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Constructing Gender Antagonism: Moralised Platform Governance in China

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Abstract

"Gender antagonism" (*xingbie duili*) has emerged on Chinese social media platforms as a prevailing term, and subsequently as a governance category for regulating online disputes. Adopting a power-sensitive approach, which scrutinises the interplay between the production of meaning and the allocation of communication resources, this study examines how "gender antagonism" is dynamically constructed between users, platforms, and the state through the case of Weibo. Employing critical discourse analysis of user jury voting records, Weibo's disclosures, and state policy documents, we argue that gender antagonism is not an objective description of gender disputes, but a discursive framework initially mobilised by some users and later institutionalised by platforms and state authorities. The pervasive moralised deployment of this term in platform governance marginalises discussions of gender equality and delegitimises critiques of mainstream gender norms amid China's crisis of population reproduction. While this discursive construction reflects a moralised platform governance pattern and transfers into effective online visibility control, it eschews gender equality, failing to alleviate long-standing tensions in China's social governance.

Keywords

China; gender antagonism; morality; platform governance; Weibo

1. Introduction

In the 2020s, "gender antagonism" (*xingbie duili*) has become a popular term on the Chinese internet to loosely refer to conflicting views and interests between women and men. On social media such as Weibo, "inciting gender antagonism" has been elevated to a reporting category targeting content that "deliberately

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creates or intensifies conflicts between men and women" (WeiboAdministrator, 2025). In 2025, Weibo removed approximately 640,000 posts and penalised over 15,000 accounts for such content (WeiboAdministrator, 2026b). At the state level, the Ministry of State Security has published a commentary, framing the provocation of gender antagonism as a form of clickbait, while threatening social stability and national security (Ministry of State Security, 2026).

"Gender antagonism" is increasingly being used as a moral accusation, leading to social and economic repercussions. For example, the term has been weaponised by men to initiate reporting and boycotts against the stand-up comedian Yang Li, as they believe her jokes "incited gender antagonism" (V. Wang, 2024). This has resulted in Yang Li losing multiple commercial endorsements.

Given the influence of "gender antagonism" in Chinese society, it is time to scrutinise this term and clarify its implications under the platform governance framework. While existing studies have examined digital feminism and online misogyny in China, which touch on the theme of gender antagonism to varying degrees (e.g., Huang, 2023; Liao, 2024; Yin & Sun, 2021), less attention has been paid to a comprehensive interrogation of "gender antagonism" per se. Likewise, the power dynamics between users, platforms, and the state in governing this phenomenon have also been overlooked. To fill this gap, we inquire: How is gender antagonism constructed and governed in the dynamics between users, platforms, and the state?

We explore gender disputes and the governance of gender antagonism on Weibo, China's most popular microblogging platform, with 587 million monthly active users, 55% of whom are female (Weibo, 2024). Having witnessed the rise of feminist and misogynist discussions, Weibo has often intervened in regulating such content (Liao, 2024).

In this article, we develop a power-sensitive framework and examine the construction of gender antagonism in the platform ecology. Through critical discourse analysis (CDA), we argue that gender antagonism is a biased discursive framework, initially mobilised by users and subsequently institutionalised by platforms and state authorities. The pervasive deployment of gender antagonism reflects a moralised platform governance pattern that marginalises discussions of gender inequality with moral accusation, and delegitimises critiques of mainstream gender norms amid China's crisis of population reproduction.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section situates contemporary gender controversies within China's changing gender politics and the platformisation process. It first reviews key historical discourses on women's issues, then analyses the allocation of communication resources within platform governance, providing two interlocking tracks. In this section, we also introduce a power-sensitive perspective through which "gender antagonism" will be examined.

2.1. Historicising Women's Liberation in Contemporary China

Although much research on China's digital feminism and misogyny focuses on the internet context, a historical perspective better elucidates gender politics, as pre-internet discourses continue to influence contemporary gender dynamics. This study outlines three historical stages with a focus on women's

liberation, differentiated by key actors and gender discourses, whose legacies continue to shape contemporary perceptions of gender antagonism.

The first stage, the Mao era (1949–1970s), is characterised by the state-led socialist feminism that integrated women's liberation into the revolutionary goals (Z. Wang, 2016). This is reflected in the state's emphasis on freedom of marriage and women's equal rights in the first Marriage Law, issued in 1950. Nevertheless, the Marriage Law faced patriarchal resistance in rural areas, and then the state's political agenda shifted from individual freedom to harmonious families in 1953 (Croll, 1981; Z. Wang, 2006). This transition aligns with Foucauldian biopower, which focuses on how life is managed and regulated (Foucault, 1978). The biopolitical shift reveals the state's ambivalent attitude toward women's liberation: It is not as prioritised as class struggle and social stability, especially when it causes resistance. This ambivalence continued throughout the following stages.

The second stage (1980s–1990s) represents a transition from top-down state feminism to a complex, market-driven, and internationally-influenced landscape. Under the Reform and Opening-Up policy, the state shifted its focus from political struggles to the market economy, from being self-dependent to linking up with the international track (H. Wang, 2007). In 1995, China's convening of the Fourth World Women Conference promoted the popularity of terms like "gender discrimination" (*xingbie qishi*) and "gender equality" (*xingbie pingdeng*) in Chinese society (Liu, 2021). These terms would remain influential in the platform age of later years.

The third stage started around the 2000s, characterised by the marginalisation of gender equality in state governance and the rise of mediated feminist activism. The young generation of Chinese women, who had grown up with China's market reform, advocated for feminist issues against sexual harassment and gender inequality on social media, especially Weibo (Tan, 2017; B. Wang & Driscoll, 2019; Xue & Rose, 2022). However, the tightening state control of dissent, and the prevailing misogyny on social media, have exerted immense pressure on feminist advocacy (Wu & Dong, 2019; Yin & Sun, 2021). Still, young female users have adopted multiple strategies to maintain the visibility of gender equality under scrutiny (Guan, 2025; Xue & Rose, 2022). Their gendered media use is rooted in a fundamental demographic change: The young generation of Chinese women has gained unprecedented socioeconomic status and autonomy in marriage choice (Yu & Xie, 2019), and has higher expectations of gender equality than older generations (Qian & Li, 2020). This largely stems from the state's long-term, albeit flawed, modernisation efforts to protect women's rights in education and employment from the first and second stages. This has often been overlooked in studies that focus exclusively on the internet context of gender politics. Young Chinese women's attitudes sit uneasily with China's biopolitical governance, as they are not as willing as their predecessors to follow the traditional gender orders, including universal marriage and childbearing.

The co-existence of diverse discourses presents the long-lasting tension between the state's socialist commitment to gender equality and persistent patriarchal traditions, as well as between the state's control for stability and the mounting dissatisfaction of young women. In this sense, gender controversies on the Chinese internet are not groundless. Rather, they reveal a problem rooted in China's modernisation. Despite revealing the underlying paradox between diverse actors and discourses, research on Chinese women's liberation does not directly explain how "gender antagonism" is perceived, constructed, and governed in the platform age, leaving a crucial research gap.

2.2. Platform Governance and Challenges

As media studies scholar Meng (2018, p. 10) notes, "in the media-saturated contemporary world, ideologically embedded discursive formations…are heavily mediated." Gender discourses are particularly "platformised" today, as platforms have increasingly become embedded in social infrastructures, economic sectors, and government regulatory systems. This has been conceptualised as platformisation (Helmond, 2015; Plantin & De Seta, 2019; Poell et al., 2019). These discourses are increasingly mediated by platform mechanisms, making it essential to examine how platforms structure gender-related content.

Platform governance reflects how communication resources are allocated through the interactions between platforms, governments, and the public. It can be understood from two dimensions: the governance *of* platforms, referring to external regulation by legal, social, and normative frameworks, and the governance *by* platforms, with their capacity to shape information flow (Gorwa, 2019). While the intent of the governance of platforms is to constrain platform power through administrative institutions, the platforms themselves exercise governance through moderation systems that detect, remove, or highlight certain content (Gillespie, 2018). By controlling communication resources, such as content visibility, platforms increasingly operate as political actors and infrastructures of expression (Klonick, 2018). This infrastructural power shapes which discourses become visible to users. Gender-related content has emerged as a particularly contested domain where platforms must balance freedom of expression, the user experience, and administrative regulations.

Existing research has examined the rise of manosphere communities on international platforms such as Instagram, Reddit, and Twitch, which are characterised by online misogyny, as well as violence and harassment targeting specific gender groups. In response, major platforms have introduced rules and measures, including deplatforming certain accounts and communities to address potentially harmful content (Monsees, 2025; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Trott et al., 2022; Zolides, 2021). Still, content moderation faces challenges. Opaque moderation processes and ambiguous definitions of violations in gender-related contexts complicate governance practices (Are & Gerrard, 2023). The widespread use of automated moderation, often lacking the capacity to interpret complex contexts and nuanced language, limits its effectiveness. Moreover, the boundaries of toxic content, including gender-based harmful content, remain unclear, and are continuously reconfigured through negotiations between users, platforms, and broader society (Trott et al., 2022; Vaccaro et al., 2021).

In China, there has been similar platformisation and challenges in moderating gender-related controversial content. The increasing visibility of gender issues in Chinese society and users' conflicting expressions with strong emotions on these issues have resulted in frequent and large-scale disputes. This dynamic leaves knotty problems for platform governance, as diverse actors in platform governance hold different positions and influence in gender politics. The wide adoption of the ambiguous term "gender antagonism" in China by different actors introduces additional ambiguity and uncertainty into content moderation, further contesting the boundary around violative content.

Meanwhile, platform governance in China has exhibited different characteristics, shaped by stronger state involvement. The Chinese government has formulated laws and regulations like the Provisions on the Administration of Internet Comments Posting Services (2017), which hold platforms accountable for reviewing and removing any content that violates state laws and regulations. Distinctive content moderation

mechanisms have emerged under legal pressure marked by the widespread adoption of participatory moderation mobilising users to engage in content-violation judgments (Fan & Zhang, 2020; Shang, 2026). The user jury examined in this research is one such example. Moreover, state authorities such as the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the highest regulator and censor of China's internet, continually update policy documents and initiate *Qinglang* (clear and bright) campaigns, a long-running series of internet governance and content regulation campaigns targeting content and behaviours considered harmful, illegal, politically sensitive, or socially destabilising, including those specifically related to gender disputes.

Overall, existing research has highlighted the importance of platform governance in shaping gender discourse, as well as both shared and context-specific dynamics across different societies. Yet, limited attention has been paid to how gender discourse is governed through the interaction between state regulation, platform mechanisms, and user participation in China. In this study, we ask: How are the boundaries of gender discussions, under the label of "gender antagonism," constructed and governed on Chinese platforms such as Weibo? Answering this question requires a thorough and dynamic investigation that addresses gender discourse formation shaped by diverse actors.

2.3. A Power-Sensitive Theoretical Framework

To understand the construction and governance of gender antagonism, as well as different actors' roles in it, in this article, we build a power-centred theoretical framework drawing upon cultural studies and the political economy of communication. The framework understands power in a broad sense, which includes, but is not limited to, "state institutions," since "overt political power is only one rather specialised form of power" (Thompson, 1995, p. 13). Inspired by Meng's (2018) analysis of Chinese media, it focuses on two dimensions of power in media: the production of meaning through discourse, particularly languages and definitions, as the application of power increasingly relies on discourses and "more particularly the ideological workings of language" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 2); and the allocation of communication resources, especially content visibility, a key platform mechanism for controlling information flow. As Schiller (1973, pp. 6–7) contends, "the flow of information in a complex society is a source of unparallel power." The power perspective is not static; rather, it focuses on "power relations" (Mosco, 2009, p. 24), enabling a relational analysis of diverse actors. From this perspective, gender antagonism is continuously amplified and addressed within specific power dynamics, in which certain discourses carry more influence than others and the control of communicative resources is unevenly distributed among actors like users, platforms, and the state. At its core, gender antagonism unfolds as a struggle over meaning, visibility, and power within platform-mediated communication.

3. Methodology

Epistemologically, this research is inspired by feminist standpoint theory, which integrates women's perspectives into empirical and theoretical resources to understand power structure and manifest gender equality through knowledge production (Harding, 1987; Hartstock, 2004). In the examination of the platform governance of gender antagonism, we focus on how gendered experiences, especially those of women, are discussed and governed. Instead of producing neutral scrutinisation of platform governance, we realise our feminist stance, which adheres to the principle feminist standpoint theorists advocate, "the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter, thereby recovering the entire research process for scrutiny in the results of research" (Harding, 1987, p. 9). Accepting the

feminist standpoint is not the equivalent of accepting all women's narratives as unquestionable, since "there have always been women willing to produce sexist and misogynistic thought" (Harding, 1987, p. 11).

Around the theme of "gender antagonism," we focus on the triangular interaction between users, Weibo, and the state. Based on accessibility and relevance, we collected data from three sources: The first source was cases collectively adjudicated by Weibo's *dazhongpingyi* (jury) and published by Weibo's official account *Dazhongpingyiyuebao* (monthly report of the jury). We collected all 269 published cases between 2021 and 2025, covering a wide range of themes such as regional discrimination and fan wars. Then, we identified 83 gender-focused cases, defined as those involving explicitly gendered labels (e.g., "men," "women," "girl," "mother") and/or gendered topics (e.g., marriage, childbirth, bride price, domestic violence, menstruation). These cases reflect user perspectives in gender discussions. The second data source consisted of posts published by two accounts: Weiboguanliyuan (WeiboAdministrator), which represents Weibo's official stance, and Weiboxia (WeiboVigilante), which communicates with users in an anthropomorphic and informal tone. From their launch dates up through December 2025, we collected 176 posts containing the keyword "*xingbie*" (gender). These posts present Weibo's view on gender-related content. The third source was policy documents and official announcements issued by the CAC containing "xingbie" (gender). There were five such documents and announcements in total as of December 2025. These represent the state's stance.

We conduct CDA on the collected data, as it helps uncover complex power relations through both explicit and implicit language use (Fairclough, 1993; van Dijk, 2015). CDA has been widely employed to examine discursive practices and tensions between citizens, institutions, and the state in China (Huang, 2023; Qiaoan, 2019), demonstrating its value for analysing discourse surrounding gender antagonism and the underlying power relations.

4. Gender Disputes in User-Participated Moderation

This section examines the users' perspective on gender controversies in their content moderation via Weibo Jury. Launched in February 2021, Weibo Jury allows users to vote for controversial posts and collectively decide whether the selected content should stay visible. Ordinary Weibo users can join it after passing a test about platform rules, functionalities, and the community culture. Based on the Jury's votes, Weibo selectively publishes 3 to 10 representative cases per month, which contain the Jury's voting results. Once a majority of the Jury members identify a content violation, Weibo makes a final decision to reduce content visibility or (temporarily) silence relevant accounts. Although these publicly available cases in the monthly reports reflect user opinions, they are chosen and filtered by Weibo. Based on the examination of the released gender-related cases in the monthly reports, we present three findings: (a) a substantial proportion of the caseload consists of gender disputes; (b) there are conflicting standards in Weibo Jury's rulings; and (c) Weibo has discursively shifted from "gender discrimination" to "gender antagonism."

First, gender disputes constitute a substantial proportion of Weibo Jury's cases. Weibo Jury utilises users' collective knowledge to resolve controversies about ethnicity, religion, gender, region, and fandom that lack clear standards of legal violations. Gendered issues largely overlap with this aim, as gendered narratives are ubiquitous in everyday life and do not necessarily violate existing laws. From 2021 to 2025, gender-related cases constituted a substantial proportion of all cases (see Figure 1), although the proportion declined from 2023 onward.

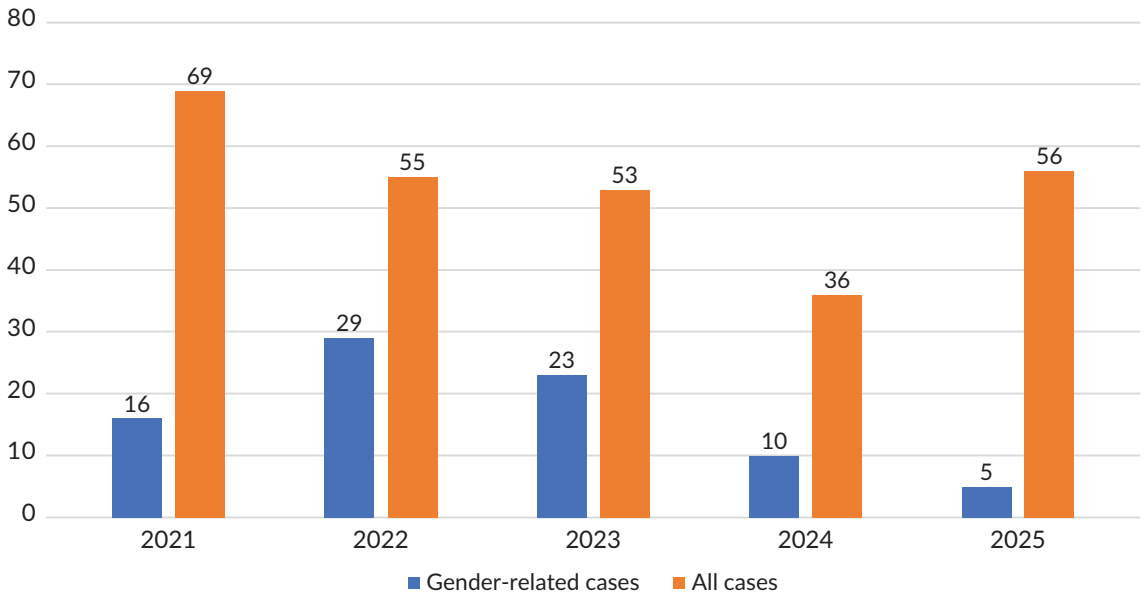

Figure 1. Yearly published caseload (gender-related, and all cases), 2021–2025.

Marriage and fertility is the most prevalent topic in gender-related cases. We have identified 16 topics from all 83 gender-related cases and calculated their frequencies (Figure 2). Marriage and fertility, and closely related topics including motherhood, bride price, and fatherhood, constitute the majority of the controversial cases. This result echoes China's demographic transition: Young women's attitudes towards

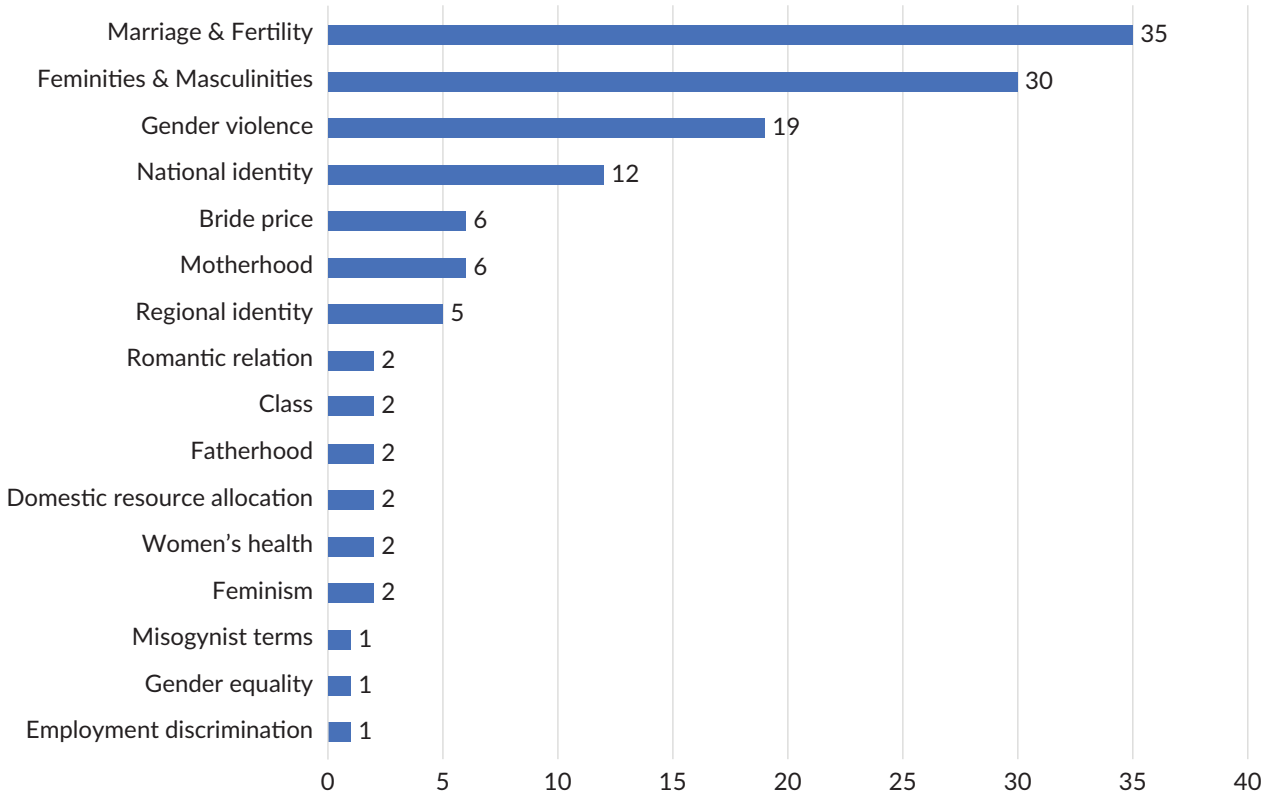

Figure 2. Frequency of topics in gender-related cases.

marriage and childbearing have shifted further away from traditional gender norms than those of men (T. Li et al., 2022; Qian & Li, 2020; Yu & Xie, 2019), making gender an increasingly disputed domain.

Second, the selected cases show diverse, even conflicting, attitudes toward gender disputes. There are ruling results showing a misogynistic stance, which aligns with the prior academic critique of the "platformisation of misogyny" (Liao, 2024). Users' expressions can be ruled "violations," even though their posts may contain expressions which would be reasonable from a feminist perspective. For example, in Case 1, a (likely female) user asks a question about men's marriage infidelity. Despite empirical evidence that men commit more betrayals than women in marriage, and the absence of any toxic language (Zhang et al., 2021), this post resulted in a violation:

> Case 1: #Man cheated during his girlfriend's pregnancy and still wants to reclaim 160,000-yuan bride price# Good men are like ghosts—everyone believes they exist, but no one has ever seen one. Post more news like this so that sisters in blind love can wake up to see reality.
>
> Weibo Jury ruling: Violation (333 votes for violation; 173 votes for no violation). (Report of August 2022)

Regarding the recurrent theme of gendered violence, Weibo also published an exemplary comment to underline platform rules (Case 2). This comment refutes the gender differences in crime, while focusing on the exaggeration in the original post. It is seemingly neutral in being alert to the stereotypes of a certain group, yet it silences women's perspective about violence, as most victims of gender violence are women:

> Case 2: #Internet celebrity live-streamer was killed by her husband, body hidden for two months# Stay away from men, live a happy life.
>
> Comment worth drawing upon: "Using an isolated case to generalise about and attack an entire gender group, smear them, and create conflict." (Report of November 2021)

When women's expressions are imprecise, even with sufficient real-world evidence, they are seen as intolerable, especially when female users blend curse words into their content with reasonable claims (Case 3). The use of uncivil language does not necessarily equal toxic content, as marginalised people and activists can employ uncivil expression to raise awareness of social-political issues (Oh & Downey, 2025). In this case, the content moderation had obstructed understanding of the nuance in language use and social contexts, resulting in an unfavourable environment for expressions challenging existing norms. Moreover, Weibo's standards and rules are opaque, as most cases (like Case 3) did not specify the reasons for the violation, which restricts users from questioning unfair gendered experiences, and helps maintain the traditional gender order:

> Case 3: #Police reported a female student murdered by a neighbour villager after the college entrance exam# Are you sick or what? Why not release the suspect's photo? Why post the young girl's photo instead? Is blurring only the eyes enough? Her bright youth and promising life are gone, yet you publish her photo so that some vile men can comment on her appearance? That's seriously sick. Can unethical media outlets and disgusting men just go to hell?

> Weibo Jury ruling: Violation (316 votes for violation; 187 votes for no violation). (Report of June 2022)

Although the standards of Weibo Jury rulings seem opaque, some cases show that users' participation can promote gender equality:

> Case 4: Does the following content have negative effects?
>
> #A woman who suffered domestic violence 16 times and now lives with a colostomy bag undergoes a new disability reassessment# Why is intentional injury being labelled as "domestic violence"? Is it because adding the word "domestic" turns it into a shield against severe punishment? Violence is violence, and harm is harm. Why should the law treat such injuries as less serious simply because they occurred within the family?
>
> 438 users participated in the vote: 8% voted yes, and 92% voted no negative effects. Based on this result, the content is displayed normally. (Report of November 2024)

Both Weibo Jury (and Weibo at large) have the capacity to differentiate emotional expressions from discriminative content. This is probably a benefit of the feminist activism that has persisted across the last two decades.

Nevertheless, conflicting attitudes among jurors reflect diverse users' opinions, as well as the historical, dynamic, and unsettled gender politics of contemporary China, where both gender equality and the patriarchy continue to shape gendered norms. This complicates the prevailing critiques of Weibo as a misogynistic platform, since this platform, with various groups of users, has to appeal to heterogeneous values. The anti-misogynist voices of users, though not dominant at this moment, also participate in Weibo's gender discourse competition.

We also found that in early monthly reports, Weibo had used "gender discrimination" instead of "gender antagonism" to position gender disputes. For example, in the Report of October 2021, Weibo listed a "representative gender discrimination case." However, this term disappeared in May 2022. It was replaced by "gender antagonism" to describe gender disputes in Weibo's official announcements. This shift of discursive framework will be further analysed later.

The Weibo Jury voting cases reflect heightened user concern regarding gender issues, as well as their diverse perspectives. With contradictory discourses, users struggle to shape gender norms in a collective and decisive manner. Despite users' active participation, the platform retains power in participatory moderation: It unilaterally determines which controversial cases are presented to the jury, which voting results are ultimately disclosed, and what violation punishment is imposed. Consequently, user influence over the allocation of visibility regarding gender issues remains constrained.

5. Platform-Defined Gender Antagonism

Along with the mounting gender disputes, Weibo, as a for-profit platform, has to take steps to improve the user experience and sustain user activities, during which process "gender antagonism" is defined and

addressed. As the mouthpiece of Weibo, two accounts, WeiboAdministrator and WeiboVigilante, regularly publish updates on community guidelines, platform rules, and specific moderation cases. Their posts directly reveal Weibo's stance on gender controversies. Through a CDA of Weibo's official posts that mention "gender," we identify three interrelated dimensions of Weibo's governance: the institutionalisation of gender antagonism as a distinct violation category, the moralisation of content moderation judgments, and two governance models.

5.1. The Discourse Shift From Discrimination to Antagonism

In the early 2020s, Weibo recognised that gender-related issues could provoke disputes, and incorporated them into its platform governance rules. Back then, gender-related disputes were categorised as a subtype of "moral manipulation" (*daode bangjia*) under the platform's reporting rules, and gender discrimination, along with racism and regional discrimination, was classified as reportable hate speech under the category of "promoting hatred" (*xuanyang chouhen*).

However, since January 2021, "gender antagonism" has increasingly foregrounded Weibo's official communications, instead of the previously used term "gender discrimination." Additionally, "inciting gender antagonism" has become an independent and prominent violation category. In June 2025, WeiboAdministrator officially announced that its updated reporting system included "inciting gender antagonism" as a distinct violation category, defined as content that "deliberately creates or intensifies conflict between men and women by fabricating false antagonisms, framing contentious topics, inciting oppositional sentiments, maliciously labelling groups, or offering one-sided interpretations" (WeiboAdministrator, 2025).

The language shift from "gender discrimination" to "gender antagonism" warrants careful interrogation, as the two terms carry different connotations. "Gender discrimination" carries historical and political significance in China, shaped by the state's agreement on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women. It recognises women's structurally disadvantaged position and legitimises claims for gender equality. By contrast, "gender antagonism," often treated as objectively describing gender disputes, presupposes a symmetrical power relationship between men and women, reframing gender disputes as a mutual hostility and zero-sum competition. Within this discursive framework, anyone who questions the existing gender order is presumed to be hostile to the opposite side, and thus, morally problematic. This biased dichotomy largely intensified, rather than resolved, divisions between women and men.

5.2. Moralised Moderation: Perceived Illegitimate Gender Discussions

Weibo's governance of gender antagonism demonstrates a moralisation strategy, in both the definition of the category and the handling of violations. By framing gender antagonism as a moral issue that falls outside the formal legal framework, Weibo invites user participation to interpret and apply this ambiguous term in judging cases. Moreover, moralisation is reflected in how violations are addressed. In published cases, Weibo's official accounts frequently employ moralised language such as "maliciously publish harmful content" and "deliberately provoke dissonance": 79.48% of WeiboAdministrator's gender-related posts and 86.86% of WeiboVigilante's posts contain such terms. This pattern suggests that Weibo prioritises

perceived intent over content in addressing gender antagonism violations, thereby using moral judgment to justify punishments.

Although most content that elicits punishment becomes inaccessible, some typical cases remain accessible alongside Weibo's official comments to educate the public about what is considered a violation. For example, under a news post about a car accident involving a male driver, a user commented, "The man who caused the accident is hidden again?" This question is understandable in the Chinese context, where female drivers' accidents have been overrepresented, and Weibo users tend to attribute car accidents to drivers' gender when drivers happen to be female (M. Li & Luo, 2020). In this case, the user attempts to counter the bad-female-driver narrative. Although this comment did not contain any uncivil language, it was regarded as "intentionally provoking gender antagonism" despite the context (WeiboVigilante, 2023).

This moralisation strategy shifts the focus away from the content and context of gender discussions and the underlying social issues, and toward the presumed motivations of content producers. Rather than engaging with issues of gender inequality, violence, and discrimination, the platform's discourse centres on moral interpretations and judgments about the perceived malicious intent, deliberate provocation, and conspiracies behind the speech. This strategy hinders further engagement with actual social problems and delegitimises certain forms of gender critique by framing them as acts of bad intent, rather than constructive social commentary.

5.3. Handling Gender Antagonism: Two Governance Models

Weibo's moralisation of gender antagonism reflects an anti-intersectional model that isolates gender from other social issues. Originating from Black feminist thought, intersectionality has been developed by sociological scholars as a heuristic and critical framework for analysing how multiple systems of oppression (such as race, gender, and class) intersect to produce disadvantages for both individuals and groups (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). Rather than narrowing focus to one dimension, intersectionality underscores the irreducible complexity of gender issues and the necessity of a multidimensional perspective. For online gender disputes that involve multiple dimensions of identity and power, intersectionality provides a valuable lens through which to understand how gender conflicts in social issues are discussed, articulated, and received. However, Weibo's moderation practices systematically counteract this intersectional understanding. When users apply the gender perspective to broader social issues, the platform frequently intervenes with the justification that users "maliciously relate gender perspectives to trending social topics." This framing treats gender analysis not as a legitimate critique, but as a violation.

In seemingly apolitical everyday news, Weibo discourages the gender perspective. One trending topic, #A woman who started her new job and fell in love with her boss was scammed out of 180,000 yuan#, clearly involved elements inviting gender analysis: workplace power imbalances and gendered vulnerability in relationships. However, WeiboVigilante commented, "Of course, public news deserves discussion, but I want to say, do not immediately switch to gender antagonism mode when seeing gender-related topics" (WeiboVigilante, 2022). Despite labelling the topic as "gender-related," the platform requires users to discuss gender-related events without committing any violations, even though Weibo provides no clear standards on gender-related violations. This exerts an impractical burden on users and silences many feminist critiques.

The anti-intersectional model becomes more visible during politically sensitive events. In June 2022, the notorious Tangshan beating incident shocked the public, drawing attention to sexual harassment and violence against women in public spaces (Mao, 2022). Around 200,000 posts on this topic appeared on Weibo in a single day (Qin et al., 2024). Some discussions took a misandrist tone as resistance to sexism and patriarchy (Hou, 2025). This incident clearly involved multiple intersecting issues: sexual harassment, gender-based violence, public safety, and broader concerns about women's safety in public spaces. Weibo soon announced the removal of 14,546 posts and the silencing or shutdown of more than 9,000 accounts, with reasons including "provoking gender antagonism with extreme rhetoric," "rehashing historical statements to attack state policies, institutions, or other inappropriate content," and "promoting hatred and discrimination" (WeiboAdministrator, 2022). As a result, visible discussions tended to minimise sexism, while feminist discussions were suppressed (Qin et al., 2024). In the highlighted violations, WeiboAdministrator showcased violative posts such as "Being beaten to death like animals, Chinese women are not (treated like) human." By framing such expressions as "extreme rhetoric" (WeiboAdministrator, 2022), the platform had delegitimised female anger.

By limiting users' language use, discussion perspectives, and ideological expressions, Weibo's anti-intersectional model has narrowed the scope of legitimate participation in gender issues. Across both everyday social news and highly politicised incidents, Weibo treats gender as a separable and isolated category that should not be "maliciously related" to other social issues. It diverts discussion away from gender and replaces gender analysis with other perspectives, like class or criminal activity, resulting in the downplaying and delegitimisation of dissent against mainstream gender norms.

A contradiction in heated discussions is that the platform benefits from user engagement with trending topics, which drives attention; however, increasing engagement and hyper-visibility become threatening when they connect gender to institutional critique, structural analysis, or challenges to mainstream ideologies about marriage and fertility. Weibo's anti-intersectional model balances the bottom-up user engagement and top-down political pressure. This governance strategy creates a constrained discursive space where gender can be mentioned but not analysed, and where incidents can be discussed, but not connected to structural problems.

In addition to the anti-intersectional model, Weibo utilises constant visibility moderation to mitigate any political pressure caused by the hyper-visibility of gender disputes. Because hyper-visibility may expose governance shortcomings or social tensions, posing risks for platforms operating under Chinese regulatory oversight, platforms face pressure to manage risky discourse while sustaining engagement.

Weibo Jury report disclosures and Weibo official accounts' updates reveal a systematic pattern of visibility moderation. Weibo reduces the visibility of controversial gender-related content on two levels. First, it directly removes any posts, comments, or accounts deemed to be provoking gender antagonism, lowering visibility and influencing individual expression. Second, and more subtly, Weibo controls the visibility of gender-related cases to users through both the jury system and its monthly reports. As shown in Figure 1, the number of gender-related cases in these reports decreased from 2023 to 2025. However, announcements from WeiboAdministrator reveal a different trend: In 2025, Weibo launched seven targeted actions against gender antagonism, which was more than in previous years, alongside seven additional campaigns addressing content that provokes negative emotions, in which gender antagonism cases

constituted the majority. Together, these actions resulted in the removal of 640,000 gender antagonism posts (WeiboAdministrator, 2026b). This contrast can be attributed to two potential reasons: First, the platform has strengthened its screening of gender antagonism while limiting the user jury's access to such cases; second, Weibo selectively discloses information in its monthly reports.

This section illustrates how "gender antagonism" is institutionalised, moralised, and governed on Weibo. In this process, "gender antagonism" develops into an impactful, ambiguous notion referring to a wide array of gender discussions questioning the current gender order. Along with the platform's control of visibility, it further becomes a part of the meaning-making process and disciplining language that expands Weibo's discretion and silences feminist opinions. While these practices regulate online discourse and reinforce gender norms in online discussions, their broader implications should be understood through state–platform dynamics and the interaction between online discourse and offline social reality.

6. Above the Platform: The Role of the State

In China's platformisation, platform governance has to match the state's governmental framework (de Kloet et al., 2019; Liao, 2024). This logic also applies to gender antagonism. This section focuses on the state's role in governing online gender disputes. We will provide a more nuanced analysis by analysing the two-way circulation of the concept of "gender antagonism," through both bottom-up and top-down processes.

Although "gender antagonism" is institutionalised by platforms, this notion is not created by the platform. Rather, it can be traced back to May 2019 discussions on a user-generated post on Zhihu, a Quora-like Q&A platform in China. In 2020, this term circulated through a diverse array of platforms, including Weibo, because of controversy surrounding Yang Li. The budding discussion drew the attention of both platforms and the state. In January 2021, WeiboAdministrator first used this term; in November 2023, the CAC ("Notice on launching the 'Qinglang campaign to rectify online hostility' special action," 2023) first used it in a Qinglang campaign targeting online hostility. In this way, the concept circulated from the bottom up, and ultimately became a target of authorities' regulations. Similarly, the term "gender antagonism" has replaced "gender discrimination" in the CAC's statements. The CAC stopped using "gender discrimination" in September 2023.

It would be a misnomer to call this bottom-up circulation a democratic process of grassroots ideas setting the state's agenda. After all, the wide usage of "gender antagonism" in internet posts is not indicative of a common social understanding of gender issues. Moreover, the state does not mechanically follow the grassroots' word choice in its governance, as exemplified by this term's top-down circulation.

The CAC's adoption and re-definition of the term has narrowed the scope of "gender antagonism" in its regulatory actions, leading to the top-down institutionalisation of this term. "Gender antagonism" is an umbrella term referring to any gender issues internet users discuss. The diversity of gender disputes in Figure 2 can partially corroborate this: Despite the dominance of marriage and fertility, Weibo users discuss many other themes, and they do not necessarily centre around the opposition between men and women, as "gender antagonism" implies. In the first adoption, the CAC featured "gender antagonism" under a general frame of "stigmatising a certain group" in its Qinglang campaign. This general tone changed in its second adoption in the Qinglang campaign of December 2023, which targeted short videos that "spread wrong values of love and marriage and intentionally incite gender antagonism" ("Notice on launching the 'Qinglang

campaign to rectify problematic content orientations in short-video' special action," 2023). In the campaign, a close connection was built between gender antagonism and social values of marriage and childbearing. In the name of rectification, the scope of "gender antagonism" narrows: In the 2025 Spring Festival Qinglang action, the CAC targeted content that "intentionally advocates anti-marriage and anti-fertility values, propagates extreme feminism, and incites gender antagonism" ("Notice on launching the 'Qinglang 2025 Spring Festival online environment rectification' campaign," 2025). The campaign targeted anti-marriage groups and so-called extreme feminists, who were predominantly young women (Guan, 2025; H. Wang et al., 2025). In this way, "gender antagonism" is redefined as anti-marriage and -fertility values and extreme feminism, which should be understood against the background of China's crisis of population reproduction (Yu & Xie, 2019). The state promotes the reproduction of life to alleviate the crisis.

In this way, "gender antagonism" deviates from its surface meaning, which theoretically signifies a well-matched competition between men and women. Practically, its criticism is increasingly being directed toward women who are not subject to traditional marriage patterns and the reproductive role. The CAC's redefinition further strengthens the inherent bias of "gender antagonism."

With its disciplinary power, the state has enforced the governance of gender antagonism top-down within its administrative power. From 2023 to 2025, Weibo continually launched campaigns against gender antagonism to meet the CAC's requirements, removing millions of posts (WeiboAdministrator, 2023, 2026a). The state's governance of the platform has arguably been effective: The visibility of online gender dispute disclosures has decreased since 2023, as discussed above. Yet this comes with limitations, manifested as a narrow understanding of gender disputes and the absence of gender equality. Thus, the state's attention to gender disputes has been reduced to themes of marriage and fertility, which can be attributed to both the prevalence of these topics and China's emerging population crisis. Amid declining marriage and birth rates, China has introduced multiple pro-natal measures, and the ideological regulation of gender antagonism should be seen as part of the biopolitical governance. Against this backdrop, framing these feminism-based reflections as inciting gender antagonism reflects "a connective strategy, part of the practice of hegemony which enlarges the sphere of influence of the state into the private sphere" (McRobbie, 1994, p. 201). Without legal reasons to eliminate women's questioning of current marriage patterns and gender roles, "gender antagonism" offers a discursive tool to delegitimise ideas that challenge current gender norms and trigger anxiety between governing authorities. The state's ambivalence towards women's liberation resurfaces when population reproduction becomes problematic.

The actions in China's biopolitical governance reveal that gender disputes are regarded as merely an online discursive battle, instead of a symptom of fundamental demographic change. This is a problem. Posts containing anti-marriage values often disappear, but the young generation of Chinese women longing for gender equality and their tension with traditional gender norms cannot. Without addressing their expectation of gender equality, it remains challenging for the state to alleviate the population crisis and maintain its legitimacy in social governance.

Gender has become a sensitive domain on Chinese platforms. While international platforms, such as TikTok, have explicitly defined misogyny as a violation in their community guidelines, largely reflecting the hegemony of gender equality shaped by successive waves of Western feminist activism, China's platform governance has been deliberately distanced from feminism. Where users' participation is encouraged, platforms' rules remain

ambiguous, and the state maintains an ambivalent stance toward gender equality. In this context, a pattern of "moralised platform governance" emerges, in which moralisation is mobilised as a strategy for maintaining existing gender norms and expanding state influence in a platformised society. This moralised governance pattern is prominent in areas that fall beyond the formal legal framework, yet may challenge the state's agenda, such as facilitating marriage and fertility.

In this section, we identify the dominant role of the state in mainstreaming the "gender antagonism" discourse. The adoption of this term in official regulatory documents serves to the meaning-making and legitimisation of gender antagonism in a top-down manner. The punishment of prohibited content, including voices challenging dominant gender norms, is implemented through the administrative control of platform resources. However, while the state seems powerful in governing online gender discourse, it is not all-powerful, particularly in biopolitical governance, as it eschews the long-lasting gender tensions in China's modernisation.

7. Conclusion

This research focuses on the wide circulation and the changing definition of "gender antagonism" in China. Examining the discourse construction on Weibo through a power lens, we argue that gender antagonism is not a neutral description of gender disputes, but a discursive framework that reinforces existing gender orders and serves biopolitical governance in China. While users contribute to its emergence, both platforms and the state, holding more meaning-making power and communicative resources, leverage the term's ambiguity and institutionalise it in platform governance practices. This discursive framework marginalises gender equality and upholds hostility toward women who are unwilling to follow the existing gender order, particularly the reproductive roles women had previously taken. We conceptualise the governance of highly visible controversies beyond formal legal frameworks, such as gender disputes, mediated through moralised and ambiguous standards, as moralised platform governance. Despite the short-term effectiveness of invisibilising gender disputes, the long-standing tensions between the state's socialist commitment, the patriarchal tradition, the platform's desire for users and profits, and young women's aspirations for gender equality persist. As such, the lack of gender equality consensus will continue to pose challenges to the state's governance of the population reproduction crisis, and to its own legitimacy.

This research contributes to platform governance and gender studies by developing a bifocal perspective on power, and by emphasising the local history of gender politics. Through the power perspective, we reveal how moralised governance operates via the ambiguous term "gender antagonism," which appears to be neutral but embeds state ideologies of social stability within regulatory practices. Our analysis shows that the production of gender discourses is increasingly entangled with platform governance, calling for continued scholarly attention and critical examination.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

All data generated or analysed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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