about, you know, what I just mentioned, about that word "media" and how colonialism and neoliberalism change [our world to] something else, and we talk about the race issue, the discrimination issues, and...actually, as well as gender issues with him, and he actually provided me a really new perspective regarding how to look at it because...because, my course leader, he started in China-Africa Relations – that's his study, his research interest, and he actually provided me a really like a new perspective to think about the...the difference bet ween different culture, background, and different societies, and how...how to consider them in different perspectives. And also, when I came to the UK, I stay in heterogeneous country, like compared to China. There are a lot of people here. There are a lot of people from different races and nations here. So, I actually have a chance to compare my hometown with here. So, where you have a chance to different kinds of things, like different from the place that you come from, you just like...you saw a mirror to...to reflect yourself and other people, and I think that the whole environment, the whole different environment, is the basic of the...is the foundation to provide me the perspective to think critically, and my supervisor, my



course leader, also guided me, like on a knowledge level, to help me to...to learn how to think critically regarding the race and discrimination issues.

**Kyra:** So, I also wanted to kind of discuss your academic background. Obviously, you've mentioned that you're studying your PhD at Westminster. What was your journey into higher education?

**Huanyu:** I actually started [?] when I was undergraduate and I just find that the [?] cannot always save people, especially when the victims were doctors. There were a lot of like criminals regarding doctors at that time, and the media, they didn't report it, you know, like they didn't report it objectively. [...], so that made me realise it, I want to stop this problem, so I want to transfer my major, I want to go to the Media discipline to see how...what happens, how it went like this. Is there any way that we can stop this problem to...to like build a bridge between the [...] and the normal people? So, I came to the UK to study the Media & Development. And, I just mentioned earlier in the question, I learned a lot about media, communication, as well as colonialism and neoliberalism issues, and this knowledge updates my whole knowledge and my values towards this world. So, at that time, I...I learned [?] reporting diversity, gender, sexuality, race, and age...gender, age, sexuality, and...yes... So, basically, it's like a four-part documentary [...] that you can choose [...], you can choose gender, you can choose sexuality topic, you can choose age – yeah, age and disability, yeah, that's the four parts. So, I choose gender and I...I actually learnt a lot from that module leader regarding the gender issues, regarding the gender awareness, and, also, at the same year, the #MeToo movement happened in China, like the #MeToo movement that starts from the United States in 2007, which is the year I start my postgraduate course, and the #MeToo China started from 2018. So, at that time, I just really care about this movement, and I really pay attention to this movement, so I started [...] when I took this movement as a topic for my PhD thesis, I want to do more research about this, do more research about...not only about gender issues but also about the Chinese feminist gender issue, which is...which is literally still under-representative in the global context. So, yeah, that's the...the very original motivation that put me go deeply inside of the higher education.

**Kyra:** And what is the title of your thesis at the moment, and I guess how does it relate to some of the previous work that you've done?

**Huanyu:** So, the title is 'Women's Voices in the Social Media Age – a Case Study, #CommunityMovement in China in 2018'. This is the current title. Maybe I will make it more shorter [laughing], more precise, later, but yeah, that's its title. So, basically, it's a study focused on the #MeToo China which happened in 2018, and I analyse the cases, and interview [relative] activists who participate in the #MeToo movement to explore whether



there is like non-Western feminist issues – sorry, whether there’s a non-Western feminist narratives underneath this environment and what kinds of relationship between Chinese feminism and the social media. I feel...I feel...like...obviously, the previous study, em, media development, on my postgraduate course, provided me the...the necessary knowledge I need to study further in Media discipline. And, also, I think specifically the perspective and the critical lens regarding the race and...decolonising issue inspired me about...about the perspective I can choose in my research. So, basically, people analyse this issue from a gender study perspective or from a neoliberalism perspective, [whatever they want], or [...] activism perspective. But during my research, I find that...the issue that Chinese feminism faced is not only an under-representative by this, it’s more like a double suppression. One is from the gender, but another one is definitely from the Western mainstream narratives, where that women, Chinese women, have to join the...you know, the narratives are...you can call it like storytelling rulers to use the way that the Western society acknowledge to tell their story, otherwise they don’t have the chance to tell their story or they don’t...they will not be recognised or they will not be acknowledged because they didn’t follow their rulers. So, at that time, I find that, as a Chinese feminist, me and my allies, [we’re all standing in]... we’re all [standing] in a situation that [we’re stuck] between the West and the East. Like, when we are in our own hometown, we don’t have the right to speak out due to the authorities, the censorship from the government, the suppression of the freedom of speech, when...like let me call it, like [...] activist, because she [ran] from China to the Europe. So, when we [ran] to the Western society, we...it seems that we have...we have a place to speak out, but it’s actually not true. For example, if we speak out but we didn’t mention about the censorship of China, well, some media will think about whether you just cover the real issues in China or whether you didn’t point out a specific problem that happen in this authority government. So, at that point, your suffering and your problem is not...is not the most important because the most common also stereotyped way that Western...including Western media, like all the Western narratives, choose what they want to tell the Chinese story is censorship, is, you know, like that censorship authority and a country without freedom. That’s the perspective that they always choose to tell. But that’s not the only one, and that’s definitely not the most important thing for real Chinese people suffering real...I mean, experiencing real suffering. So, those activists, including me, find that, if we want to let our stories to be told, or if we really want our voice to be heard, we need to, firstly, [follow up/fall out] the Western narratives to create the narratives by using their language, their [?] and their ideology, and then, only at that time, they can pay a little bit more attention about our story, and then we can start to speak our own story.

**Kyra:** What do you think is the kind of relationship between modern kind of feminist movements and social media today?

**Huanyu:** I think, if we want to discuss this issue, it really depends on the context, what feminism movement and social media, in which country we are talking about...like they face



different...they have different relationship and they face different problems in different cultures, societies. When they're in China, like basically the relationship between the feminism movement and social media is that social media is the only way that a feminist can initiate social movement – it's the only tool that they can use to initiate social movement because there are like really huge censorship issues and like our government suppression on...on any social movement. So, the feminism movement and the...and the social media in China is kind of like a more cooperative relations, if you want to discuss. That's like the one way, and the only way, and the best way for Chinese feminism, no matter they speak their voice or initiate a social movement or pursue any development towards a feminism career or the gender equality in China.

But where you...where you go back to a more general level, where you look from another perspective, like in Western world, maybe we need to...maybe we talk more about how social media like...causes a lot of backlash on feminism movement because social media... because social media are so...used for [?] that it can gather people so quickly, it can initiate social movement so easily, it can mobilise people so soon, that it creates campaign and a protest literally every day, but what else, what exactly their influence? Do they have literally bring a long-term influence? Do they [help] literally make progress regarding the issue they fight for? And where does social media also bring some negative influence, for example, fake news, fake accusations, and internet violence towards people, towards real people? And that...that may be the issues that we talk more frequently in Western societies.

However, in China, we actually have these kinds of phenomena. We had phenomena regarding fake news, regarding the online violence towards real people. But we don't have the, you know, [?], how to say, [...] to discuss, to suffer it, because the main...I will not say enemy but the main obstacle that all the feminist activists, or generally activists, need to face and figure out is the suppression of freedom of speech, [...], online censorship, is the...is the [black-box from] the whole internet environment. There's like [a scholar] mentioned that the internet in China is not an internet, but is more like an intranet. It's more like a half-open, half-closed internet because it's just partly [...] the whole world, and they are partly controlled by the government, so under these circumstances, when you think about social media, they are actually at the same status, so...because they are all state-owned, they are not private owned, they are state-owned. So, social media...what the situation the internet face in China is the same that social media face in China, so when we talk about issues in China, like [salary], we still start in the censorship and the internet [freedom] so yeah...

**Kyra:** And I guess this leads us quite well actually into my next kind of segment, which I wanted to dedicate to thinking about what it means to really decolonise the media. So, a question I wanted to start off with was: what spaces within the media do you feel are particularly colonial?



**Huanyu:** Generally, I think it's still the way of storytelling, like there's like absolutely authority rulers now in the media about how a story should be told, no matter in China or in Western society. If you are...like if you are not telling your story in a specific way and use a specific tool or platforms, you cannot guarantee that your words can be heard, because the mainstream media is still...like we can say that Western media, like when we...when we want to hear about news, [...] BBC or [...]. Like even in the movies, like even, for example, in a movie, I remember like the character they are stuck in a small place because of like something...accident, so they don't have a [?] to connect with people, their phone is broken, and at that time, the character asks her friend a question, "Did you hear anything news about it?" They said, "No, there's nothing else here, [only/on the] BBC." So [laughing], so I just want to [re-examine] what you're saying, that the mainstream media, they somehow formulate a way that they...they rule the way that we tell the story, and how shall we tell story, and then what can we do to tell the story. That means that we don't have other options to choose and to know. We were so automatically accepting that we receive the news, we receive [the choose] and the most objective information from these Western media. However, they definitely have their perspective. They are not that objective as we thought, but we treat them as the real and the true answers, and that's the problem. They decide. They decide what way is the right way to report news, to tell the story, and they [...] us so that we don't have opportunities, we don't have other options to choose, we don't have other like a spare...we don't have spare time or spare place to think about whether I can report my – what I can report news or write some articles in another way. I don't have these kinds of opportunity to think about it because, although I think I can choose another way to write, when I write, I publish. Who will see? Who will listen? Nobody cares because I'm not in the mainstream gang rulers.

**Kyra:** Thank you. So, we've also kind of briefly talked about the role that governments can play in controlling the media from censorship and surveillance, but how do these impact us, you know, as an audience?

**Huanyu:** It's actually a common...it's a common phenomenon, not just in China. It's also in the UK or in the United States, but they're just more, you know, like a...more invisible. They are not so clear, not so straight, but they still exist, like... I think the most important thing that this censorship and surveillance impact us, as an audience, is that they...they actually [screen and distinguish the choose] and the information that we need to hear. The information, the news, the so-called what is fake, what is the...choose is...is actually...the [screening] by them is not... So, basically, what we receive is just like a part of the information. We cannot get a completed information with the censorship and surveillance they like... From my point, they generally existed, no matter in China or in Western countries. In China, the censorship and the surveillance, they are fact, the way people think about the outside world. So, if you...if you ever have the opportunity to come to China, you will find



people still have really stereotyped images and ideas about Western world, like they...like [laughing], in some part, in some time, the Western world is still being treated as like evil in China, but the image, they can change, they can transfer. The change and the...the way...I mean, the change and transfer depends on how the government want the people know, especially, you know, like when...when our government, when the Chinese government have a really harsh relationship...really strict relationship with the United States government, they will report more negative news report towards United States. They will report a lot of damage, criminals, crimes in the United States. Also, they will report some like, you know, like bad news in the UK as well, to create an image that the UK will always help the United States to do some evil things, and then to strength this [?] image for the audience in China towards the Western society. Where, in another world, in Western society, like if you read a BBC news report, you will find that BBC have like...BBC have a specific section called BBC China, which writes report both in English and in Mandarin, and most of them are negative news [laughing]. Like when something bad happens in China or something like, you know, like criticised or debating issues happen in China, or happen in China and Africa countries, they will report it, but when something good happens in China, like [most of the time], they have like... They have their specific...you know, they have their specific perspective, and it's [then] important to choose the news, and the audience, we as the audience, we can only read the news they chose to ask, not all the news. So, that's why people who always read BBC and the Guardian, or other like [?] news in the Western world, they also have a stereotype towards Chinese people. Like when they think about China, the first thing they think about is censorship – it's a place that people...never had freedom, it's a place [where] people eat dogs, something like that. And the people will bring this stereotype into the real world, and that's what causes us serious problems in the daily life.

**Kyra:** Thank you. So, what do you think journalists, and I guess activists, from your perspective, can do to help the process of decolonising the media?

**Huanyu:** Because I don't have really like a lot of journalist experience, so I will say I will talk from the activist perspective because I know more about activists. So, basically, I think...I think it was still back to the...to the idea of [...] platform that we use to tell the story, right now, because [...] social media platform because it provide a new way that people...they don't be qualified – they don't have to be qualified. They can also start [to tell their] stories on the social media platform, and that's a media platform. So, as an activist, I think...I think activists can like make full use of this...this [tour], this social media platform, or more like a... maybe there's like a more advanced media platforms in the future to make use of them to speak their voices. Like, yeah, I think the speak their voices is the most important way – even to speak is the most important way. You don't need to worry about where your voice... where...like who will hear your voice or where your story will go in. They just show up. They...to present it on the media is the most important thing. The more we speak out, like as activists, the more normal people, or activists, speak out on the public social media



platform, or like generally in media, the more we can...the more opportunities we can make the media diverse, and when you get enough information, rather than read the information selected by specific people in specific media, you have more chance to know about this world. Some people, they talk about like Twitter, they don't...Twitter, they don't...the lack of rulers, you know, to regulate people – there is a lot of fake news, fake accounts, there's a lot of violence. Anyone, anything, who, even AI can create an account on the Twitter to speak. But, from my viewpoint, and only from my viewpoint, I still feel that the positive influence is much more than the negative influence that...that it can bring – I mean the social media and the speak out. So, yeah, I think the speak out, speak out is the answer – keep continually speaking out. Do not hesitate to speak out, no matter what kind of thing, no matter what kinds of issues you want to raise, don't be...like never feel shame about yourself to speak your voices. What kinds of voices? Any kinds of voices matters.

**Kyra:** Thank you, Huanyu. So, a question I usually like to end on, I'm sure you know already, is: what is something you'd like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years? But maybe you could even extend this question, if you'd like, to the media more generally, and just society in general. I'll let you decide.

**Huanyu:** Okay. Well [laughing], I feel like I actually answered this question for several times, yeah, but I'm still really happy to, yeah, like basically my answer is not changed a lot. The first one is definitely there will be less hierarchy in the higher education institution. There will be less hierarchy, less colonialism, and...yes, and more diversity, more decolonialisation, and more equality, no matter in race or gender. And, third, specifically, I want to say I want to see more representation, especially East Asian students. The higher education in the UK, they actually treat the higher education as an industry, as a business. They run them, they manage them, so they will provide like a relevant service for the international students from who they charge like a lot of money. However, these kinds of service never created a collective identity of belonging for those students, especially students from East Asia, and that's a problem. And some people will say that, because East Asian students, they like to be a small group in their own, you know, in their own Asian group, but that's not true. That's not the choice. Like people always gather together with different kinds of group. However, as a – because higher education institution, you are education institute, you have the responsibility to let the student here to feel belonging, not only just to fly here, to pay a lot of money for a degree and then fly back [one year after]. So, I really hope that it can be changed in the following 10 years, and like I personally can't understand why they continue and treat the higher education as a business. But I cannot accept that they treat international students purely as like a...you know, like a customer. They are still students. They need...they have the right to get...they have the right to get things that they...they [...] they can get in the university, belonging like...collective identities, like as a...for example, as a University of Westminster...well, I'm a part of Westminster. So, I really hope that there will





be more representation and more, you know, awareness about...more focus on the right and...the experience, especially East Asian students, in the following 10 years.

And, finally, there will be a decolonisation, academic studies, and the curriculum design and...yeah...like academic studies [...] design, a curriculum design. I'm looking, really looking forward to see a decolonisation in there – more people from different backgrounds, different languages, to contribute together to the curriculum design. That's what I really want to see in the next 10 years, and that's it – I hope it will become true!

**Kyra:** I do too, absolutely. Huanyu, thank you so much for your time and for joining us on the podcast today. It's been really nice to just obviously be in conversation with you a little bit more about your academic background and your PhD, as well as hearing your points on what it means to really decolonise the media. So, thank you so much...

**Huanyu:** Thank you very much for inviting me, Kyra. I'm so happy to be here and share my ideas.

**Kyra:** To find out more information, access our tools, or get in touch, visit us at [blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj](http://blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj).