

The Men Question in Chinese Digital Feminism: Embodied Gender Subjectivity and Ugly Affects

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and all sources have been acknowledged.

Meihua Lu

Gen AI Attribution Statement

No content produced by generative AI tools has been used in the preparation of this thesis.

Notes on Translation

Translations from all other languages, predominantly Chinese and some Japanese, into English in this thesis are provided by the author unless otherwise indicated. I use the Hanyu Pinyin system for Chinese words, names, places, and phrases. For all full names in Chinese and Japanese cited in this thesis, I follow the order of surname then first name, in accordance with local customs.

Abstract

This thesis examines the controversial phenomenon of *yan-nan* (feminist misandry) in post-Metoo Chinese digital feminism. Since the late 2010s, Chinese digital feminists have increasingly expressed hostility towards men and masculinities in online feminist discourse, while feminism is at the same time being more widely associated with “man-hating” and fostering “gender antagonism” in Chinese popular and mainstream perceptions. By critically analysing feminist *yan-nan* through empirical and theoretical approaches, this thesis situates Chinese digital feminists’ attitudes towards men within the broader context of the “men question” in Chinese feminist history and the dynamics of global/transnational feminist theories and movements. It challenges superficial versions of the “misandry myth” which frequently pathologise feminist emotionality and tie it to misogynistic notions of femininity, while also being contested by recent feminist studies for problematically reproducing essentialist gender binarism. Conversely, this thesis argues that *yan-nan* in Chinese digital feminism should be understood fundamentally as a situated knowledge (Haraway 1997) reflecting the complexities and dilemmas faced by feminist politics within the post-socialist, neoliberal Chinese setting.

Drawing in part on in-depth one-to-one interviews with 14 self-identified feminist women and 16 Chinese men, all of them engaged with online feminist content, this research explores feminist attitudes towards men and men’s responses to feminist *yan-nan*. Analysed with reference to feminist affect theory and feminist phenomenological approaches to embodied subjectivity, these interviews highlight the significance of emotions for both groups in living upon/with feminism in everyday life. Within the post-socialist authoritarian contemporary Chinese context, I contend that a *feminist sensibility* has replaced conventional feminist collective activism, organisations, and practices as a core means of doing feminism and building feminist political

identification. With a specific analytic focus on negative feelings such as feminist disgust and men's guilt, this thesis interprets these "ugly" affects not as issues to be managed but rather as fundamental aspects of the embodied subjectivities that enable feminist politics to unfold. In the end, this thesis proposes for recognising the key role of affect in everyday politics of gender, by especially considering how the availability of positive/negative feelings on the structural level can orient individuals to incline or resist existing dominant gender power structures in their everyday feelings and practices.

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Introduction

April 13, 2022 was an ordinary day. As usual, I woke up in the morning and grabbed my phone to start my day with social media. Instantly, I sensed something unusual. I have developed this instinctive sense when big gender-related news breaks in China since digital feminism became part of my daily life in the late 2010s. So I was prepared. I started by going to *Weibo* to find out what was going on, and I saw the hashtag “Extreme feminism has become online cancer”, posted at midnight on the 12th by the official *Weibo* account of the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League (CYL). I read the short blog post carefully:

“Extreme feminists” have been stirring for a long time. Although each ‘explosion’ can fool many citizens, the longer it goes on, the more its true nature is exposed – everything leads to “women's rights”. These people’s brains are not defective, and they are not sincerely defending women's rights, but creating ‘gender antagonism’ to merely attract online traffic and take the opportunity to make money. The exposure, the burst of texts, and the hidden grey industry chain behind, consistently enable the “female fist¹” to gain fame and fortune.

Being “extreme” is not the way to protect rights, but a conspiracy. The recent spate of incidents shows that “extreme feminism” has become more and more rampant and toxic. The whole Internet

¹ “Female fist” (女拳) is one of the popular pejorative terms used to satirise Chinese feminists.

should together remove this “poisonous tumour” and change the web space back to being clean. There is no time to lose!²

I was not very surprised when I saw this post. As a feminist woman growing up in China, digital feminism has been part of my everyday life since my college days – and so have been the backlashes against feminists. However, a depressing feeling still rose within me. The official government’s attitude toward online feminist voices has always been ambiguously negative. In China, state media like CYL have their own social media accounts to guide public opinion, shape the government’s image, and promote official ideologies in cyberspace (Guo 2018; Cui and Wu 2016). Even though feminist posts and hashtags are constantly being censored and banned, I am used to feminist discussions still being tolerated without being explicitly interfered with. This was the first time that I can recall seeing such a straightforward strict condemnation. Initially, some questioned whether this post was authorised by CYL or simply a personal act by the media editor. Others wondered whether this was a tactic to divert public attention from the Shanghai pandemic lockdown.³ On April 13th, the blog post was not deleted. On the contrary, it was manually set as the top post of the CYL account.

Whatever the real purpose was, the post led to rapidly expanding expressions of desperation across online feminist communities on *Weibo* and *Douban*. Young digital feminists felt used, vilified, and criminalised. The post implies a bleak future for feminism. The state had decided to define digital feminism as the villain. Following my habit of collecting research information, I then switched to several anti-feminist

² The post was written in simplified Chinese. The quotation here is translated by myself, and the same translation approach is applied to other media contents written in Chinese quoted in this thesis. For more information about the CYL post, please see Yang (2022).

³ Chinese official social media posts also function as a system of emotional valves to stabilise social sentiment levels by diverting public attention away from some problems (See Lu, Huang, and Meng 2023).

communities that I frequently visit. The headline of one public article was: “Female fists question the CYL and hit the trending list? The CYL is not indulging them anymore!” Most of the comments had a cheerful tone, excited to see the conflict between feminism and the state finally exposed. I skimmed through this triumphant orgy in silence and then received a message from one of my feminist friends. “I really want to ‘run’,” she said.⁴

It is quite common for Chinese feminists to feel lost. Since the late 2010s, Chinese digital feminists have faced an embarrassing situation where any efforts to question gender issues on Chinese social media would appear like a tedious, didactic public lecturing with little institutional support. Social media backlashes and unpredictable censorship reduce the spaces for feminists to speak while intensifying the conflicts. Aside from the “feminist fist” (女拳) that associates feminism with violence and aggression (He and Brown 2023), Chinese digital feminism also has other popular, notorious names among the backlashes, such as “fake feminism” (伪女权) and “countryside feminism” (田园女权). Since 2020, in public opinion, Chinese digital feminism has been increasingly associated with inciting “gender opposition” (性别对立) or “men-women opposition” (男女对立) (Lü 2022). These backlashes are implicitly supported and allowed by the state under the official ideology of maintaining social harmony and stability (Lei 2017). The CYL’s condemnation of feminism as a “poisonous tumour” was soon incorporated into the general metaphors for feminism as a cancer or sickness that endangers social harmony (Bao 2025; Chen and Gong 2023).

Feminist online conversations can easily turn into fierce quarrels: sometimes effective, but most of the time tiring. In recent years I have observed changes among my feminist friends that highlight this. Just within a few years, some of them have become more

⁴ “Run” (润) is a popular slang on Chinese social media that implicitly means immigration to other countries from China.

reticent, while others are becoming more radical – increasingly tired of tolerant discussion and staying meek. A common saying used by these feminist friends is “You have to first try to turn the roof over, and then people will agree with your proposal to open a window in the house.” This is a saying developed from the writings of the critical Chinese intellectual Lu Xun during the revolutionary period of the last century (Lavery 1974). For some of my friends, radicalisation feels like an inevitable choice. They have begun to use sarcasm and vulgar reproach more often, and some have become highly self-defensive, outspoken, or even aggressive.

I could neither fight nor stay quiet – so I ran away. This was a choice that most of my feminist friends cannot afford. By the time one of my friends reached out to me saying that she was struggling with workplace gender discrimination, marriage pressure from parents, and online misogyny and harassment, I had already started my PhD degree in Sydney – a beautiful harbour city with dazzling sunlight, ocean breeze, and jacaranda blooms. My academic peers and colleagues were sitting together in seminar rooms discussing gender equality, postcolonial feminism, intersectionality, and queer politics. Some said there was to be a rally in Sydney that weekend. Someone shared the protest information. There seemed to be no reason to be desperate about anything. Why do a feminist project about “hating men”, they asked me with cautious interest that I was sensitive might be disapproval? I felt all my explanations sounded pale to them. I found myself ugly and alien.

The truth is, there was really nowhere for me to run. Even in Sydney, my world was still closely connected with Chinese digital feminism – through my family, friends, fellow students, and through social media. After the CYL post, I saw a flood of posts in the women’s communities expressing their pain. Some women felt betrayed by their own state. One post I read said, “I never thought I would want to leave here so badly one day. I want to go to a better place; I want to stroll on the streets with more gender

equality.” Underneath these expressions of frustration and anger, I felt an intense sense of helplessness, a sense of confusion about my feminist identity and beliefs. If we are local feminists, why do we feel like we don’t belong in our country? But if we are foreign, are there any places we should go? Where is our home?

The local-ness of Chinese feminism has always been a difficult problem for Chinese women’s movements and studies. Using Chen Ya-chen’s words, the question of “what is Chinese feminism?” can be “endlessly explored but never conclusively, definitively answered” (Chen 2011, 2). Historically, the idea of feminism emerged in China in the late 19th century as a foreign product that represented Western modernity and civilisation (Chen 2011; Wang 2017; Liu, Karl, and Ko 2013; Spakowski 2021). After a century’s turbulence centred on anti-colonial war and socialist revolutions, in the 1990s the re-introduction of gender theories into China led to fierce local debates about whether Western theories are applicable to the post-socialist Chinese context. In these debates, one of the most representative voices is the feminist scholar Li Xiaojiang, who has influentially expressed caution towards so-called “Western” feminism. Li questions the effectiveness of Western gender theories in explaining Chinese women’s lived situations in the post-socialist context, and insists on using the term “local” as distinct from “localisation” (Li 2000; Li and Zhang 1994). However, such an insistence on the binary division between a local Chinese feminism and a foreign “Western” feminism also risks transferring concrete local knowledge and experiences into geopolitical ideologies (Song and Gao 2022). In mainstream state discourse, the official version of local Chinese feminism is kept within the framework of state feminism, named “the path of women’s development with Chinese characteristics socialism” (中国特色社会

主义妇女发展道路).⁵ This official state feminist discourse – organised around a main ambition to achieve “the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation” – ties women’s rights tightly to the party state. As many have argued, this official version of Chinese local feminism has largely lost its independence and critical capability within the patriarchal party state institutions (Wang 2017; Yin 2021). Thus, while emphasising its “Chinese characteristics”, this official state feminism monopolises the meaning of local-ness of Chinese feminism to reinforce its patriarchal power structure (Zhu and Xiao 2021).

Against this background, this thesis aims to reaffirm the necessity of studying Chinese digital feminism as a locally situated feminist knowledge. Although I intend to avoid any rigid division between China and the West, my emphasis on local-ness⁶ in this thesis stems from a deep care for local grassroots feminisms and the embodied individuals living with feminisms in this chaotic, turbulent age. In line with feminist theorists who value positionality in feminist knowledge-making (Rich 2003; Harding 1991; Mohanty 1984), and stressing social, historical and bodily locations simultaneously in this, I approach Chinese digital feminism as fundamentally a situated knowledge (Haraway 1997). From this perspective, local-ness means understanding the situations of feminist knowledge production, its political and sociocultural contexts and history, and its interaction and integration with transitional knowledge and feminist politics. Further, studying Chinese digital feminism as local feminism also means acknowledging its ugly, problematic elements as a part of the production of local

⁵ This is an official term adopted by the Chinese state in government files and reports (see [ACWF Social Liaison 2019](#); [ChinaNews 2020](#)). The “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色社会主义) was first proposed and has become the dominant political ideology since Deng Xiaoping’s national turn program in 1982. Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, this term has been re-adapted into the “Xi Jinping Thought”, which has been argued for upholding conservative, family-centric gender ideology (Li 2020; Drahos 2024; Yang 2022).

⁶ Regardless of the decades of local discussions around the subject *ben-tu-xing* (本土性) in China, there is an inconsistency of its translation in English publications (Wesoky 2016). The English translation of *ben-tu* (本土) can be “indigenous” (Schaffer and Song 2007), “local” (Song 2022), or a mix use of both (Wesoky 2016; Spakowski 2021). As “local feminism” is still the most commonly used expression in Chinese feminist studies, in this thesis, I use “local-ness” to translate *ben-tu-xing* to avoid the geographic implication in “locality”, or the limitations of conveying Chinese feminism’s modern transnationality nature in “indigeneity”.

knowledge in its situation, without seeing these as a distortion or pollution of some “correct” feminism of objectivity. Following Haraway, Chinese digital feminism as situated knowledge is about partial perspectives, limited locations, contradictory voices and stories. In line with this view, I want to explore some of the hostile, antagonistic, unpopular aspects of Chinese digital feminism. I do not address them here as problems to be resolved, avoided or denied so that Chinese digital feminism can be diverted back to the correct orbit. Instead, I understand them as an integral part of feminism as a local gender politics of defiance. It is this situated approach that “allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (Haraway 1997, 59).

Thus, this thesis focuses on one of the most common, notorious forms of feminist “ugliness” in digital feminism in the 2020s: a Chinese version of feminist misandry widely mythologised as feminists creating “gender antagonism”. This is at the centre of how the CYL post and many feminist backlashers represent feminists – as creating hostility towards men. The concept of gender antagonism often sounds disturbing and problematic and immediately evokes a series of questions. Does this mean Chinese digital feminism is anti-men? Is it a form of feminist separatism that upholds an essentialist gender binary? Even for many Chinese feminists, “gender antagonism” feels like something to deny, avoid, or resolve. Yet despite the visibility of this accusation we still know very little about how Chinese digital feminists actually relate to men.

Setting out to address this lack of knowledge, between April and June 2023, I interviewed 14 self-identified feminist women and 16 men who consider themselves familiar enough with digital feminist content to share their thoughts on its perceived hostility towards men.⁷ I was aware that talking about this controversial topic would be

⁷ A detailed research method of the thesis including information about the participants will be presented in later sections of the introduction.

a challenge for all my interviewees – both the feminist women and the men. I felt the weight of that challenge too. How would they respond to my questions, especially those difficult ones regarding feminists’ vulgar, aggressive accusations against Chinese men? Would they feel awkward, offended, or upset during the interviews? And how would they feel about me, as a feminist scholar researching such a disturbing topic?

On April 23, 2023, I began my first Zoom interview from my bedroom in Sydney. I opened my laptop camera, clicked “Record,” and signalled to my interviewee on the screen that we were ready to begin.

“So, could you tell me your story with Chinese digital feminism?” I asked.

I don’t want to run away anymore.

Is Misandry a Myth?

Against the background of Chinese digital feminism being increasingly associated with misandry in popular discourse, this project inquires what “misandry” is exactly like in Chinese digital feminism. Is it a myth, a reality, or a weapon? Situated within this debate over feminist misandry, this thesis raises the following research questions: First, what are Chinese digital feminists’ attitudes toward men and men’s participation in Chinese feminist movements? How do Chinese digital feminists develop and adopt *yan-nan*, and what is the role of *yan-nan* in individual feminists’ everyday lives in relation to their feminist identity, practices, and propositions? Second, how do Chinese men who encounter feminist *yan-nan* understand and respond to feminist criticisms? How do their interpretations of *yan-nan* influence their understanding of feminism and of themselves as situated by the power relations of gender? And at last, what key features

of and problems in Chinese digital feminism of the 2020s are revealed by feminist *yan-nan*? Is their political potential in feminist *yan-nan* for challenging misogyny, male-domination, and binary gender constructions, in contemporary hetero-patriarchal China?

Among the Chinese men interviewed, one of the interviewees, Matthew,⁸ complained about Chinese digital feminism in terms that support the popular position espoused in the CYL post. He declared: “They are not promoting gender equality. They are promoting gender conflicts.” Like most of the Chinese men I interviewed, Matthew is a well-educated young man in his twenties who identifies himself as supporting gender equality. However, when I asked about his opinion of feminism, he used the term “countryside feminism” (田园女权) to define this digital feminism he does not support. As a popular yet controversial term, this “countryside feminism” quoted by Matthew is also sometimes translated as “rural feminism” in English (Yang, Guo, and Arteel 2023). This term is used as a popular sarcastic description of feminism in Chinese social media culture. The “countryside” / “rural” in the term does not refer to feminism in rural areas of China. Rather, it is associated with a Chinese term for local dog breeds (*tugou*) and so has the sarcastic connotation that this form of Chinese feminism is cheap and shallow.

“What’s your understanding of ‘countryside feminism’ then?” I asked Matthew for clarification. “It’s a pejorative term,” he explained. “Those people’s minds are immature. They put emotional content on social media like teenagers do. Well, I cannot be certain about the exact definition of ‘countryside feminism’. In my view, they indiscriminately attack all men, regardless of what these men are saying. They bash men who do not show a supportive attitude towards women. These actions are too extreme! [...] I think these countryside feminists are creating hostility between men

⁸ All the participants’ names as they appear in this thesis are pseudonyms.

and women, but, in my opinion, conciliation should always be the right way.” He proposed instead a feminism of harmony.

Matthew’s attitude shares similarities with another pervasive form of feminist backlash in contemporary China. In this form, the opponents of Chinese digital feminism often position themselves as the guardians of a “real”, less-confrontational feminism, while opposing digital feminisms for being fake and extreme (Yang, Guo, and Arteel 2023; Huang 2023). The charge of misandry – the claim that feminists hate and attack men – comprises a large portion of popular anti-feminist discourse in China.

These accusations find ammunition in the new negative terms Chinese digital feminists invent to problematise mainstream masculinities and criticise misogynistic Chinese men. For feminists, such terms need to be constantly renewed over time to deal with the increasing tension of reactionary backlashes and, in more practical terms, because the platforms they rely on adapt their censorship and thus block or conceal posts using controversial terms. In 2022, “baby man” (男宝) became one such popular feminist neologism to satire men who were self-centred and spoiled by Chinese society (Chen and Gong 2023); *diewei* (爹味) was another such term coined by feminists as an ironic homophone to oppose male domination and mansplaining (Zhang and Mu 2024); and “pest man” (蝻) became widely used by feminists to replace the character for “men” which would be pronounced the same way in Chinese expression (Xue and Rose 2022). At the time of writing this thesis, such neologisms continue to emerge in Chinese digital feminist spaces. Even more recent examples are *tian-li* (田力) and *lao-deng* (老登), both of which terms carry the connotation of men being disrespectful and despicable.

“These words are weapons.” According to Donna, one of the young Chinese digital feminist women I interviewed, “Men have invented many of these really bad misogynistic terms. [...] That’s why I encourage women to keep creating these sorts of

aggressive words to respond. They are good to use on social media because they spread easily.” Among the feminist women I interviewed, no one raised objections to using such words. Clearly, Matthew’s proposal of harmonious feminism and conciliation with men is not what these participated feminist women are prioritising.

In Chinese, the general term for misandry is *yan-nan* (厌男), which is composed of the two Chinese characters *yan* (dislike or aversion) and *nan* (men). Similarly to the English etymology for “misandry”, Chinese *yan-nan* is coined by mirroring the term *yan-nü* (厌女; misogyny) that literally stands for the dislike of women. In Chinese digital feminism, the most popular detailed definition of misogyny comes from the Japanese feminist scholar Ueno Chizuko in her book *Onnagirai* (English: Misogyny; Chinese: *yan-nü*), which was first translated and published in mainland China in 2015. After the dissemination of the term *yan-nü* with the outbreak of what has been called the “Ueno Chizuko Boom”⁹ and Chinese #MeToo, *yan-nan* was first invented as a backlash accusation against feminism but was then gradually adopted by many digital feminists to express their feminist attitude.

In Anglophone contexts, Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) define misandry by its etymology as a hatred towards men. As a counter response to feminist critiques of misogyny, the term misandry has been used by MRAs to make arguments about men’s victimisation by feminist ideological attacks (Nathanson and Young 2001). These arguments include claims that feminists are spreading a toxic misandry culture that puts men’s health and gender identity in danger (Nathanson and Young 2001). The circulation and application of misandry discourses by MRAs help constitute a collective consciousness of anti-feminist ideology in manosphere communities (Marwick and

⁹ Since 2020, the phenomenal Ueno Chizuko Boom has exerted a huge influence on Chinese digital feminism (Sullivan 2023; Masako 2023). In 2024, Ueno was included by TIME in the 100 most influential people of the year due to her feminist influence in China (Fincher 2024).

Caplan 2018). These discourses try to undermine the legitimacy of feminist politics by depicting men as persecuted by feminism. By formulating an equivalency between misandry and misogyny, misandry is defined as sexism, gender stereotyping, and discrimination against men (Nathanson and Young 2006).

Feminist studies have persuasively argued that the misandry claimed by MRAs is untenable. Misandry lacks misogyny's foundation in "systemic, transhistoric, institutionalised and legislated antipathy" (Flood et al. 2007, 442), and thus cannot constitute the structural oppression of a gender. Instead, the MRA applications of misandry continue problematic negative stereotypes of feminists as angry, extreme men-haters (Moi 2006; Tomlinson 2010). The misandry accusation is thus a stigma (Védie 2021). Not only reactionary but also empirically false, the misandry myth is in fact a reconstruction of patriarchal male domination and misogynistic culture (Marwick and Caplan 2018; Kimmel 2017). One large-scale quantitative research report led by Aífe Hopkins-Doyle brought together five studies working across nine countries to provide evidence that feminists do not hate men. This report reveals that feminist women's attitudes toward men are "no more negative than men's", thus "the label 'man-hater' is at least as accurate if attached to men themselves" (Hopkins-Doyle et al. 2024, 28).

None of my interviewed feminist women exhibited emotions of hatred towards men. However, as exemplified by Donna's words earlier, their attitudes towards men are not friendly either – a conciliation with men, in the terms proposed by Matthew, seems to be a very unlikely choice for them. In 2020s China, public opinions on feminism on social media are becoming increasingly polarised, a process furthered by platform algorithms (Piao et al. 2025). Men and women's gender attitudes are increasingly divided as well (Jiao, Jin, and Shen 2025). This division seems significantly greater amongst Chinese youths compared to past generations (Yang 2023). As Yang Rujun's

report shows, young women are the main promoters of a more thorough gender equality value that questions male primacy and privilege. While women tend to empathise and adopt feminist cultural content, men's reaction towards the same feminist content tends to be anti-feminist and misogynistic (Jiao, Jin, and Shen 2025).

The splitting of gender and political values between men and women is not a phenomenon specific to China. In 2024, *The Financial Times* (Burn-Murdoch 2024) reported that in various regions across the globe, the gender divide among men and women is widening in young generations. An *Ipsos* report across 29 countries also noted the gender gap in political ideologies. Compared to Gen Z women, Gen Z men are more likely to hold conservative attitudes towards promoting equality (Ipsos 2024). Relevant data reports show that American women between 18 and 30 years old are significantly more inclined to liberal ideologies than their male counterparts (Gallup 2024). A similar trend is also observed in Australia, Germany, and the UK (Chowdhury 2024). In East Asia, South Korea's 2022 elections revealed that 59% of young men voted for conservative candidates, while the rate among young Korean women was only 34% (Gong 2024). In other words, the exclusionary attitude towards men embodied by feminists may not be attributed simply to hatred, but conciliation becomes difficult when there are increasingly sharp gender differences in values and political stances.

More importantly, the purpose of feminists' active weaponisation of misandry is part of a feminist confrontation with anti-feminist backlashes and misogynistic culture (Lawrence and Ringrose 2018; Ringrose and Lawrence 2018; Chen and Gong 2023; Hou 2024). In her 2020 book *Moi les hommes, je les déteste (I Hate Men)*, the French feminist writer Pauline Harmange presents one of the best-known examples of feminists claiming the legitimacy of misandry as a "healthy" feminist feeling. Harmange importantly differentiates feminist misandry from the notorious affront of feminist-hating men, by arguing that misandry is a reactive response to misogyny:

“Misandry and misogyny cannot be compared, quite simply because the former exists only in reaction to the latter.” (2000, 32) In the preface to the Chinese translation of *Moi les hommes, je les déteste*, Chloé Delaume offers an explanation that feminist misandrists do not hate men as individuals simply because they are men; but they hate the existing cultural and social systems that create and maintain men in sustaining patriarchy. After it was published, Harmange’s book provoked huge controversy. A French government official condemned it as a promotion of sexism and hate speech and threatened to take legal action to ban the book (Willsher 2020). Similarly, when the Chinese translation of *Moi les hommes, je les déteste* was published in 2023, despite the pressure of book publication censorship, the book encountered resistance and backlash. Like the author Harmange, the Chinese editor and feminist promoters of the book were met with backlash and cyber violence (P. Zhang 2023). The critics flocked to rate the book with low grades and left comments accusing it of stirring up a gender war between men and women. Meanwhile, on the same book review website, its feminist readers commended this same book for being moderate and accurate.

The type of feminist misandry supported by Harmange and many Chinese digital feminists is not a myth. As argued by my interviewee Donna, it is a feminist weapon. This form of misandry requires a different definition from that used by MRAs. Tris Hedges (2024) uses Kate Manne’s misogyny theory to re-interpret and define misandry as “the felt anger, hostility or fear towards the patriarchal social order and its valorisation and/or expression in misogynistic and machismo behaviour” (97). Hedges argues that the reclaiming of feminist misandry would be a politically productive act, allowing an acceptance of feminist anger, which is a totally legitimised feeling that fuels feminist struggles (Lorde 1997). Thus, instead of “hatred”, Hedges adopts Harmange’s approach, defining feminist misandry as a spectrum of “negative feelings” (94) towards the totality of the male sex that stems from the experience of injustice and moral violation (see Chapter 4). For these writers, misandry refers to a series of negative

feelings that arise from experiences of being mistreated, and is thus morally justifiable, psychologically natural, and politically promising.

Before giving any preliminary definition to the political position of misandry in Chinese feminist politics, this thesis starts from the more basic question of what exactly is misandry in Chinese digital feminism. Through historical, empirical, and theoretical investigations in the following chapters, this thesis argues that *yan-nan* (feminist misandry) in Chinese digital feminism is an ordinary affect that reflects the everyday sensibility of living a feminist life in a misogynistic, hostile environment in contemporary China. My analysis of the interviews reveals the complexity of *yan-nan* in contemporary Chinese digital feminism as much more than a simple problematic essentialism or separatism implied in popular discourses. Instead, *yan-nan* as a part of the “men” question needs to be taken as part of the situated feminist knowledge, reflecting important characteristics and dilemmas of contemporary Chinese digital feminism in a post-socialist authoritarian society with neoliberal characteristics. By doing so, I propose that the “ugly” affects of feminist politics are not something to be solved or overcome, but fundamentally crucial. This includes recognising such “ugly”, disturbing affects as ordinary parts of everyday life and gender politics, tied to the uneven distribution of affective burdens produced by the socio-cultural structures of the contemporary gender power system.

Research Method

In this thesis, my exploration of *yan-nan* in Chinese digital feminism aims to unfold how it relates to the gender power dynamics using a mix of empirical and theoretical approaches that I will now outline. For the empirical aspect of my research, 30 participants (14 feminist women, and 16 anti/pro-feminist Chinese men) were recruited

to participate in one-to-one semi-structured interviews on Zoom. More specifically, the two groups of participants were recruited as self-identified Chinese feminist women, and Chinese men who consider themselves familiar with Chinese digital feminism online. My recruitment foregrounded the term *guo-nan* to indicate to prospective participants the kind of questions I would ask. *Guo-nan* (国男) is an abbreviation of “Chinese men” (中国男人). Unlike the neutral term “Chinese men”, *guo-nan* is coined as a sarcastic term. The term is sometimes replaced by the even more negative expression of “蝮蝮” (also pronounced as *guo-nan*), written with the side character of “虫” (meaning worm) to suggest that men are like pests. By emphasising these two categories organising my interview material, I do not intend to assume that Chinese digital feminists are all women, or that being a feminist and a man is inherently incompatible. Instead of a simple gender division, this design is designed to highlight which participants raise “men” as a feminist question, and who responds to Chinese feminist criticisms of “men” as referring to themselves.

The recruitment was processed through the distribution of an online survey from 18 April 2023 to 28 April 2023. As the first stage of recruitment, the online survey mainly functioned as a recruiting and pre-screening tool for this qualitative project. A short online survey with seven simple questions was distributed online through snowballing to ask for people’s attitudes to feminism and towards the online term *guo-nan* (See Appendix 1). As this was always intended to be a qualitative project, the distribution of the online survey mainly functioned as a recruiting tool to introduce the research project to potential interviewees, while also allowing them to sign up voluntarily at the end of the survey if they were interested in exploring the questions in the survey further in an interview. Instead of direct online recruitment, the design of this survey comes from two considerations around the difficulty of recruiting men to talk about feminism: On the one hand, as this project does not only want to recruit Chinese men who are interested in and friendly to feminism, I was looking for range of men’s attitudes and

positions, including those who were vigilant and hostile towards Chinese digital feminism, among those wanting to talk about their experiences of and feelings about feminist *yan-nan*. This indirect recruitment method avoided the potential risks and controversies of posting recruitments in anti-feminist men's online communities about a project that may sound hostile to men. On the other hand, this recruitment survey allowed a pre-screening of the interviewees' stances towards feminism to facilitate a more diverse representation of the sample, specifically the diversity of Chinese men, as their attitudes and self-identifications towards feminism could be complex and even contradictory and resist being classified as simply anti-feminist or pro-feminism.¹⁰

The online survey was distributed on *WeChat* (the main mobile instant messaging application in mainland China) using a snowballing method. Within ten days from April 18 2023 to April 28 2023, I received 370 valid filled-in surveys, with 118 participants expressed an interest in taking the follow-up interview and left their contact methods. For the participants who disclosed their gender-identifications on the survey, 80 (21.6% of the total sample) of them are men, with 38 (47.5%) expressing interview interests; 184 (49.7% of the total sample) are women, with 90 (48.9%) expressing interview interests. There are 5 (1.35% of the total sample) survey participants who selected the "other" gender option, but none indicated interests on participating the interview. Within the 38 men and 90 women who expressed interview interest, 34 men (89.5%) and 74 women (82.2%) indicated that they had heard of the term *guo-nan*, so that they were put in the pool for interviewee selections. The selection of interviewees was then based on the participants' indicated feminist stances on the survey (see Table A below). For participants who are men, considering the complexity of men's self-identified

¹⁰ Many male respondents who selected "I am a feminist" turned out to be anti-feminist during the follow-up interviews. This is in accordance with the finding that many anti-feminist men actually identify themselves as the real feminists or pro-feminists compared to avowed feminists (see Yang, Guo, and Arteel 2023). Men's self-identifications in relation to feminism are more carefully investigated in the individual follow-up interviews discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

position in relation to feminism, the selection criterion attempted to keep diversity as much as possible, so that I reached out to men in each of the indicated identity categories, even though in some cases the participants did not reply (see Table A). For the women’s part, the aim was to recruit self-identified feminist women, so the participants who selected “I am a feminist” and “I am a radical feminist” were contacted based on a simple random sampling. In the end, after making contact through their preferred contact methods indicated on the survey, 16 men and 14 women responded, consented, and participated in the interviews from April 2023 to June 2023. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, each last from 40 minutes to 90 minutes. For ethical considerations, all interviewees are anonymised, each with a randomly assigned pseudonym (See Appendix 2).

	Men		Men (Interview Pool)		Men (Interviewed)		Women		Women (Interview Pool)		Women (Interviewed)	
<i>Total Number of Participants</i>	80		34		16		184		74		14	
a. I am a radical feminist.	0	/	0	/	0	/	8	4%	4	5%	1	7%
b. I am a feminist.	9	11%	7	21%	7	44%	90	49%	48	65%	14	100%
c. I support gender equality.	67	84%	25	74%	11	69%	117	64%	43	58%	/	/
d. I am not interested in feminism.	6	8%	2	6%	0	0%	2	1%	1	1%	/	/
e. I oppose feminism.	5	6%	4	12%	3	19%	2	1%	0	/	/	/
f. I hate feminism.	5	6%	1	3%	0	/	0	/	0	/	/	/
g. Not sure.	5	6%	1	3%	1	6%	1	1%	0	/	/	/

Table A: Participants’ Stances on Feminism Categorised by Gender¹¹

Among the 30 interviewees, the majority of them are between 18-25 years old, living in Tier 1 or New Tier 1 cities in mainland China,¹² and have a high degree of education (see Table B below). It is a defect of snowball recruitment that the representativeness

¹¹ The question about stance on feminism was a multiple-choice question. Therefore, the sum of the numbers in each column does not equal 100%.

¹² The category of residency within mainland China is based the Chinese city tier system. The Tier 1 Cities (一线城市) and New Tier 1 Cities (新一线城市) refer to the most developed metropolitan areas in China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu. Etc.

of this small sample is limited. Yet, these demographic features are consistent with existing findings that Chinese digital feminism largely involves the young urban middle-class who have access, resources, and cultural capitals to utilise social media technologies (Yin and Sun 2021). There are no significant gender differences in the interviewees' levels of education. However, while the majority of both groups are in their twenties, the sample of men (7 of them are over 25 years old) is comparatively older than the sample of women (1 of them is over 25 years). More of the women were located outside mainland China when their interview took place in 2023.

	Men		Women	
Total Number of Participants	16		14	
Age				
18-25	8	50%	13	93%
26-30	7	44%	1	7%
31-40	1	6%	0	0%
Current Residency				
(New) Tier 1 Cities	11	69%	7	50%
Other Urban Regions	1	6%	1	7%
Village/Town Regions	1	6%	0	0%
Outside Mainland China	3	19%	6	43%
Education				
Bachelor's Degree	4	25%	4	29%
Master's Degree	9	56%	9	64%
Doctoral Degree and Above	2	13%	1	7%
Other	1	6%	0	0%

Table B: The Statics Summary of Demography of All Interviewees, Categorised by Gender

The interview data was then analysed and coded on NVivo based on Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's guidelines for thematic analysis, to identify and analyse emerging patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). During the thematic analysis, the two samples were processed separately as two independent datasets as they did not share the same interview questions in the semi-structured interview, being designed to respond to feminist *yan-nan* from different perspectives (the discussion of this data will also be divided into different chapters in this thesis). For example, for the women, as the interviewees all self-identified as feminists, the interview started with the question of how they became a feminist. For the men's interviews, as their stances were more diverse and ambiguous, the interviews started with clarifying their attitude towards

feminism. There were, however, overlapping questions shared by all interviewees, such as exploring their attitude towards feminists' online expression of *yan-nan*. Such shared questions were still analysed separately based on the interviewees' gender self-categorisation, although paying extra attention to the emergence of similar codes/themes.

Thesis Outline

This thesis is situated in and aims to build theoretical dialogues across three major research fields: transnational feminist studies; feminist body and affect studies; and critical men and masculinity studies. I will briefly sketch each of these here and then leave a fuller discussion for the following two chapters.

First, this thesis puts *yan-nan* (misandry) in Chinese digital feminism under a historical and transnational lens, by valuing and considering the intertwining of feminist theories and feminist practices from both local historical Chinese feminist heritage and contexts, and the forms of Western feminisms that influence and shape Chinese feminism from the past to the present. This context and historical based approach takes Chinese digital feminism as primarily a situated knowledge. On the one hand, the transitional perspective in this thesis highlights the local-ness of Chinese feminism by establishing conversations with local pre-socialist and post-socialist feminist theories. Chapter 1, which is a historical review chapter of Chinese feminism's relationship with men since the 20th century, explores the local feminist heritages and situates Chinese digital feminism in the genealogy of producing local feminist theories. On the other hand, contemporary Chinese digital feminism relates to the broader global digital feminism, sometimes categorised as "Fourth Wave" feminism in Western contexts, linked to activism and networking by means of digital media and also particularly marked by the

flashpoint identified as the #MeToo movement (Cochrane 2013). Although the feminist “waves” narrative is rightly contestable (Schuster 2013), the rise of *yan-nan* and Chinese digital feminism cannot be separated from the entwined spread of popular feminism, postfeminist sensibility, and neoliberal values (Banet-Weiser 2018; McRobbie 2004; Tasker and Negra 2007). This relationship will be further elaborated and discussed theoretically in Part 1 (Chapters 1 and 2) and empirically in Part 2 (Chapters 3 and 4).

Second, by emphasizing that Chinese digital feminism needs to be taken as situated knowledge, this thesis also highlights that feminist knowledge and theories are not only produced by contexts but also be lived embodied individuals. Thus, this thesis continues the feminist exploration of what has been called the “affective turn” in late 20th century feminist theory, which sees emotions / affects as a natural, essential part of feminist politics, inspired by affective feminist theorists such as Sara Ahmed (2014; 2010), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), Lauren Berlant (2011), and Clare Hemmings (2015; 2012). In and after this affective turn, feminist thinkers have theorised the feelings and emotions involved in fuelling, signifying, and also contesting oppression (Lorde 1997; Gould 2009; Boler 1999). In particular, I will focus on the supposedly “ugly” side of Chinese digital feminism that foregrounds feelings of vulnerability, hostility, and desperation. I interpret these ugly feelings as “interpretations of predicaments” that “not only render visible different registers of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner” (Ngai 2004, 15). In exploring such negative affects, this thesis also draws directly on the theorisation of bodies and embodied feminist experience explored in corporeal and phenomenological feminist studies from feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir (1989), Iris Marion Young (2005), Johana Oksala (2016) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994). These theoretical frameworks will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2, while the application of affect in feminist *yan-nan* will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 6.

Finally, as a project focused on feminist critical examinations of men and masculinities, this thesis engages with what is known as critical men and masculinity studies, especially with theoretical debates arising from the concept of hegemonic masculinity first coined by Raewyn Connell (2005). In adopting an embodied approach, this study necessarily also resonates with current discussions of men's affect and subjectivities in negotiations with masculinity culture and feminist scrutiny (Waling 2019b; Beasley 2015; Berggren 2014). This aspect will be introduced and discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, which specifically focus on men's responses to feminism.

I will utilise these frameworks to analyse my interviews and the context in which they took place using a tripartite structure, with each part composed of two chapters. The first part (Chapters 1 and 2) introduces the background and theoretical framework of this research. Part Two (Chapters 3 and 4) focuses on discussion and theoretical analysis of feminist women's *yan-nan* and Part Three (Chapters 5 and 6) focuses on discussion and theoretical analysis of the Chinese men's responses to *yan-nan*. I conclude this introduction with a brief sketch of each chapter.

In Part One, Chapter 1 is a historical review of Chinese local feminist movements from the early 20th century to the 2020s. In contrast to focusing on the "women question" (Barlow 2004) in the history of Chinese modern feminism, and work that often concentrates on the transformation and discipline of women, my historical review foregrounds the constant marginalisation of the "men question". I consider here the importance of critical enquiry into the construction of men's gender subjectivity and male domination (Zhong 2000), seeing this as a crucial blind spot for local Chinese feminist struggles. From the Enlightenment and socialist periods to the post-socialist contemporary China of neoliberal governmentality, this chapter reveals a drastic transformation of local feminism's relationship with men and the nation. Unlike digital

feminisms today, the image of “angry feminist monsters” was not representative in the mainstream discourses on Chinese local women’s movements in the 20th century. Through investigating this curious transformation, this chapter highlights the socio-political dilemmas for feminists in raising the “men question” and the significance of the rise of the “men question” in the 2020s.

Chapter 2 outlines the necessity of using an embodied approach to studying Chinese digital feminism. This chapter argues that insufficient attention is paid to embodied subjectivity in existing Chinese digital feminism scholarship, which consequently often seems to imagine a “no-body” feminism. Such an approach sidesteps the importance of studying feminism as situated knowledge produced by embodied individuals. This chapter offers the alternative of seeing bodies as a productive site for feminist politics by drawing on feminist phenomenology, corporeal feminist theories, and feminist affect studies.

Part Two turns to discussion of the empirical data from the interviews with feminist women. Chapter 3 turns to the question of feminist women’s subjectivity and its affects based on an analysis of these interviews. To understand Chinese digital feminism as a highly individual-based feminism without conventional collective activism in the post-socialist Chinese context, this chapter develops Rosalind Gill’s concept of postfeminist sensibility (2007; 2016) by arguing that Chinese digital feminism features a *feminist sensibility*. Within this feminist sensibility, individual women’s embodied feelings, gender consciousness, and self-practice become the key means of confirming an embodied feminist identity and doing/living with everyday feminist politics. This chapter consequently rejects an indiscriminate application of “postfeminism” to Chinese digital feminism, highlighting the complexity of the lived subjectivity of individual feminist women longing for a radical cultural and institutional transformation in contemporary China.

Chapter 4 explores a specific feminist feeling that is crucial to *yan-nan*: feminist disgust. In this Chapter, drawing on Bonnie Honig's (2021) feminist reading of *Bacchae*, the great ancient Greek tragedy by Euripides, I argue that the feminist disgust apparent in *yan-nan* is an affective politics of feminist refusal. The chapter offers a close observation and interpretation of the feminist interviewees' descriptions of *guo-nan* (the despicable Chinese men) and the role of disgust in presenting "greasy" men's bodies as an abjection (Kristeva 1982). Meanwhile, this disgust towards men is also an affective self-struggle of refusing to become the "women" constructed by and for the patriarchal heteronormative culture (Beauvoir 1989). In revealing the intensity of disgust in my feminist interviewees' interactions with men, this chapter reveals the bodily affective loads in everyday feminist politics that have long been marginalised and underrated by the public and feminist academic research as merely an individual matter to be overcome. In the end, feminist disgust uncovers the structural dilemma experienced by Chinese digital feminist women, while signifying a strong affective political commitment that feminist bodies are very connected to the disgusting world: a world that cannot be avoided so must be changed.

The next chapter turns to the men's dataset by discussing the interviewed men's responses to feminist *yan-nan*. Part Three follows a similar structure to Part Two, with Chapter 5 first exploring the problem of men's gender subjectivity in encountering feminisms. Here, I develop Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity (2005) by reinterpreting hegemonic masculinity as the felt promise that a stable subject position is inherent in being a man. Responding to the phenomenon of men being harshly criticised by digital feminists, and through a dual process of de-gendering men and re-gendering themselves, the Chinese men I interviewed reaffirm their manhood while constructing an ultimately stable position for the "good man" that no criticisms can touch. By investing in the belief that there is always a place to be a good man, they can

bypass feminist *yan-nan* and ultimately strengthen the felt promise of a masculine position underpinned by a hierarchy that privileges hegemonic masculinity.

In the last chapter, paralleling the discussion of feminist disgust in Chapter 4, I turn to the specific uncomfortable feeling of guilt in men's responses to feminism. I observed the prominence of this feeling not only in the responses of my (profeminist and antifeminist) men interviewees, but also pervasively in the Chinese and non-Chinese men's movements that are key aspects of the context for these interviews. Drawing on Young (2011) and on Hannah Arendt's political theories on individual and collective guilt in structural injustice, this chapter argues that men's feeling of guilt, in response to feminism, is embedded in a liability logic that eventually justifies men's inaction in feminist politics. By considering men's bodies as "oriented" (Ahmed 2020) towards guilt by the socio-cultural systems around them, I argue that guilt implies an opposite tendency to feminist disgust. While disgust suggests an embodied subject that cannot be separated from the world where it is living, men's guilt leads to a rejection of affective connection with the world these men share with feminists and women. In the end, by comparing feminist disgust and men's guilt, this chapter highlights the affective cost of deviation that functions as affective orientation device in sustaining the existing gender orders.

Part One

Chapter 1

Raising the “Men” Question in Chinese Local Feminisms

Not a man in the flesh, unable to walk among them;
but my heart is stronger, more fierce than a man's!

Qiu Jin (1903)¹³

How can he be so average, yet so full of confidence?

Yang Li (2020)¹⁴

The Old Women. The New Women. Mother of Citizens. Modern girls. Iron ladies. Bad women. Good women. Compared to these familiar slogans and touchstones, have men ever become a question in Chinese feminism? In among the constant stream of women questions, the men question haunts my mind every time I read the history of Chinese women's movements in the 20th century.

In *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (2004), Tani Barlow notes that “women” (*nüxing* / *funü*) in Chinese feminism is a historical catachresis. There is no stable referent for this term, she argues. But the absence of a referent is also what makes the term meaningful, as it captures the contingency of the women as a historical notion

¹³ Qiu Jin (秋瑾) (1875 – 1907) was an anti-Qing Chinese feminist revolutionary.

¹⁴ Yang Li (杨笠) is a Chinese stand-up comedian, gaining particular fame from her performance in a Chinese stand-up comedy show *Rock & Roast*. Her joke satirising Chinese men for being “average-yet-confident” (普信男), referred to in the introduction, went viral on the Chinese Internet in 2020.

under all kinds of competing ideological forces. From the turn of the 20th century, when feminism was introduced and promoted in China, it began to be entangled with nationalism in the context of Western imperialism's expansion and a period of crisis for the Chinese nation. On the premise of empowering the nation instead of women, the "women question" (妇女问题, which is also translated as "women problem") was immediately brought to the forefront of the local Chinese women's movement. In the modern Chinese historical context, while the "women question" initially addressed the dominated status of Chinese women under federal patriarchy, it soon developed into scrutinising the problems of Chinese women, with claims that this was because of the general ignorance of Chinese women that the nation was falling into weakness and poverty (Wang 1999). Efforts to educate, transform, and cultivate Chinese women began at that time as parts of a Chinese modernisation project (Liu, Karl, and Ko 2013; Rofel 1999).

In contrast to the "women question", the main purpose of this chapter is to illustrate why raising the "men" question matters for Chinese feminism, starting by outlining the historical and social contexts of such a question would involve for Chinese feminism from the late 19th century to the 2020s. My subsequent review of the Chinese feminist history of the last century reveals the question of "men" as a structural question about male domination and the systematic downplaying of women and femininity. This "men" question has always been there throughout the modern history of Chinese feminism, while its criticisms have been constantly marginalised and erased during male-dominated nationalist revolutionaries and socialist reforms. Overall, this chapter argues that contemporary Chinese digital feminisms who create "gender antagonism" today should not be seen simply as an outcome of the influence of a global feminism trend in the so-called "the Fourth Wave" (Munro 2013; Cochrane 2013). It is also key to a continuing story about local Chinese feminism, and in the dynamics of global and inter-Asian feminist interactions.

Revisiting Men's Roles in Chinese Feminist History

Chinese modern feminist movements were long led by men. This is a controversial statement in the field of Chinese feminist history. The academic contentions around this statement centre on how to critically interpret and analyse the relationship between Chinese feminism and men since the late 19th century. On the one hand, scholars emphasise that such a statement overshadows the agency and important constant efforts made by female feminist activists (Song and Gao 2022; Ma 2003). Such marginalisation has become part of the ideological construction of the political myth that it was the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that granted liberation to Chinese women, as the unquestionable saviour, thus compromising women's subjectivity in Chinese feminist movements (Wang 1999).

On the other hand, the controversy of this statement also stems from a curious but related historical phenomenon that is different from many Western feminist histories. Modern Chinese feminist movements have retained a close relationship with elite male intellectuals and male revolutionaries for a long time (Liu, Karl, and Ko 2013). Throughout the 20th century, Chinese men seldom became the critical object of feminist movements as a gendered group partly for this reason. Their active participation and even important leadership in Chinese feminism at least suggest that Chinese modern feminist movement has not been a pure women's movement driven by women's gender conscious awareness (Meng and Dai 2018). As Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua note, Chinese women's subjectivity and gender experiences have always remained a blind spot, as women's liberation and equality was raised and guided by the collective force of modern nationalist revolutionaries and then the party-state: "In between these two points, there were no wide grassroots bottom-up women's liberation 'movements' in the societal sense." (25, *my translation*) Meanwhile, this incompleteness also means

that men's subjectivity and their roles in gender power relations have also been a blind spot for Chinese modern feminist movements, even though a search for men's modern masculine subject position has always been key to men's participation in feminism (Wang 2005; Zhong 2000; Lei 2021).

Inspired by the insights from these local feminist historical scholars, this section is thus a reflection on the history of Chinese women's movements, with a specific critical examination of the role of Chinese men and masculinities. From seeing men as pioneers, saviours, and comrades, to the realisation of men as not only different but, in the end, a problem, this historical revision outlines a linear transformation of Chinese feminism's relationship with men.

“Men are Pioneers”: Introducing Feminism at the Turn of the 20th Century

The emergence of the Chinese feminist movement at the turn of the 20th century was a backdrop to the weakening Qing government and the escalating colonisation crisis. The fact that feminism was first translated and introduced to China at this time was due to the passion of nationalist male intellectuals. Since the late 19th century, the dominant arguments on women's roles centred on two main themes: women as “female Chinese citizens” (女国民) and women as “mothers of Chinese citizens” (国民之母). The first argument posited that, as half of the citizens, women should bear the responsibility of contributing to national empowerment. The second eugenics proposition, in the well-known phrase “enrich the country and strengthen the breeds” (富国强种), emphasised that women needed to be civilised in order to fulfill their roles as mothers of the Chinese nation. The education and cultivation of Chinese women was thus raised as a means of saving the Chinese nation from the colonisation crisis. For example, Liang Qichao, a prominent late Qing reformist, included a famous chapter in his 1898 reform proposal

advocating for women's civil education. While such arguments helped provide women with opportunities to receive an education, with a new level of mobility rights at the time, Liang's rhetoric also asserted that the nation was weakened by women being too dependent on men instead of being a productive labour force in social economy. This narrative also framed women specifically as the reason for China's failure in global modernisation. In contrast, male figures, especially "civilised" male intellectuals, were depicted as visionary pioneers.

The power to interpret and communicate feminism was thus in the hands of educated Chinese men. Feminist materials were first translated and introduced to China by male intellectuals studying abroad in Europe and Japan. The first two Western feminist articles introduced to China – John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Herbert Spencer's *The Rights of Women* (1851) – were translated by the male scholar Ma Junwu (Song 2016). However, these translations were misleading from the beginning, as Ma incorporated his own understanding on women and gender into his translations often at the cost of distorting the original meanings (Song 2016). Although European suffragettes were still fighting for women's rights against social and legal pressures, Ma's translations depicted the West as an idealised realm of gender relations where equality and civilisation had been achieved (Song 2016). These portrayals profoundly shaped Chinese perceptions of modern European society and provided prototypes for subsequent feminist discourse in China. Additionally, faced with the urgent need to address China's practical problems, male intellectuals often reinterpreted English texts to align with local circumstances, sometimes distorting their original meanings (Wang and Ko 2016). This specific localisation process allowed male perspectives to dominate feminist discourse, often concealing the inherent gender conflicts in the source material. Such arguments, rooted in male-centric views, frequently culminated in critiques of Chinese women's perceived ignorance and conservatism (Ko 2005; Wang 2005).

Jin Tianhe's *Women's Bell* (女界钟) in 1903 was one example of this underlying insistence on male superiority. This book is recognised as the earliest publication of a local written feminism manifesto in China (Liu et al. 2013). Jin's writing summarised and highlighted several topics around Chinese women's empowerment, including women's morality, character, capability, education, social rights, political participation, and marriage. As an educated Chinese man, Jin presented Chinese men in this book as progressive social reformers, who have felt "a ray of sunlight pierces the curtains, opens their eyes, pricks their nostrils and reaches straight into their brains" (Liu et al. 2013, 208). On the contrary, Chinese women are depicted as still "knowing nothing of the ideas of equality between men and women, or ideas of women's participation in politics ... in civilised nations." (208). For this reason, the responsibility for "rescuing" women fell on the shoulders of male intellectuals. In comparing modern Europe with feudal China, the manifesto is an open expression of Chinese male intellectuals' grievances and consequently the injury to their male esteem of being Chinese men under the threats of Western imperialism. Jin imagined himself as a civilised white man, walking with his white wife and children on European streets with happiness and ease. In this imaginary hierarchy in a Chinese male intellectual's mind, European white men were superior symbols of civilisation, while Chinese women were placed at the bottom, symbolizing the uncivilised nature of the Chinese nation. Jin pictured a "civilised" modern family in these terms: an intellectual Chinese man can discuss his political passion with an educated wife who also helps him prepare his study desk and educate their children.

While the male superiority embedded in these texts and related action was sharply felt and questioned by some female activists at the time, the dominant view among female activists and revolutionists during the early 20th century was that women should be as capable as men to become qualified Chinese citizens. These women represented

themselves as “female heroes” (*nü hao jie* 女豪杰), advocating for women to participate in the country’s salvation by actively joining social reform movements and the military force. At the time, these early nationalist feminists promoted a new type of femininity of *xiong-qiang-mei* (雄强美, literally means “male, strong, beautiful”), arguing for Chinese women to be masculinised and passionate like men (Lei 2013). Qiu Jin was one of the most famous and influential of these figures. Born into the upper class as a daughter of a government official, Qiu Jin became active in the Chinese feminist career after studying in Japan in 1904 and was eventually executed by the Qing government in 1907. Throughout her activist life, she left plenty of passionate poems and essays to express her sorrow and anger at women being unable to fight for the Chinese nation like men and appealing to her female “fellows” to throw away their female clothes as well as their habits of dependence. Qiu also gave herself another new name: *Jingxiong* – the literal meaning of which is “comparable to men”.



Figure 1 A portrait of Qiu Jin, wearing male clothes and holding a dagger

These early nationalist feminists like Qiu Jin were also fiercely opposed to women being positioned as educated wives and “Mothers of the nation” in the dominant male intellectuals’ arguments (Hong and Mangan 2001). To convey their determination and

passion, they compare themselves with historical female warriors like Liang Hongyu and Hua Mulan from Chinese stories.¹⁵ Yet these stories cast a disturbing shadow on the fate of the feminist movement in the early 20th century. In Mulan's story, after winning the war, Mulan dismissed herself from the army and changed back to her female costume. After the victory of the 1911 Revolution, the new Nationalist Party in turn refused to include gender equality in governing principles. As later feminist protests also failed, the first women's suffragette movement in modern China arrived at a disappointing end (Edwards and Zhou 2011).

“Men are Saviors”: The New Cultural Movement and the Loss Fate of Nora from the 1910s to the 1930s

In the early 1910s, feminist thought and women's movements in China experienced a significant development. Impelled by nationalist passion, a significant number of educated young female students joined social movements with men during the May Fourth Movement.¹⁶ Feminist claims raised at the time continued to argue for women to be acknowledged and respected as modern Chinese citizens equal to men (Wang 1999). These feminist requests reflected a similar dilemma in Mulan's story. For women, to become an enlightened modern Chinese citizen means to become a modern “man” (Wang 1999). It was also during this period that the view that Chinese women need to be rescued as passive oppressed victims from feudal patriarchal China reached its peak. This is what Dorothy Ko (1994) calls the May Fourth perspective on women. In their

¹⁵ Liang Hongyu (梁红玉) and Hua Mulan (花木兰) are both famous female warriors in ancient Chinese histories, and their stories have been widely adapted into traditional Chinese operas and folk stories.

¹⁶ The 1919 Chinese May Fourth Movement was large scale student-lead nationalist movement that made significant impact on Chinese social and cultural aspects. The movement was initiated by university students in Beijing and then spread to the national scale, with the joint of industrial strikes by workers and local stores.

efforts to “liberate” women from their traditional family, educated male activists again took the role of the saviors.

Compared to the late Qing period, at this time feminism received more social attention and public support as a result of the increase in national student movements. Among the participants were many young female students who joined the marches, forming a new social group of educated, modern women keenly aware of their gender identity. These were the “new women” (新女性) influenced by the ideals of enlightenment (Barlow 1991, 199; Chan 2020). A representative symbol of this “new woman” was another import: Nora, the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House*, introduced to China during the early New Cultural Movement. But the Chinese interpretation of Nora diverged significantly from Ibsen’s original vision (Song 2011). The adaptation of Nora’s story again exhibited the process of what was lost and produced in the localisation of Western feminist thoughts. In Ibsen’s original play, Nora’s awakening aligned with Western feminist calls for women’s independence from familial and marital constraints. When adapted in China, however, Nora was interpreted as a symbol of rebellion against the feudal patriarchal authority imposed by Chinese parents, particularly opposing arranged marriages and advocating for romantic freedom (Song 2011). This transformed the character’s core struggle from a gender issue to an intergenerational conflict. Instead of seeking personal independence, she actively sought romantic love and willingly entered a marriage with a man under the claim of seeking women’s freedom.

While the slogan of marriage freedom reflected a newfound awareness among Chinese women regarding autonomy over their bodies and desires, Nora also became a desired object for male intellectuals as the ideal partner for progressive educated men. On the one hand, in contrast to the modernised “new women” like Nora, the “old-style women” (旧式女性) were still viewed as problematic objects. These women, typically raised in

conservative families and subject to traditional Confucian ideas and education, including foot binding and arranged marriage, faced tragic outcomes in their unions with “new style” male intellectuals. When such men became disillusioned with their wives’ traditional lifestyles, these “old-style women” were at risk of being abandoned or forced to transform themselves into “new women” with cruel body transformation – such as unbinding their bound feet – and often with denial of her dignity and agency (Ko 1994). On the other hand, the experiences of the new “Noras” who entered romantic marriages with male intellectuals were often marked by disillusionment. At least, female writers during this period depicted post marriage life as fraught with disappointment and frustration (Song 2011; Zhang 2007). When the passion of romantic love dissipates, the lives of these women were reduced to endless demands of housework, while unfaithful husbands pursued new “Noras” without remorse. As Song Jianhua (2011) notes, ultimately, “Chinese Noras walked out from their homes to find ‘liberation,’ but in the end, they ‘liberated’ men instead of themselves” (126).

Educated young men’s passion for “liberating” and transforming Noras is a reflection of the anxiety of Chinese men in a time of national crisis. Male characters grappling with financial crises and anxieties about their masculinity were common themes in novels of the 1920s and 1930s (Zhang 2007). Economic turmoil exacerbated by the global economic crisis and the protracted Japanese invasion further deteriorated the Chinese economy during the 1930s. With factories closing and national businesses collapsing, Chinese men faced significant job insecurity (Zhang 2007). The resulting anxiety was compounded by the prevailing belief in a hierarchy of civilisations and the influence of social Darwinism amid tense international relations. Consequently, social movements advocating for women to “return home” emerged twice during the 1930s and 1940s. The progressive discourse on women’s liberation that characterised the New Cultural Movement was replaced by rhetoric promoting traditional gender roles, emphasizing women’s duties as obedient wives. By the time the Nationalist

Government launched the New Life Movement in 1934, the figure of “Nora” had become stigmatised as a symbol of irresponsibility and immorality (Cai 2017; Edwards 2012). Public discourse now widely labelled these modern women as “whores” for their adoption of Western fashion including more revealing clothing, while also blaming them for harming the national economy by purchasing foreign products (Tang 2017). Ultimately, Nora walked out but found her home or liberation nowhere.

“Men are Comrades”: The Socialist Revolution and The Mao Era

In the late 1920s and 1930s, under the strategic encouragement of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), there was a powerful push towards “mobilising women’s walk-out” (动员女性出走). Scholars like Cai Jie and Song Jianhua describe this as the second walk out of Chinese Noras (Cai 2017, Song 2011). While the first walk out aimed at embracing marriage freedom and romance, Nora’s second walk out guided her towards socialist revolutions (Song 2011).

In turning ‘left’ to socialism, feminist intellectuals of this period, like Ding Ling, constituted a group of “female revolutionaries” (Zhang 2016). The determination of female revolutionaries to walk out was driven by the ambition that women should not indulge in romantic fantasies. Individual enjoyment including the pursuit of romantic love had to be sacrificed for the greater cause of national salvation. While male writers of the time often depicted modern women as alluring and desirable, female socialist writers displayed a strong commitment to rejecting romantic entanglements in favour of dedicating themselves to revolutionary careers (Yang 2006). In the early stage of Chinese socialism, this rejection was, at least in part, a deliberate choice by many female intellectuals, including women such as Xiang Jingyu and Ding Ling. These feminists came to understand that, recognising the failure of Nora’s first walk out, true

empowerment for women could not be achieved through marriage and sexual liberation alone (Barlow 2004).

Yet, once again, any broaching of the men question was overshadowed by socialist revolutionary passion. The economic hardships of the 1930s and 1940s fuelled male anxieties about unemployment and their diminishing roles (Zhang 2007). As national capitalism developed, working conditions for factory workers and rural farmers worsened, compounding their insecurities. Labourers and ambitious yet unfulfilled intellectuals together represented a significant portion of the proletariat, and both groups were grappling with the loss of their manhood (Zhang 2007). The socialist revolution provided an opportunity to reclaim masculinity by redefining identity through class struggle. By embracing their roles as proud proletarians, men's shame at being oppressed and humiliated by bourgeois figures transformed into a narrative of rightful defiance (Zhang 2007). During the 1930s, for example, the Chinese left-wing writers' union, composed predominantly of male writers, contributed to this new masculine ideal through literature that celebrated the integrity of working-class men while condemning the upper-class male archetype for its cruelty and hypocrisy. This dynamic also extended to portrayals of socialist heroism, which was embodied by the literary fashion of "revolution plus love" theme among the left-wing writers (Liu 2003). In this left-wing literary theme, revolutionary male characters regained manhood through dedication to the socialist cause. As Liu Jianmei puts this, "revolution came to define masculine ideals" (Liu 2003, 87). Such depictions reinforced a narrative in which a man's loyalty to the socialist Party legitimised his masculine worth so fully as to replace his traditional role as the family's economic provider.

Such shifts did not disrupt an underlying male social dominance. Instead, power hierarchies within the Party substituted class-based gender power structures. The inheritance of a gender power structure within the Party is revealed in the writing of

socialist female writers such as Ding Ling. During the 1930s and 1940s, the depiction of male characters in this female literature shifted away from desirable, handsome social activists to despicable hypocrites. While male revolutionaries initially replaced intellectuals as the ideal lover figure during the early stage of the socialist revolution, this ideal was soon shattered during wartime as male portrayals became increasingly negative in female literature (Zhang 2007). In these women's writings, political power within the Party was revealed to be intertwined with sexual power. Ding Ling's works, such as her short novels *Inside the Hospital* (1941), *Night* (1942), and the essay *Some Thoughts on the March Eighth Festival*, illuminated the dilemmas faced by female socialists: being treated as disposable sexual objects and fearing abandonment by their cadre husbands. Another short novel, *The Concerns of Liping*, written by Moye, depicts a young woman forsaking her boyfriend to endure a painful marriage to an older, "more progressive" Party official. Both authors faced political repercussions for these critiques during Mao's 1942 Rectification Movement, which was a significant thought-reform campaign to reinforce inner-party discipline (Teiwes 1976).

This gender problem was not solved with the establishment of the new People's Republic of China (PRC), even though the principle of "men-women equality" was inscribed into the basic state policies (Min 2011). During the early years of the PRC, women's emancipation was still often utilised and marginalised to serve the broader social project of economic recovery and class emancipation (Sui and Guo 2022). During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the gender policy under Mao's leadership was not gender equality but closer to gender sameness that exemplified masculinity as a standard proletarian quality. Under such policies, Chinese women were recognised as undeveloped human resources that needed to be taken out of the home and integrated into social collective production (Hershatter 2011). The new feminine ideal during the socialist period was a genderless rural labourer, an "iron girl" who was physically strong. In common representations during the socialist era, the popular image of the

“iron girl” was tanned, dressed in simple clothes that facilitated her work, and looked straight into the bright future of communism with her confident, enthusiastic gaze.



Figure 2 “Strive for an abundant harvest, amass grain” (1973)

On the surface, Chinese iron girls were men’s equals in taking roles in heavy economic production. However, a gender-based division of labour persisted in both public and private spheres. Gail Hershatter’s oral histories of this period reveals that women were still the primary providers of housework, while in collective workplaces, they were assigned tasks requiring lesser physical strength and thus earned fewer contribution points (Hershatter 2011). These disadvantages implied that during the early establishment of socialist China, women were never fully become “as same as men”. For practical reasons, women had to exist to fill the gaps in domestic labour. For ideological reasons, “women” had to be presented as a complement to “men” to signify the unit of a nationwide collective term: the “Chinese people” (Wang 2016).

“Men are Different”: The 1980s’ Social Economic Transformation and the Rediscovery of Gender

Since the 1980s, with the launch of the capitalist shift that transformed Chinese society, wide social appeals calling for greater attention to gender difference started to emerge in Chinese society. 1978 marked a significant turning point for contemporary China as the economic reforms led by Deng Xiaoping introduced a capitalist shift that transformed Chinese society. Alongside this economic transformation, the relationship between Chinese feminism and men also changed.

One such change was a new visibility for female intellectuals pervasively expressing their dislike of masculine traits and tried to distinguish them from the female body. For previous feminist activists, during the early 20th century, fighting, protesting, and working like men was a key theme in feminist argument. Men with admirable masculine traits were not only seen as leaders and pioneers to respect but also models for women to imitate. This tradition ended in the 1980s. The new emphasis on gender difference encouraged women to pay more attention to how their experiences were different from men. For feminist intellectuals, this “rediscovery” of gender happened together with the introduction of Western feminist thoughts after the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW). Theories of femininity and female body experience from Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva furthered the introduction of the concept of “gender” and Western gender theories into post-socialist China. From then, Chinese feminists started calling for the re-discovery of women as a distinct gender category (Dai 1999). In other words, although Chinese feminist movements had been operating since the late 19th century, it was not until the end of the 20th century – after gender equality was inscribed in the new Chinese legal constitutions – that Chinese feminist women started to widely develop and discuss their gender consciousness in public discourses (Wang and Du 2003).

On the other hand, this was also the first time in contemporary Chinese history that male intellectuals publicly stood on the opposite side – agent women’s empowerment.

Men's interests were no longer focused on promoting women's liberation. Instead, they openly or implicitly rejected feminism (Dai 1999). While Chinese feminism was tightly connected and equated with the revival of the nation, 1980s feminism predominantly evoked negative memories of the "iron girl", a charmless image representing the political failure and the collective pain during the socialist collectivisation. For post-socialist China, a powerful woman changed to become a symbol of the tortuous past instead of the promising future. Paradoxically, the opposite argument was also raised during this period, i.e. that Chinese women were much more powerful than men, bringing harm to the Chinese nation. The statement, known as *yin sheng yang shuai* (阴盛阳衰), claimed that the genderless policy of Mao's era had mistakenly made women too strong so that men were emasculated (Zhong 2000). Since then, searching for Chinese manhood and men's legitimate subject position on the global stage has become a core theme in post-socialist era. This searching for Chinese manhood will be further elaborated in Chapter 5.

Such attempts to rediscover the difference between men and women in post-socialist China constituted the resurgence of patriarchal family values and binary gender roles based on an essentialised division of masculinity and femininity (Rofel 1999; Wallis 2015). Similar to the 1930s and 1940s, the dismantling of the state-planned economy in the 1980s led to widespread unemployment, triggering a third wave of calls for women to "return home". Women were expected to retreat to domestic roles and re-embrace traditional femininity as wives and mothers. In the 21st century, the cultural stigmatisation of career women became an even more pervasive phenomenon, positioning career women as attempting to occupy men's territory and sacrificing their femininity. Women's bodies after the Chinese economic reform were not just instrumentally manipulated under the political appeals of the nation's revival, but also started to be sexualised and consumed in the capitalist market (Zheng 2009; Ma 2024). Meanwhile, dominant masculine ideals also shifted again, back towards the image of

the able-responsible family breadwinners and now also upholding a transnational business masculinity that exemplified men's capability to earn and to consume (Song and Lee 2010; Hird and Louie 2016; Wong 2020).

The “Men” Question in Chinese Digital Feminisms

Following this brief history of 20th century Chinese feminism, this section now turns to Chinese digital feminism and the “men” question it is raising. The rise of Chinese digital feminism became prominent after the #MeToo movement in the late 2010s. In contrast to their local feminist predecessors, digital feminists in China sharply raise the “men” question by openly addressing the systematic problems of men's domination in both institutions and cultural activities, as well as individual men's roles and responsibilities in structural gender inequality experienced by women in everyday life settings (Zhang and Mu 2024; Meng and Literat 2024; Chen and Gong 2023). These feminist online practices often rely on negative discursive representations of men to complain about and respond to women's everyday encounters with male supremacy and sexism (Xu and Liu 2024). Deploying both sarcasm and the radical neologisms referred to in the introduction, these online feminist critiques sometimes lead to open mockery and harsh public criticism of men. In addition to feminist online critiques of male-dominated gender ideology, the “men” question also appears in the disputes of feminism's relationship with men and male feminist participates in contemporary China (Liu 2021; Di 2023). Recent studies have revealed the widespread feminist distrust of pro-feminist men on social media (Ji 2023) and the increasing “MacKinnon's paradigm” – as summarised by Hou Lixian (2023, 349), a depiction of powerful men against powerless women – in dominant digital feminist narratives. This hostility towards men is a distinctive feature contrasting with the tendencies of 20th-century Chinese feminism. Taking that historical background into account, this section outlines a few important

aspects of the contemporary feminist context to help understand the local characteristics and meanings of digital feminists' raising the "men" question.

The Post-Socialist China-West Opposition: Lacking a Local Feminist Language

First of all, I have suggested thus far that a critical examination of Chinese men as a gender category and their role in the relations of gender power has long been absent in local feminist movements. Unlike Chinese women, who have been constantly raised to see themselves as a problematic gender category, one that needs to be transformed and/or mobilised, Chinese men have mostly been seen as neutral gender-less citizens facing challenges based on national crisis, modernisation, and class (Lei 2022). The political consequence of this is that local Chinese feminism, for a long time, failed to challenge men's systematic domination within patriarchal political institutions. At the same time, this failure also leads to a lack of feminist language for addressing male domination in both political practices and local Chinese gender theories.

Curiously, the barriers to raising the men question for Chinese feminism come first from the basic problem of whether "Western" feminist theories of gender and male domination are applicable to the Chinese context. After the 1995 Beijing FWCW, the first difficulties faced by theorists in Chinese gender studies was the introduction and application of gender to the local Chinese context. Using the theoretical tools of Western gender theory, many of the theoretical efforts at that time tried to use gender to name and recognise women's situations in post-socialist China. This was a political attempt to respond to the post-socialist feminist backlash and the re-domestication of women into family and private spheres (Wang and Du 2003). This introduction of gender theories led to the emergence of women's studies as a discipline in post-socialist China. Yet, during this local theorisation, the question was raised whether the men-

women dichotomy that had long structured Western gender theory was applicable to China. As some have argued, the modern sense of men and women in China is a product of Westernisation during the Chinese modernisation process (Song 2004; Barlow 1991). A key element of this argument has been that there are no corresponding words for masculinity and femininity in the traditional Chinese language (Song 2004). Tani Barlow's historical study of ideas about women in China also reveals that the construction of Chinese feminists' gender subjectivity during the early 20th century was based on an interpretation of this gender dualism, introduced from the West and more specifically 19th century Western versions of the woman question (Barlow 1991). From this point of view, these discussions sometimes led to an implication that the binary gender opposition of men/women was a Western colonisation product, which sometimes verged on a strange orientalist fetish. While it is undeniably true that modern society and modern gender orders are historically produced in the context of Western imperialism and colonisation processes (Connell 1998), the local Chinese gender order, from the ancient period to the modern era, has also been undeniably planted by a patriarchy with its local characteristics (Ebrey 2003; Gao 2003; Mann 2011). For example, the traditional Confucianism doctrines on women's obedience (one of which is well known as the *sancong side* 三从四德¹⁷) have been deeply deployed in the ancient Chinese patriarchal structure, and are still asserting influences in gender notions in contemporary China (Fang 2021). Some of the attempts to re-discover Chinese gender as more inclusive and non-binary idea – including some attempts to develop a so-called “Confucianism feminism” (Rosenlee 2023) – can generate tensions with women's actual experiences of Chinese patriarchy, leading to difficulties of theorising men's domination and hegemony in the local Chinese historical context. The consequence is that there is a lack of appropriate local feminist languages to accurately address the

¹⁷ *Sancong side* 三从四德, translated as the “Three Obedience and Four Virtues”, is one of the most influential Confucianist doctrines on women's behaviours and roles in traditional Chinese society. The doctrine defines women as dependent on men throughout their lifetime, by demanding that women should obey their fathers, husbands, and sons, and take care of the domestic housework (Gao 2003).

“men” question without falling back into the rhetorical controversy of a Western / Chinese distinction.

The establishment of Chinese local women’s studies as an independent discipline in the 1980s did “[create] a space for women” (Li and Zhang 1994), while also inevitably associating gender and the challenges of gendered power relations only with women. As indicated by Song Shaopeng (2018), the key feature of Chinese women’s subjectivity and gender consciousness in post-socialist China is that they are primarily established in negotiation with the state instead of in negotiation over power relations with men. Thus, according to Li Xiaojiang, Song Shaopeng and other critical socialist Chinese feminist scholars who importantly contributed to the foundation of Chinese women’s studies, the “separation” and the development of women’s study in China is primarily a separation from the state-dominated women’s liberation and the ideological state discourses of women and women’s roles (Song 2018; Spakowski 2018). In this theoretical pathway, the pivot point for Chinese women’s studies is women’s relation with the state and the socialist past, as Western feminist theories of gender too often simplified or neglected the socialist past and “obscured the actual experience of Chinese women in a socialist context” (Spakowski 2018, 566). Therefore, Spakowski concludes that the core feature of this local critical socialist stance is “the rejection of gender as the main category of analysis in women studies” (Spakowski 2018, 566). One consequence of this tendency, however, is that investigations of Chinese women’s gendered situations seldom focused on the relationship with men and masculinities.

As Chinese gender studies have for a long time been dominated by women’s studies, men and masculinity studies (MMS) continue to be a relatively less explored field in Chinese gender studies (Lei 2022). This limited attention to men as a gender category in China has improved in recent decades, although critical studies of men and masculinities (CSMM) are still rare. This means that even within the field of studying

Chinese men and masculinities, men's roles in local gender power dynamics are rarely the subject of critical feminist scrutiny. In local Chinese MMS, both Louie Kam (2002) and Lei Jun (2022) argue against juxtaposing the question of Chinese masculinity with patriarchal gender oppression and argue that Chinese masculinity requires intersectional approaches that also take race and class into consideration. Their emphasis centres on arguing that the Chinese men question can never be simply about men-women conflicts. This is true, and I also agree that the antagonistic view of a men-women opposition barely existed in the dominant discourse form of 20th century Chinese feminism. However, the emphasis on separating Chinese masculinities from patriarchy and criticisms of gendered power dynamics can continue to bypass any opportunity for feminist critical studies of men and masculinities. As I will elaborate later, younger generations of Chinese digital feminists, since the #MeToo movement in the late 2010s, share little memory of the socialist past. This direction in local women's studies often does not resonate with them, especially when compared with the Western feminist thoughts and theories that address patriarchy in more radical ways (Ni 2024).

I will return to this lack of critical feminist attention to Chinese men and masculinities in greater detail in Chapter 5, but I want to note here that the lack of feminist critical languages for considering men and masculinities is also a consequence of the dominant state discourse. With the establishment of the new China regime in 1949, women's liberation and gender equality were promised by socialist principles and the modern Chinese legal constitution. Men-women equality (男女平等) is inscribed in the Chinese constitution as one of the basic state policies, signifying the great socialist achievements under the leadership of the CCP. The promulgation of this gender principle was an outcome of the efforts of feminists working within the party, and it meant a permanent incorporation of Chinese feminism into the institutional party state, marked by the establishment of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) in 1949. Since then, Chinese state feminism represented by the ACWF is characterised by its dependency

and affiliation with the party-state (Wang 2017), and its “perpetual detachment from feminist discourse” (Yin 2021, 15). Chinese state feminism’s leading ideology of “Marxist women theory”,¹⁸ however, has not turned critical attention to the patriarchal state. Instead, studies have shown that the mobilisation of this “Marxist women theory” in post-Mao China has consolidated the state’s patriarchal control over gender construction as a way of legitimising its domination (Leung 2003; Min 2007). In the 21st century, the state legitimises a rhetoric of gender equality combined with returned emphasis on traditional Confucianist values regarding family and womanhood, and this has in fact re-consolidated hetero-patriarchal gender roles (Yang 2022).

For contemporary Chinese digital feminism, the lack of critical feminist debate focused on opposing patriarchal male dominance has meant that when “men” did start to appear in the 2020s as a popular feminist question, it sounded radical and foreign. Chinese grassroots digital feminism has been facing the ironic situation that, even though local feminist movements have long been associated with grand narratives of nationalism and anti-colonisation, Chinese digital feminism in recent decades has often been seen in popular public opinion as a foreign force potentially endangering the nation. As recent studies on the backlash against Chinese digital feminism have shown (He 2023; Huang 2023a), anti-feminist arguments in contemporary China often use nationalist discourses to claim that Chinese digital feminism is fostered by foreign conspiracies and endangers the Chinese national safety by disturbing the social harmony with gender antagonism, primarily through feminist accusations against men. In popular anti-feminist opinion, contemporary Chinese digital feminism is often contrasted with the 20th century’s socialist women’s liberation, producing claims that the “fake” feminism

¹⁸ The Marxist women theory 马克思主义妇女观 is the official name of the leading type of state feminism ideology upheld by the CCP. It emerged as a consequence of introducing Marxist theory into China in the early 20th century, and was then gradually adapted and developed by the CCP after the establishment of the PRC. It was first clearly named and defined by the President Jiang Zemin in 1990. Therefore, in the modern Chinese context, this term does not equal to the original theory of women from Karl Marx, or Marxist feminism.

of today has violated these earlier “real” feminist principles (Yang, Guo, and Arteel 2023). Even though, as a response to this backlash, some Chinese digital feminists have learnt to mobilise socialist feminist histories to support their feminist legitimisation (Han and Liu 2024), the lack of local feminist discourse naming the men problem is still a problem. Inevitably, “a feminism that harms men’s interests will lose its qualification of authentic feminism, as well as the legitimacy of social mobilization” (Yang, Guo, and Arteel 2023, 7). In overseas Chinese studies, feminist scholars like Lydia Liu have focused on re-discovering He-Yin Zhen’s anarchic feminism of the late 19th century in an attempt to reveal the threads of Chinese local feminism opposed to male domination (Liu, Karl, and Ko 2013). But these marginalised feminist voices continue to have limited visibility and impact in post-socialist China.

Such disputes over feminist legacy and legitimacy suggest that even though most Chinese digital feminists work individually, and outside of state institutions, in order to gain even limited credibility they still need to carefully negotiate their feminist claims within the frame of the post-socialist party state (Cai 2022). The Chinese political background I have outlined here, and the way it limits feminists’ capacity to raise the “men” question in contemporary China, sets up the foundation for Chinese digital feminism’s complex and contradictory relationship with state-legitimised mainstream discourse.

The Market Force: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny

The “men” question in Chinese digital feminism in the post-2020 era is also shaped by the fact that the recent popularisation and commercialisation of feminism takes place within the context of state-promoted individualisation in China and the global spread of neoliberal culture. With increased access to social media and thus to popular feminist

discourses, feminist consciousness has entered many areas of Chinese popular and subcultural life, including screen media such as film and television (Liao and Ling 2025; F. Yang 2023), popular web novels (Chang and Tian 2021; Feng 2009), and fandom and celebrity culture (Li 2024; Ge 2022). In other words, the largest outbreak of grassroots feminist politics in China has occurred during a period of global feminist popularisation, even as such popular feminism is often highly commercialised and depoliticised through the incorporation of neoliberal values (McRobbie 2004; 2008; Banet-Weiser 2018). This means Chinese digital feminists face challenges from both the authoritarian state and the neoliberal market – forces that may initially facilitate feminist visibility but ultimately also impose structural limits on its political potential.

This popularisation of feminist discourse through the commercial market is a transnational phenomenon of the 21st century, and is often associated with the claims and sensibilities of postfeminism (Gill 2007; 2016). Postfeminism initially emerged as a backlash against the feminist movements of the 1980s in the West, claiming that gender equality had already been achieved and that feminism was no longer necessary (McRobbie 2008; Faludi 1991). In Western media culture, postfeminism is marked by a “double entanglement” – simultaneously acknowledging the legacy of feminist politics while denying its contemporary political urgency or relevance (McRobbie 2004, 255). Defining postfeminism as a cultural sensibility enables the recognition of transnational postfeminism in non-Western contexts that do not share a second-wave feminist history (Butler 2013; Gill 2007), where feminist culture can be marketed “without an explicit consciousness of feminism” (Dosekun 2015, 9). As Dosekun notes, class is central to postfeminist sensibility in Third World contexts, where the ideal of the “already empowered” woman is defined by neoliberal values of elitism, individual achievement, and consumer power.

In post-socialist China, the “capable” middle-class woman emerges as a symbol of the ideal empowered female subject, reflecting the synergy between postfeminism and neoliberal governance (Harvey 2005; Liu 2023). Postfeminist cultural themes appear in Chinese popular media through commercialised appropriations of shallow feminist slogans such as women’s empowerment and free choice (F. Yang 2023; Liao 2021). This postfeminist discourse is criticised as “consumerist pseudo-feminism” (F. Yang 2023, 2) or “patriarchal capitalism” (Meng and Huang 2017, 660), as celebrations of femininity and girl power are frequently entwined with consumer behaviour and the reinforcement of traditional gender norms. Some scholars have also criticised how neoliberal ideals of self-regulation and individual responsibility have been incorporated into popular Chinese feminist discourses, without addressing gender inequality as structured and institutionalised (Peng 2021).

Within this context, the emergence of the “men” question in Chinese digital feminism is shaped by market forces and their effect on the popularisation of feminism, which brings both visibility and controversy to feminist agendas. This context not only affects how the “men” question is framed as a feminist political demand but also influences how it is received by the public. Ultimately, the boundaries between digital feminism and commercialised “postfeminist” culture are often blurred: both are deeply embedded in popular media and platform infrastructures, and both are born into and influenced by neoliberal cultural and market forces. While digital feminism in China often adopts the language of resistance and collective struggle, it is also at times shaped by the same neoliberal logics that characterise commercial postfeminism. This first means that when feminists raise their propositions and critiques – for example, the “men” question – in the realm of popular culture and social media, these political requests can often be dismissed by the audience as ephemeral entertainment; as a complaint or a joke (Xu and Liu 2024; Meng and Literat 2024). Popular anti-feminist discourse in China also frequently attacks the commercialised nature of digital feminism, accusing feminists of

being driven by capitalist interests rather than by a genuine desire for social transformation (Bao 2025).

At the same time, the rise of popular feminism has been met with a vigorous response that Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) defines as “popular misogyny”. This backlash reacts to feminist gains and is, importantly, enabled by the same digital media platforms. This is certainly the case in China. Since 2020, in particular, hostility and aggression toward feminists and women are facilitated on and by platforms like Weibo, whose market-driven algorithms and attention-based design contribute to what can be described as the platformisation of misogyny (Liao 2024). Disruptive anti-feminist discourse on Chinese social media draws on long-standing misogynistic cultural narratives to attack individual feminists and undermine Chinese digital feminism as a whole (Yang, Guo, and Arteel 2023). These pervasive misogynistic cultures and anti-feminist backlashes present continuous challenges for Chinese feminists, while simultaneously forming the very conditions under which the “men” question becomes even more urgent and necessary.

The Individualisation of Out-System Feminisms

The individualised nature of post-#MeToo Chinese digital feminism and its emphasis on everyday gender experiences in the personal sphere is being systematically incorporated into the party-state. From a historical point of view, the emergence of Chinese digital feminism since the late 2010s can be situated as generational progress – the culmination of a linear story beginning with the Chinese local women’s movement after the 1980s economic turn (Wang 2018b). From the first generation of state feminists in the 1980s and 1990s, to the second generation of outer-system feminists in post-2000, to the digital feminists in the late 2010s and 2020s, feminist

movements in post-socialist Chinese society exhibit a tendency for gradual independence from the state government with increasing autonomy and individualisation. However, although Wang Qi (2018) summarises Chinese feminisms using the generational approach, the relationship between different kinds of feminist movements is not that they replace each other. They can be seen as co-existing compositions of a Chinese feminist movement, but dominated in different eras by feminists with different living experiences. For example, the state feminists, as summarised by Wang Qi as the first generation and represented by the ACWF, still remain a significant force in Chinese feminism, operating within the party state with their state-sponsored gender development agenda (Yin 2021).

Generally, according to Wang's historical review, the second post-socialist generation of women's activists, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, worked within institutionalised NGOs and was heavily influenced by the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing in 1995 (Wang 2018). A defining characteristic of this generation was its collaboration with the state government, as many members and leaders were affiliated with government institutions and depended on official resources (Li and Li 2017). Thus, the first generation of feminists after the economic reform can be characterised as state feminists whose efforts were predominantly non-confrontational and aligned with government collaboration. During this period, non-governmental women's organisations developed a "symbiotic" relationship with the state, operating within the boundaries of party authority to maintain their work and reinforce the party's legitimacy (Wesoky 2002; Milwertz and Bu 2009).

With a gradual shift towards grassroots organisations and a turning away from direct state collaboration, younger Chinese feminists at the start of the 21st century started to adopt more individualised modes of operation, expressing their political agendas through performance art, volunteer-based philanthropy, and social media (Wang 2018).

This change emerged in response to the government's tightened control over social organisations starting in 1998 (Han 2018). Facing an increased risk of being perceived as a threat to social stability, feminist groups turned to the Internet, blending offline activities with online campaigns. The *Feminist Voice*, for example, emerged as one of the most prominent feminist groups of this period, drawing considerable academic interest (Han 2018; Li and Li 2017; Wang and Driscoll 2019; Wang 2018). Compared to the earlier feminists working within the state, these Chinese feminists adopted a more confrontational stance and thus had a more complex relationship with the forces of censorship and policing. In 2015, however, the arrest of five feminist activists (known as the “feminist five”) signifies the way that state restraints on feminists’ offline activism started to be enhanced (Tan 2017).

The #MeToo movement in the late 2010s signifies a critical prompt to change in the ecology and development of Chinese local feminism. While earlier generations of feminists concentrated more on offline rather than online activism, these organisations and offline protests have almost disappeared in Chinese feminism since #MeToo. Instead, digital feminism in China is marked by its unprecedented influence on individual Chinese young women’s gender consciousness with the help of social media (Liao and Luqiu 2022; Chen and Wang 2020). Increasingly, online protest, hashtag activism, and social media discussions have become the main forms of feminist activities (Xue and Rose 2022). These online protests and feminist discussions still face challenges and are forced to adopt flexible strategies to bypass the Internet censorships controlled by the social media platforms and the state government (Tan 2017; Zeng 2019). Alongside increasing grassroots impact, Chinese digital feminisms use social media not only to agitate for rights and resources for women but also to challenge the culture and institutions that support gender-based discrimination and violence (Yang and Zhou 2023; Huang and Sun 2021). These online protests and discussions create a feminist political agenda by attracting wide public attention that is not confined to

feminist circles, and this can lead to changes in institutional investigation and legislation (Hou 2020).

The trend towards individualisation from the late 1980s to the 2020s can be interpreted in two ways. It does imply an increasing central state control over out-system feminist activisms and organisations. But meanwhile, it is this individualisation that gradually detaches Chinese grassroots feminism from the state institutions with increasing independence in producing their propositions and political agenda (Min 2007). By doing so, individualised Chinese digital feminists can reach into the personal realms of their everyday lives (Hou 2020). Although on the legislative level, Chinese women's liberation is "granted" with the establishment of the New China, Chinese women still experience real gender inequality, discrimination, and mistreatment under the patriarchal culture, even at the time gender equality has already been inscribed by the law as a grand socialist achievement. As local Chinese feminist stories were being incorporated into the state feminist narratives, other forms of feminist activisms have gradually become more individualised. Chinese state feminists in the post-socialist era have gradually lost the legitimacy to raise gender issues in personal and private spheres – exactly the places where young generations of Chinese digital feminists find problems with men (as #MeToo is apparently about questions of men from the beginning), and the spheres where the socialist state feminism has failed to reach and influence. Against this background, Chinese digital feminists' attention to the "men" question can be read as a meaningful attempt to bring some urgent feminist personal matters under public scrutiny, so that what happens during their interactions with men in the concrete private lives can be included in the public debate. Meanwhile, the general inability of the state's institutional power to solve private sphere gender issues also means that raising and publicly discussing the "men" question is limited within the out-system sectors, where market forces and neoliberal values are increasingly gaining significant power in influencing feminist politics.

Conclusion

As this chapter has outlined, one specific characteristic of Chinese feminist history lies in its bonds and dependence on anti-colonial/federal nationalism and socialism revolutions, which is a feature that contrasts with the history of dominant Western feminist movements. The legitimacy of Chinese feminisms was both granted and restricted by the national grand narratives (Leung 2003). On the one hand, feminism was quickly adopted as a legitimate social and ideological force for achieving national empowerment. It was promoted and even directed by elite male intellectuals and the male-dominated party-state. On the other hand, throughout the history of the past century, Chinese feminism has only obtained legitimacy when it is incorporated by the dominant political discourses, thus gradually losing its independence and a capacity to raise questions on gender power dynamics beyond the nationalist and socialist agenda.

Returning to my questions at the beginning of this chapter, it is true that men have always been a question in the history of Chinese feminism. Yet, due to local feminism's dependency characteristic, the "men" question has been constantly marginalised and erased from the political agenda. The "men" question refers to both men as a culturally constituted gender group, and men as a part of the structural problems of hetero-patriarchal domination. When Chinese women started to become a question for Chinese male intellectuals and revolutionists, simultaneously, critical feminist historical scholars note the problem of men's gendered subjectivity and self (Zhong 2000; Liu, Karl, and Ko 2013). From the turn of the 20th century till the post-socialist economic transformation in the 1980s, men's roles in Chinese feminism are entangled with the constant reproduction of Chinese men's masculine identities and the patriarchal male domination in culture and power structures. As early as 1907, one of the earliest

feminist revolutionists, He-Yin Zhen, made a claim that men must be taken as women's enemies in a patriarchal society (Liu, Karl, and Ko 2013). For He-Yin Zhen, the state is men's state, and the nationalist revolution is men's revolution. Unlike her contemporaries who prioritised the revival of the Chinese nation, He-Yin Zhen's goal was to end the inequality between men and women, and in the end to abolish the categories of men and women in a communal society. Her "men question" was brought out with her acute observation that there is a gendered motivation that drives male intellectuals to actively advocate for women's liberation: "they are thinking of how they themselves may profit from this. This is what I call men's pursuit of self-interests in the name of women's liberation" (61). While her radical anarchist feminism was largely marginalised and ignored in the 20th century's nationalist wave, the echo of her warning can still be heard constantly over the century.

More than a hundred years later, Chinese digital feminism of the 2020s places the "men" question centre stage, with increasing feminist consciousness of male superiority, hegemonic masculinity, and everyday misogyny. In recent years, Chinese grassroots digital feminists have started questioning the cultural, social and political institutions that construct men as a gender of domination (Zhang and Mu 2024; Chen and Gong 2023). With #MeToo and its ongoing influence, digital feminists in China today highlight men's accountability in systematic gender inequality and critically scrutinize their practices and gendered subjectivities in private spheres of everyday life. From Qiu Jin's early ambitious claim in 1903 that women can be as fierce and strong as men, to the open mockery of men's over-confidence in Yang Li's standup comedy, women are no long admiring men for having strong, fierce hearts.

Seen in this historical light, it is evident that this pervasive feminist critique and distrust of men is a relatively new phenomenon. This is the first time a massive phenomenon that put the "men" question under the spotlight. When reviewing the history of 20th-

century Chinese feminism, one notable feature is the relative absence of what is often referred to as “gender antagonism” as a dominant theme. This transformation suggests that raising the “men” question has specific significance in the history of Chinese local women’s movements, as men’s questions have been concealed for a long time in both public institutional and private living spheres. This local historical background needs to be taken into account in approaching the “men” question in Chinese digital feminism today. Compared to late-20th-century Western feminisms, debates concerning feminism’s relationship with men have not held significant weight nor substantially influenced the direction or content of feminist movements in China. This means that analysing feminism’s relationship with men in the Chinese context necessitates the knowledge, approaches, and frameworks that diverge from existing frameworks in English-language feminist theory and scholarship. This local consciousness is essential especially when transnational feminist surge and theories have been continuing shaping Chinese feminism from the last century to the 2020s. For example, the local historical dimension requires moving beyond the direct appropriation of debates over whether feminism should adopt vigilant or antagonistic attitudes toward men (Dworkin 1981), or alternatively, whether it should take an inclusive stance by treating men as comrades in struggle (Hooks 2015; hooks 2014).

I argue that the contemporary “men question” in Chinese digital feminism needs to be understood as a form of situated knowledge (Haraway 1997) – by which I mean it is a field of knowledge and practice that cannot be separated from China’s local and historical contexts. This requires an “on-site” consciousness of Chinese women and gender studies, by not only placing feminism as a research object in an historical context but also understanding feminism through the embodied living situations of feminists (Song and Gao 2022). While emphasizing the importance of historical context, I do not mean that post-2020 Chinese digital feminists all consciously draw upon this historical awareness when shaping their attitudes toward men. Rather, I argue that these feminist

discourses are shaped by the legacies and consequences of earlier modern Chinese feminist movements. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty asserts, the “politics of location” demands that feminist experiences be understood in relation to differences of region and race, and thus serves as “a necessary alternative to formulation of the ‘universality’ of gendered oppression or struggles” (Mohanty 1997, 2). The politics of location underscores that feminist knowledge must be situated and context-specific, since any universalised conception of feminism risks producing an ahistorical political vision that privileges white feminism while overshadowing the experiences of women in the Global South, reducing them to passive victims. By highlighting the embedded power relations within so-called objective knowledge, a situated knowledge approach to Chinese digital feminism emphasises the value of positionality in knowledge production and offers a useful lens for analysing how feminist knowledge is produced in contemporary China. In my next chapter, which offers a broader literature review and account of my theoretical foundations, I will further this emphasis on the situatedness of Chinese feminist knowledge by extending it to the discussions of bodies and embodiment, by arguing that bodies also matter in approaching the “men” question in Chinese digital feminism.

Chapter 2

Towards an Embodied Approach to Chinese Digital Feminism

Only those occupying the positions of the dominators are self-identical, unmarked, disembodied, unmediated, transcendent, born again.

Donna Haraway (1997, 62)

I am rooted, but I flow.

Virginia Woolf (1993, 74)

This chapter furthers the discussion of the “men” question in contemporary Chinese digital feminism as well as outlining the theoretical framework for this thesis. In this chapter, I argue more expansively that studying the “men” question in Chinese digital feminism as situated knowledge requires an embodied approach that takes embodied subjectivity and affect into considerations. I will argue for the importance of situated knowledge (Haraway 1997) by demonstrating that when studies of Chinese digital feminism fail to address embodied subjectivity, that feminism is not approached as a situated objectivity. This chapter thus provides a fuller literature review and a theoretical foundation for this thesis’s basic standpoint – that without such situated-ness, finding an accurate and productive way to understand Chinese digital feminism and its “men” question is an impossible task.

To explore the “men” question in Chinese digital feminism, attention to historical and social context is not enough. Situated knowledge refers to not only the discursive, ideological production of knowledge, but also embodied, subjective knowledge produced by individuals with partial perspectives (Haraway 1997). This is what Haraway calls as a “doctrine of embodied objectivity”, in which embodiment means “nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning” (Haraway 1997, 63). Yet, a persistent overlooking of embodied feminist knowledge production in the field of Chinese digital feminism studies results in a tendency to position feminism as something that is objectively or rationally unquestionable because of its opposition to oppression. In this chapter, I want to indicate that such a simple belief in the rightness of feminist opposition can sideline some concrete, pressing questions. As Chinese feminist scholars and activists, questions we also attend to include: what exact kinds of feminisms are being practised and upheld by individuals in given contexts; how do differences and inner conflicts among feminisms matter to feminist politics; and how is feminism embodied, felt, and experienced by individuals in complex and even painful and problematic ways that may occasionally seem to violate and undermine its social justice mission? These questions help avoid the simplification of feminism and instead allow more attention to a feminist embodiment that “resists fixation and is insatiably curious about the webs of differential positioning” (Haraway 1997, 64). Thus, in the following section, before unfolding that broader theoretical framework, I want to first outline some specific problems arising from the relative absence of an embodied approach in three current fields: Chinese digital feminism, studies of men and masculinities in Chinese feminism, and local Chinese women/gender studies of bodies since the 1990s. In each of these fields, this thesis considers that the lack of an account of feminist embodiment risks construing Chinese digital feminism as a transcendent knowledge in ways that can be unproductive both theoretically and politically. This chapter thus attempts to bring the body into Chinese digital feminism studies, so that an embodied approach might help us

investigate gendered embodied subjectivity (in Chapters 3 and 5) and affects (in Chapters 4 and 6) in this “men” question debate.

In other words, in approaching Chinese digital feminism as situated knowledge, this thesis does not imagine a correct or fully legitimised version of feminism but instead turns to its trivial, limited, and even ugly sides as they appear in embodied everyday life. For this purpose, this thesis mobilises an affect theory framework. In recent decades, the growing interest in affect followed by the “affective turn” in cultural studies has brought increasing investigation of affects or emotions in feminist politics in multiple ways. Among the range of different focuses that constitute feminist affect theory, in this thesis, I am primarily relying on work that focuses on the body and embodiment (Blackman 2012, 2021). That is to say, while there are affect approaches focusing on, for example, ideological and discursive media constructions of emotions, this thesis follows a definition of affect primarily as the body’s capacity of making affect and being affected (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012, 2). As Penwell and Whitehead summarise, affect according to this approach exceeds the singular category of discourse or emotion, as “a material intensity that emerges via the ‘in between’ spaces of embodied encounters” (2012, 2).

My understanding of the role of the body in this thesis also borrows from the phenomenological perspective of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s body-subject concept, in which embodiment is taken as the condition of all cultural life (Csordas 1994). This body is the “existential condition that grounds our being-in-the-world” and is “identifiable as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world” (Csordas 2024, 2). Therefore, by recognising the body as one key site in producing situated feminist knowledge, I approach Chinese digital feminism as constituted by embodied subjects (in this thesis, the interviewed Chinese men and feminist women), who produce feminist / gender

knowledge in the specific material and discursive situations of their everyday lives. Overall, in foregrounding embodied subjectivity and affect in understanding Chinese digital feminism, this thesis benefits from feminist theories at the intersection of the three key fields: feminist phenomenological approaches to bodies and embodiment, especially the feminist critical developments on the work of Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir; Elizabeth Grosz (1987; 1994)'s corporeal feminist theory; and feminist affect studies including works from Sianne Ngai (2004), Eve Sedgwick (2003), Clare Hemmings (2012), and Sara Ahmed (2014). Accordingly, this chapter will review these three fields.

The “No-Body” Chinese Digital Feminism

Chinese digital feminism studies have tended to adopt two representative paradigms of *repression-resistance* and *social movement* that both tend to generalise feminism as a transcendental political vision that is not produced but simply adopted by individual Chinese feminists. From the 2010s, studies of Chinese digital feminism started emerging in media and communication studies with a primary interest in new media technologies and the formation of the Chinese public sphere (Peng 2020). Media scholarship prior to the 2000s often tended to position Chinese digital feminist activism as part of the civil rights movement (Ip and Lam 2013), rather than investigating feminist visions and gender power relations being discussed in Chinese digital feminism. These studies often position the Chinese public sphere in tension with the state government's forces of censorship and surveillance, using a *repression-resistant* framework (Peng 2020; Zeng 2020; Chen and Wang 2020), in which feminism is depicted as an anti-authoritarian civil movement in post-socialist China. In this paradigm, as for other digital media activisms, Chinese digital feminism is seen as a resistance or liberation force against state censorship and authoritarian power (Guan 2019). The legitimacy of studying Chinese digital feminism is often justified by

presenting it as collective democratic political participation against an authoritarian state, and the significance of feminism as challenging gender power relations is very little highlighted. Consequently, in this *repression-resistance* framework, Chinese feminism has been simplified as an idea imported to fuel the civil rights movement in general. Little attention has been given to feminism in China being specifically produced and interpreted by embodied individual feminists.

Within the *repression-resistance* paradigm, the definition of feminism in Chinese digital feminism has not been properly addressed or clarified. Instead, scholarly approaches to Chinese digital feminism tend to be determined by oppositional grand political narratives of China and the West, the State and the society (Wu 2024). In positioning Chinese digital feminism as another civil rights movement resisting state authoritarianism not only are the complicated relationships between feminism and other forms of social movement erased, but Chinese feminism's relations with the state are simplified and even distorted. As more recent studies have revealed, in actual practices and experiences, Chinese digital feminists frequently adopt the state's authoritarian or nationalist discourse as a way of legitimising feminism (Ye 2021; Han and Liu 2024). Meanwhile, debates and negotiations around these coalitions also happened within Chinese digital feminisms, constantly shaping and changing feminist propositions across platforms, communities, and temporality. As criticised by Ye Shana (2021), the paradigm of "feminist victim-resister" (785) defines Chinese feminism in the opposite to the state too easily, translating it as part of global post-Cold War discursive production. Ye (2021) criticises the argument that digital feminism in the *repression-resistant* framework replicates a romanticisation of the oppressed, rendering Chinese women victims to be saved from an oppressive state power, and thereby producing a post-socialist coloniality that continues to "reconfigure both colonial formations and decolonial strategies in the post-Cold War, post-socialist era" (Ye 2021, 785). Within the *repression-resistant* framework, Chinese feminism risks being utilised as a hollow

symbol to refer to anti-authoritarian democracy, while its on-site feminist meanings produced by embodied feminist subjects are less investigated.

Since the outbreak of the global #MeToo movement, another common research pathway is to use a *social movement* paradigm, focusing on exploring the dynamics of Chinese digital feminist activism, especially its negotiation with different power sectors, its mobilisation, development, strategies, and weaknesses. In contrast to the repression-resistance framework, the social movement approach after the burst of Chinese #MeToo pays more attention to digital feminism itself, rather than using digital feminism as a means of exploring other political issues. Sara Liao and Luwei Rose Luqiu's (2022) study of Chinese #MeToo, for example, illustrates in detail how different stakeholders are involved in this movement, and the power of digital feminist activists in making social changes and influencing government policymaking. Along with this social movement paradigm, media studies of the Chinese #MeToo movement discuss how mobile technologies like social media platforms enable the connective and collective political efficacy in Chinese digital feminism (Zhou and Qiu 2020; Yin and Sun 2021; Zeng 2020; Mao 2020; Chen and Wang 2020). Recent scholarship in media studies continues to investigate how different media platforms help or impair Chinese digital feminisms (Meng and Literat 2024), and the difficulties and challenges feminists face in operating on social media (Chen and Ding 2024). Even though digital technologies have provided opportunities for feminists to challenge gender hierarchies and bring personal problems into the spotlight, these same technologies also lead to a series of problems, such as limiting the participation and representation of working-class rural women (Hou 2020; Yin and Sun 2021; Huang and Sun 2021).

The deficiencies of the *social movement* paradigm are also apparent in its limited attention to the specificity of the feminist body. Despite showing an explicit interest in and concern for feminism itself, the social movement paradigm tends to use the general

term feminism with limited questioning of what specific feminist propositions and theories are produced by individual participants in the movements. This tendency is reflected in the contentious use of Western feminist terms, such as liberal feminism (Peng 2020), neoliberal feminism (Peng 2021; Liu 2023; Huang 2023a), and radical feminism (Liu et al. 2024), which constantly attempts to categorise Chinese digital feminism in (Western) feminist political positions. Among these terms, neoliberal feminism is the one most often used to discuss contemporary Chinese contexts in recent years, while other terms often remain unclarified. We know very little about whether feminists participating in the movement identify themselves as, for example, liberal or neoliberal feminists. When scholars assigning these terms to Chinese digital feminism it is seldom considered how Chinese digital feminists themselves identify, interpret, and negotiate these feminist propositions and their associated theoretical and political assumptions. What the social movement approach overlooks is how individuals invest feminism with meaning based on their own lived experience, and I contend this is crucial to both constitutes what Chinese digital feminism and where it is headed.

Both *repression-resistance* and *social movement* paradigms tend to devalue the complex embodied personal experiences involved in Chinese digital feminisms. In these approaches, personal everyday feminism, which constitutes a major portion of Chinese digital feminists' lives, is often reduced to a pre-stage or limited part of the real activism that comprises a collective social movement. Presuming that there is a "true" or "more serious" collective feminist movement, distinct from the current Chinese digital feminisms, the academic vision of what this better feminism looks like is ambiguously outlined with little critical examination. For me, this raises a further concern – that scholarly approaches to Chinese digital feminism that adopt a social movement paradigm can lead to an implicit self-positioning of Chinese digital feminist researchers as the expert commentators on or even "commanders" of Chinese feminist movements. This academic arrogance is reflected in studies that constantly seek to

clarify and differentiate “pseudo”, hypocritical, and radical feminism(s) from a truly progressive and beneficial Chinese digital feminism (e.g. Yang 2022; Peng 2020; 2021; F. Yang 2023). These critiques tend to adopt the neoliberalism framework in analysing Chinese popular feminisms, arguing that Chinese feminisms have been “hijacked” (Liu 2023, 728) or “contaminated” (Liu et al. 2024, 870) by Western neoliberal discourses. Yet these same scholars seldom provide alternative plans or examples of their ideal collective/socialist feminist vision.

It is not the purpose of this study to provide such a vision either. I do argue, however, that such transcendental accounts of feminism lack sufficient focus on feminism as a grounded, embodied knowledge production that is always enacted in context-specific processes. Although the cautious examination of digital feminism’s relation with global neoliberalism is important, we must not consider digital feminism only as the inheritor of 20th-century Western feminisms, but also crucially as forms of feminism unavoidably operating simultaneously in a neoliberal (Baer 2016) and post-socialist (Ge 2025) context. Approaching feminism as an “incontrovertible political good” and setting out on the mission to save it “from those supposedly feminist bad actors that speak, without legitimation, in its name” (Bassi and LaFleur 2022, 320), does not take feminism seriously or as intrinsically complex. Here, I agree with Serena Bassi and Greta LaFleur’s criticisms of the “persistent sense” that “feminism is an incontrovertible political good that, while perhaps requiring some tweaks, needs to be saved from those supposedly feminist bad actors that speak, without legitimation, in its name” (Bassi and LaFleur 2022, 320). This concern is increasingly brought up by recent Chinese digital feminist scholars, who are raising dissent about the academic tendency to identify and name some forms of Chinese digital feminism as “pseudo” feminism (e.g. Yin 2021; Liu 2023). As Liu Yue (2023) argues, such true/false feminism judgements are problematic when so many feminists are unable to practice conventional collective actions in contemporary Chinese contexts. These judgements become

unrealistic, speculative standards. Liu (2023) asks that, before viewing Chinese digital feminism as being “hijacked” by neoliberalism and other “bad” discourses, we first admit that Chinese feminism is still a local feminism, even if it has some neoliberal content, deemed problematic. Instead, for example, how is feminist consciousness and feminist knowledge being produced and facilitated when it is born on the ground in a neoliberal post-socialist Chinese context? In this thesis, I consider that questions like this cannot be properly addressed without returning to a more embodied, contextualised approach – one that is willing to examine individual body situations in any account of how and why feminist knowledge is produced in contemporary China.

This lack of attention to embodied subjectivities in Chinese digital feminism in the two dominant paradigms addressed above impedes our understanding of both Chinese digital feminism and the “men” problem it raises. I want to offer four specific critiques here that guide the emphasis on embodied subjectivity in this thesis. First, the lack of research into the actual bodies involved in Chinese digital feminism often leads to an instrumental use of feminist bodies and emotions. Some more recent scholarly attention to affect has begun to explore how emotions, particularly anger and sadness, mobilise feminist online debates, and the role of social media in enabling the communication and transmission of emotions (Jinman Zhang 2023; Li and Guo 2025; Wang, Zhang, and Tang 2025; Yuan and Wang 2025). However, sometimes in these studies, feminist embodied feelings tend to be valued only when they have clearly mobilised feminism into actions. For example, investigations of feminist emotions tend to emphasise “translating female netizens’ personal grievances into discursive resources” (Zhou and Qiu 2020, 365), or else focus on how digital feminist practices “employ discursive strategies to narrate personal and affective experiences” (Yuan and Wang 2025, 2). In doing so, feminists’ embodied feelings often become resources waiting to be transformed into discursive political force, as nothing but a “discursive, dialogical phenomena” (Greco and Stenner 2008, 9).

My concern with this functionalist view is that it can draw an implicit distinction between good, helpful emotions and bad, destructive emotions in feminism. Where emotions are seen as obscuring feminist political movements and endangering inclusiveness and solidarity, they are often immediately discarded as problems to be monitored and solved. For example, Huang Qiqi's (2023) study of the "married donkey" discourse¹⁹ in Chinese digital feminism criticised the "unthinking celebration of the increasing visibility of women's anger" (234), warning that Chinese digital feminists should be more cautious about the celebration of anger as it can problematically divide women into separate groups, while the expression of anger can be easily exploited for profit-making. Similarly, a study of the online Chinese radical feminist group also indicates the danger of feminist anger in transforming the target of feminist criticism towards individuals, thus "such exclusionary affective practices not only narrow feminism's emancipatory potential but also limit its ability to address the interconnected and multifaceted structures of power and oppression" (Wang, Zhang, and Tang 2025, 15).

Although these cautions about presuming unquestionable feminist sisterhood or presuming the engagement with neoliberal individualisation in Chinese digital feminism are very worthwhile, the approach taken in response implies that the feminist body and its affective dimensions are properties to be controlled, governed and utilised strategically by media discourses based on feminist rationality. In other words, feminist bodies and emotions function in such an approach as strategic materials in the service of achieving feminist goals. In this instrumental usage of bodies, "bad" feminist emotions and attitudes towards men and other groups can be framed as a problem that needs to be solved, reinforcing a division between "good" and "bad" feminism (Bao

¹⁹ Married donkey 婚驴 is a term that emerges from Chinese digital feminism to refer to married women in a sarcastic way, implying these women are dumb for believing in men and the marriage system.

2023; 2024) assisted by the classic misogynistic division of “good women” and “bad women”. As shown in Bao Kai’s studies, in popular public opinion, especially in male-centric online communities, feminisms are often defined and classified as “radical” not for their political stance and propositions but for the perceived “irrationality” exhibited by their emotional forms of expression. As discussed in later chapters of this thesis, this classification of good and bad feminisms based on policing their level of emotional expression is also commonly adopted by the Chinese men I interviewed in this project. But to date there are still limited studies taking feminist feelings/affects in Chinese digital feminism as a productive embodied force that fundamentally enables the production of feminist knowledge and politics, no matter “good” or “bad”.

My second critique of the overall lack of attention to bodies in scholarship on Chinese digital feminism is that ignorance about bodies leads to an instrumentalist understanding of discourse. In scholarship adopting critical discursive approaches, discourse can be adopted as a simple language tool, mobilised and manipulated to achieve political goals. For example, much discourse analysis has shed crucial light on how gendered power relations are mediated by social media, how Chinese digital feminists are able to challenge normative gendered discourses by making subversive online expressions (Li 2024; Meng and Literat 2024), and by creative use of ordinary language, such as composing hashtags and neology (Wu 2020; Yang 2022). This research tendency reflects a key feature of Chinese digital feminism, which is the revealing of unequal gender power in existing culture mechanisms through “feminist wordplay” (Xue and Rose 2022, 135). However, meanwhile, existing media studies of Chinese digital feminism with the focus on media discourses sometimes risk narrowing discourse into linguistic tools for political action, without considering how political discourses are produced and conditioned by individuals’ embodied situations. In some studies, discourse is equated with thematic language expressions on social media, and discursive power is reduced to media effects. For example, this is specifically evident

in the frequent combination of “discourse” and “strategy” in recent media studies publications, showing how various discourses of neoliberalism and nationalism can be manipulated and strategically integrated into Chinese digital feminism (Li 2024). This simplifies the complexity of digital feminism into a matter of how people should better communicate their ideas, leading often to an exploration of how feminist individuals and groups should adopt more civilised, constructive discourse strategies to enable more objective and comprehensive feminist discussions (Deng et al. 2024; Yang, Qiu, and Zhu 2023). Furthermore, in the strategic discursive approach, there often appear to be no actual, living subjects involved in manipulating these “strategies”. Instead of investigating people’s lived subjectivity in producing and rewriting certain discourses, the strategic discursive approach pictures political subjects as calculating, rational tacticians whose actions are always activated and guided by an optimal strategy. Consequently, the strategic discourse approach fails to consider the affective foundations in the formation of gender / political subjectivities. I instead choose to emphasise how these embodied affects produce various propositions and strategies for individual feminists, enabling them to act in certain ways – or, perhaps more importantly, disabling them from acting in certain ways when their bodies are exhausted, irritated or disgusted.

My third critique is that the scope of existing research is often limited to Chinese digital feminism within short periods of time, and in terms of certain activisms and popular online debates, without attempting any long-term investigation (or any holistic perspectives on) of the formation of feminist subjectivity (Han and Liu 2024). Studying Chinese digital feminism as a series of independent actions may leave the impression that individual feminists just “happen” to be involved in one or two online movements. Digital feminism is therefore sliced into many isolated incidents and activisms, while the continuity and contradiction in the transformation of feminists’ subjectivity are largely overlooked. For example, as this thesis will argue in later chapters, feminist

“*yan-nan*” (misandry) does not emerge alone as an independent feminist claim to attack Chinese men. It is rather a responsive feminist attitude, gradually formed and developed through feminists’ online and offline experiences, usually as a kind of historical sedimentation across multiple “events”. Thus, depicting digital feminist activism as any kind of independent event cut off from the whole duration of the feminist body will always limit our understanding of that activism. As my interviews with feminist women show, becoming a feminist and living a feminist life is a long-term and ongoing process, in China as elsewhere, because living a feminist life is always “a slow and painstaking step” (Ahmed 2016, 5). The feminist body has a historical duration encompassing various encounters and experiences. And it is based on this historically assembled body that feminist knowledge and understandings are produced.

Finally, my last critique is that without an investigation into bodies and subjectivities, we cannot know how people become, or do not become, feminists, or how people can become different and even contradicting kinds of feminists. So far, the media discursive approach dominating existing studies has contributed to the investigation of the articulation of alternative subject positions in Chinese digital feminism with the assistance of social media discourses. This approach positions the core task of Chinese digital feminism today as feminist ideology-making. Thus, Yin Siyuan (2021) argues for a “re-articulation” of Chinese feminisms by paying attention to how ideological discourses can form “new political subjects and transform[ing] current realities” (Yin 2021, 17). Yin proposes that Chinese feminisms should use local historical feminist resources to build consensus among the public and reunite their political critique with underprivileged groups to build feminist alliances. While this is a critical and insightful point, one problem with this strategy is that scholars seldom continue their discussions on to how such re-articulations can be practised and actualised by living people in Chinese digital feminism. As a result, feminist ideology-making often sounds like the manifestation of political discourse in the air, without a material foundation in actual

lives. This simplifies the interplay between discourses and bodies into a one-way determining relationship, downplaying the role of bodies as a side-effect of political discourses. By occupying a given subject position, produced in discourses, a feminist political subject is simply taken as an outcome of a certain version of political ideology. However, if subjects can be reduced to mere outcomes of media effects, how is it that some people are able to become feminists and raise critical enquiries into existing power discourses in media expressions? And how is it that people can become different feminists (or anti-feminists), even when they are exposed to the same media content? Are ideological media effects the only meaningful variable in constituting political subjectivity? What we don't know is how (feminist) political discourses actually impact the lived bodies and their everyday life experiences, influencing individual ways of understanding life and the world, and how living histories and situations work and produce (feminist) political discourses.

Underneath this overall neglect of embodied subjectivity in existing scholarship on Chinese digital feminism lies an implied understanding of bodies as passively governed by discourses, so that the enfolded body either “disappears” in discussions as if it does not matter to feminist politics, or it is implied as a limit to political actions of speeches and languages (Lloyd 2024) . This reflects what Lisa Blackman (Blackman et al. 2008; Blackman 2021) and Grosz (Grosz 1994) summarise as the “cultural inscription” and social constructionist understanding of bodies, in which bodies are simply a “stabilised effects of the subject-positions that precede them” (Blackman et al., 2008 17). No actual living bodies are regarded seriously in this approach: “the actual fleshy body of skin, muscle, tendons, synapses and blood has been eviscerated, becoming not so much a body-without-organs as a body without any material substance whatsoever” (Blackman et al., 2008 17). This position can manifest in similar yet different ways when it comes to individual men in Chinese digital feminism.

The Problematic Bodies of Men in Chinese Digital Feminism

As I suggested in the introduction, Chinese digital feminists' sarcastic criticisms of Chinese men and masculinities have recently begun receiving greater academic attention. These criticisms mostly take the form of creative media expressions, especially as social media neology (Meng and Literat 2024; Xu and Liu 2024; Zhang and Mu 2024). But little is known about Chinese men's responses to these feminist criticisms. In recent years, feminist scholarship has increasingly started to give to men's reactions and understandings of feminist propositions and requests. Many have explored anti-feminist discourses and backlashes in male-dominated online communities and popular discourses (Huang 2023a; Yang, Guo, and Arteil 2023; He 2023). Yet, similar to feminist media studies on Chinese digital feminism, this research on men's backlash or misogynistic reactions toward feminism seldom deploy embodied approaches. Men's online speech in response to feminism is seen to usually focus on using strategic discourses to protect men's privilege in the patriarchal social structure. For example, Xu Kaibin and Tan Yan's (2020) article on the discursive strategies of "sexual harassment suspects" analyses statements made by 15 men accused during the Chinese #MeToo movement, and concludes that these men adopted multiple discursive strategies as "techniques" in defending their sexual assaults. Liu Jiacheng's (2021) promising study on men's empathy in #MeToo illustrates how feelings play a role in men's reactions towards feminism. Yet, Liu does not pay further attention to men's situated embodiment when considering these empathetic feelings, but instead turns to classifying what are "good" and "bad" emotions if men are to become feminist allies.

This points to an odd phenomenon: studies of Chinese men that consider their embodied subjectivity rarely consider men's responses to feminism, while studies of Chinese men's responses to feminism seldom adopt embodied approaches. Aside from this

scholarship in feminist media studies, scholars of Chinese men and masculinity have seldom explored men's relation with Chinese digital feminism. On the contrary, in the field of Chinese men and masculinity studies, embodied approaches to Chinese men widely adopt interviews and ethnographies to explore how men from different social groups understand their gendered social roles and negotiate with masculinities in their lived experiences. Examples here include Liu and Zheng's (2021) study of rural Chinese fathers, and Lin Xiaodong's (2013; 2016; 2019) work on Chinese male rural migrant workers. Some scholars have also investigated young, middle-class urban Chinese men's experiences of emergent masculinity expectations, such as caring, soft, beauty-sensitive types of masculinity in the women-oriented entertainment industry and media discourses (Tan, Liu, and Kong 2022; Wen 2021). This scholarship has provided insights into men's embodied subjectivity when negotiating and sustaining gender power relations by examining dynamic embodied processes, but often do not exhibit explicit political concerns and, in particular, do not consider men in relation to progressive social change activities such as feminism. Therefore, they are more aligned with sociological Men and Masculinity studies (MMS) than with Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities (CSMM).²⁰

Against this background, Chinese digital feminist studies of men's responses to feminism have already noted some unresolved tension between splitting media discourses and men's embodiment into two separate entities: it is puzzling that, in Chinese digital feminism studies, if feminist bodies are often taken for granted as generally passive inscription surfaces of discursive power, men's bodies specifically seem difficult – if not impossible – to be inscribed by feminist discourses. For example, Chen Yifan and Gong Qian (2023) indicate in their study of the feminist sarcasm of “baby man” that the feminist online discursive formation of “baby man” can hardly

²⁰ The division between men/masculinity studies (MMS) and critical studies of men and masculinities (CSMM) and their relationship with feminist studies are outlined by Chris Beasley (Beasley 2015)

transform gender power relations in reality. Similarly, Ji Di's (2023) study of pro-feminist men in Chinese digital feminism also indicates a tension between men's online discursive performances and their embodied feelings and actions. While self-claiming pro-feminist men may express their support for feminism on social media platforms, they also acknowledge that no "actual" actions in their real lives are taken. Ji concludes that this is because the connection between online media discourses and men's embodied actions is too feeble; and thus men's inaction in feminism needs to be explained in terms of a "patriarchal dividend" (Connell 2005), which makes men essentially difficult to change as the privileged social group. While the concept of a patriarchal dividend is a popular tool for explaining men's role in feminisms, Chris Beasley sharply points out that this tendency has created an awkwardness in CSMM, where poststructuralist feminist criticisms of power and CSMM discourses both tend to position men using a structuralist approach that often essentialises the category of men as patriarchal oppressors (Beasley 2012; 2015). In doing so, men's agencies and consciousness of (oppressive) actions are taken for granted, embedded in a sovereign subjectivity regardless of their embodied situations and experiences. In other words, no matter what men have experienced in their encounters with feminism, their actions and positions are always explained by a seemingly unchangeable position as beneficiaries of patriarchal dividends. This tendency continues investing in the notion that male subjects are "whole, unified stable entities which provide a platform for action and social change" (Waling 2019, 98). It thus reproduces the idea that men's subjectivity is separate from their bodies and embodied situations, remaining self-determined and conscious in protecting their privileged social positions.

In related ways, the "no-body" problem in relation to men in Chinese digital feminism reduces men's bodies solely to the social position of male domination, instead of as individuals living the experiences of the feminist situations they encounter. What interests me in this thesis is what exactly happened at the point of the conjunction of

men's exposure to feminist discourses and their embodied gender subjectivity. If there is really a fissure – as suggested by Ji Di's research – between men's embodiment and feminist online discourses, what contributes to the appearance of the fissure? How does it feel to experience that fissure? Or is it really a fissure with feeble connections, or perhaps, there is no fissure at all? Aside from straightforwardly adopting the explanation that men are essentially a privileged group enjoying patriarchal benefits, we still have little information about what happens when Chinese men encounter and interpret feminist discourses. In this thesis, I therefore attempt to take men's reactions towards Chinese digital feminism as embodied, experiential, and affective processes, as are women's. I approach men's bodies as open material entities permeable to feminist and other social influences, and capable of generating new feelings and meanings in these encounters. By doing so, I do not aim to make this investigation a justification of men's stances and practices in relation to Chinese digital feminism. Instead, my discussions and analysis of men in Chinese digital feminism (particularly in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6) examine how meanings of masculinities and feminisms are mediated by gendered embodied subjectivity and the experiences and feelings that involves.

“Depoliticised” Bodies in Chinese Local Women's Studies

It is worth noting that the focus on women's bodies, gendered embodied experiences and situated feminist knowledge, even though not strictly phenomenological, has been an important stream in mainland Chinese local women's studies in Mandarin since the 1990s. As I suggested in Chapter 1, the widespread consciousness of women as a gender category that is different from men emerged under the backdrop of a post-socialist feminist re-creation of gender differences, and the introduction of the Western gender theories and literatures of Beauvoir, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva (Chen 2011). This school of Western feminist thought, especially what is known as

“French feminist theory”, have enlightened the local feminist investigation of women’s experiences, languages, and gender subjectivity, in contrast with the male-centric, masculine cultural norms after the Chinese economic reform (Zhong 2006).

In 1990s China, the emergence of a representative genre of women's “body writing” (身体写作) actively used women’s personal experiences, especially sexual experiences, to explore femininity and women’s subjectivity in post-socialist China with the rise of transnational capitalist values (Lu 2008). These personal writings form a body politics that attempt to “derive a feminist narrative apart from their cultural heritage, both modern and classic” (Zheng 2004, 49). However, these efforts in seeking a unique language for Chinese women to voice their experience have also been criticised for being less subversive because they tend to fall back into stereotypical images of femininity under the male gaze (Dai 1999; Zhong 2006). The concerns expressed by these feminist scholars included whether the (sexual) liberation of female bodies and the attempts to narrate women’s embodied experiences can serve a feminist transformative purpose: “in what ways does body writing get translated into an emancipation of the female self without at the same time turning it into isolated ‘shrieks’?” (Zhong 2006, 654) For Zhong Xueping (2006), the body writing of the 1990s gradually lost its feminist political significance. Zhong considers that this genre signifies a “culture turn” in local Chinese gender and women's studies, that is to say, turning “away from the social issues whose articulations at the time were constrained within a tired orthodox Marxist discourse” (637).

Since the 1990s, both academic disciplines and feminist movements in mainland China started to shift towards a direction with less explicit concerns of political and economic transformations. As in Wu Xiaoying’s words, local Mandarin-Chinese women and gender studies began to follow a “depoliticised” pathway, selectively adopting gender and feminist theories as social science analytical tools, focusing on explaining the social

reality without showing explicit political interests or intentions in their cooperation with grassroots feminist social activists (Wu 2018; 2024). In Chen Ya-chen's point of view, this transformation in mainland China since the 1990s is largely marked by turning towards a "nonpractical" French theoretical orientation, which is embraced for being less politically sensitive in Chinese political environment comparing to the American counterparts (Chen 2011). Chen concludes that this tendency is a preference for "feminism as a theory over feminism as practice" (171). The difficulty of mainland Chinese feminists transforming abstract theories into practices leads, by this argument, to a selective filtering in introducing Western feminist thoughts. Thus, it selects French feminist theories, such as those of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, that are "theoretically and philosophically eloquent" (174) but do not tend to address concrete social issues and generate political pressure for social transformation, appeared in the academic horizon as a safer and more promising option.

This brings us to the division of "nüxing zhuyi" (女性主义) as gender consciousness, and "nüquan zhuyi" (女权主义) as women's rights, as two correlated but separate pathways in Chinese local women's studies (Rofel and Dai 2018, 3). Since the 1990s, the shift in Mandarin academia to "nüxing zhuyi", a less politically upfront local stance that concentrates on exploring femininity and women's living experiences, shows an explicit contradiction with overseas Chinese feminist scholars publishing in English (Han 2024). Local Chinese women and gender studies in Mandarin have invested considerable effort in building the situated knowledge of Chinese women and women's movements. Such studies emphasise subjectivity, and also situated bodies and experiences in socialist and post-socialist Chinese contexts (Spakowski 2018; Song and Gao 2022), but without demonstrating any overt interest in contemporary feminist politics and activism (Han 2024). At the same time, as I have illustrated earlier, Chinese digital feminist scholarship, centred on media and communication studies and often appearing in English publications, often exhibits explicit political interests but through

the social movement framework and, in turn, displaying little interest in bodies and experiences. One consequence of this split in academic Chinese feminist studies is that investigations and theorisations of bodies in Chinese contexts have gradually been resituated in less upfront political domains.

Against this local backdrop, I want to argue for adopting an embodied approach to Chinese digital feminism as a necessary replenishment of both “nüxing zhuyi” and “nüquan zhuyi”. Putting it into other words, this is an attempt to rejoin these two pathways to restore the political force of Chinese feminism as lived by embodied individuals. For this purpose, we need a re-politicalisation of gendered bodies in feminism: not just as how bodies are inscribed and what bodies mean, but also what bodies can do in the politics of Chinese feminism.

What Bodies Can Do? Reviewing Feminist Theorisations of Bodies

In this section, I will conduct a theoretical overview of feminist theorisations of bodies from the three major intertwining streams of feminist phenomenology, corporeal feminist studies, and feminist affect studies. Together, these three areas of feminist knowledge inspire this thesis’s approach to the “men” question in Chinese digital feminism. Overall, these three areas of feminist theories challenge the notion of body as an essential, natural entity in opposition to rationality in the traditional mind-body division in Western philosophy (Blackman 2021). Moreover, these fields also provide this thesis with key guidance on how to reflect on the politicisation of bodies, by taking bodies as fields of contesting meanings, discourses, and power, while simultaneously paying attention to an embodied feminist subjectivity that can actively resist, produce, and transform (Blackman 2021).

In *Bodies in Technology*, Don Ihde begins with a summary of *body one* and *body two*, as two different senses of how bodies can be approached and analysed. This summary offers a brief framework for understanding Western theories and philosophies of the body after rejecting the essentialist naturalistic views of bodies. According to Ihde, *body one* refers to our corporeal being as the site of perceiving, sensing, and interpreting the world in the phenomenological sense, while *body two* approaches the body from the perspective of what a body means and how a body is culturally constructed:

I will investigate several senses of body in relation to our experience of being embodied. We *are* our body in the sense in which phenomenology understands our motile, perceptual, and emotive being-in-the-world. This sense of being a body I call *body one*. But we are also bodies in a social and cultural sense, and we experience that, too. [...] I call this zone of bodily significance *body two*. (Ihde 2002, xi)

Both *body one* and the *body two* in Ihde's summary have rich theoretical foundations in the fields of philosophy and gender and cultural studies. In the poststructuralist approach, the influential politicisations of bodies from Michael Foucault significantly contribute to the theorisation of *body two*, in which bodies are taken as sites of governance and power (Foucault 2012). While Foucault's famous theorisation of power relies on his thorough investigation of the workings of discourse, discursive power for him is never equivalent to ideological effects without actual bodies. Bodies always play a crucial role in Foucault's theorisation of power, and discourse never operates in pure language forms. As Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, the operation of power is enabled through the discipline and control of bodies:

One would be concerned with the 'body politic', as a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge. (Foucault 2012, 28)

The “docile bodies” in Foucault’s theories are bodies that can be “subjected, used, transformed and improved” (2012, 136). Thus, bodies are exactly how disciplinary power of the society works to “increase the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)” (2012, 138). This theorisation has widely influenced feminist theories on how women’s bodies are also being disciplined and governed by patriarchal forces (Bartky 1997, 199; Bordo 2008). Based on Foucault’s theories, Sandra Lee Bartky argues that women’s bodies are docile subjects that are constructed and shaped by patriarchal disciplinary practices, producing “a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed” (Bartky 1997, 100). Bartky also considers that media is one of the most frequently discussed disciplinary powers acting on women’s bodies. In doing so, an association between media representation and its effect on women’s bodies is established through ideas of femininity. The pervasive disciplinary power in media culture has constituted a panopticon for women to police their own bodies, as they internalise the disciplines and use them to reflect and define themselves. This self-discipline practice of female bodies is noted as an “oppression that exercises itself” (Bordo 2008, 208).

There are, however, feminist theorists that raise questions about Foucault’s theorisation of the docile body, particularly for overlooking the significance of body’s lived experience (McNay 2013), its affective or psychic life (Butler 1997; Kruks 2018), and the corporeal materiality (Grosz 1994) of gendered bodies – in other words, the *body one* in Ihde’s summary presented earlier. For some of these critics, like Bartky (1997)

and Lois McNay (2013), Foucault's earlier theorisations of bodies in *Discipline and Punishment* insufficiently attend to sexual difference, specifically the experiences of women's bodies. Although Foucault has intensively discussed gendered experiences of bodies and sexual differences, such as in the later volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1988), there are feminist theorists questioning Foucault's body theories for taking bodies as a passive entity under the power inscription. In other words, Foucault's body theories are categorised by many as a cultural inscription model of body theories (Blackman 2021), in which bodies are seen as "shaped and constituted through signs, signification, language, and metaphors" (Blackman 2021, 28), so that the "material or corporeal body disappears and is replaced by cultural signs and symbols" (Blackman 2021, 28). For Grosz, such an "outside in" model of inscription theories puts bodies and the positions of bodies as a social and historical production (Grosz 1994, 117). Yet, she disapproves of approaching bodies as passive entities – as blank pages or slates to be inscribed or stamped on by power:

I am suggesting that, in feminist terms at least, it is problematic to see the body as a blank, passive page, a neutral "medium" or signifier for the inscription of a text. If the writing or inscription metaphor is to be of any use for feminism – and I believe that it can be extremely useful – the specific modes of materiality of the "page" body must be taken into account: one and the same message, inscribed on a male or a female body, does not always or even usually mean the same thing or result in the same text. The elision of the question of sexual (and racial) specificity of the inscribed surface occurs throughout the history of accounts of the body. (Grosz 1994, 156)

The feminist criticism of the inscription model of body theories returns to a central question in the politicisation of bodies, which is about what bodies can do in feminist

politics, if they are not only sites of discipline. This concern aligns with some of the theoretical debates on the lack of the role of agency in Foucault's approach (Ahearn 2001). For example, McNay's scepticism towards the concept of the docile body and its feminist application is especially put on their depiction of women as passive victims under domination, so that the process or possibility of resistance becomes too opaque and hard to imagine (McNay 2013, 47). Together with this question on agency and resistance is some other feminist theorists' enquiries on what exactly happens during the process of "outside in", as by reading Foucault, "we get absolutely no sense of *what it feels like* to be subjected to the panoptical gaze; nor do we get any sense of the experiential dimension of becoming a self-surveilling subject" (Kruks 2018, 75, with my emphasis). This is also the question asked by Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), in which Butler discusses the importance of Foucault's subjection theory but indicates that there are more things to discover in the psychic process of subjection.

These questions inspire feminist theorisations of bodies back to a rediscovery of the politicisation of the *body one* – the body that is corporeal, experiential, and affective – and its dynamic instead of exclusive relations with the *body two*. Using Ihde's original conclusion, the *body one* is "the necessary condition of all situated knowledges – but it is not the sufficient condition" (Ihde 2002, 69). And yet, "for there to be a marked cultural body, or body two, there must be a body one that is markable" (Ihde 2002, 70). Theorisations of this dynamic relationship between these two senses of bodies are well presented in feminist phenomenology, feminist corporeal studies, and feminist affective studies, which I will now offer a brief illustration respectively.

First, feminist concerns over these questions are associated with the other important field influencing feminist theorisation of bodies: the feminist phenomenology approach that takes subjectivity through embodied lived experience. These portions of feminist phenomenology work, often known and named as "critical phenomenology" (Oksala

2023), heavily rely on the body-subject theoretical ground from Merleau-Ponty and its later development from Beauvoir (Fischer and Embree 2000). According to Merleau-Ponty, the subject is first and foremost a “body-subject”, which means that the subject’s knowledge of the world is produced only through bodily sensations and perceptions (Merleau-Ponty 2011). This view takes bodies as primary and essential sites of production of senses and meanings, so that there is no way for individuals to know the world without bodies. Merleau-Ponty’s body-subject theory also emphasises that, since bodies are the most important and fundamental medium for knowing the world, all knowledge is subjective as situated knowledge, produced through one’s simultaneously material and social body in the world. It is in relation to this double situation of the body that Beauvoir (1989) and her followers in feminist phenomenological theory find value in Merleau-Ponty’s works. Bodies are not objects being determined by individual minds or consciousness but are materially conditioned by real-life situations. Meanwhile, the body itself is a situation, producing knowledge and shaping individual consciousness through its perceptual mediation of the world. As Beauvoir notes in *The Second Sex* (1989):

Because the body is the instrument of our hold on the world, the world appears different to us depending on how it is grasped. [...] But we refuse the idea that they [bodies] form a fixed destiny for her [women]. They do not suffice to constitute the basis for a sexual hierarchy; they do not explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her for ever after to this subjugated role. (Beauvoir 1989, 45)

This understanding of bodies allows a form of freedom that acknowledges constraints on women’s situations (Kruks 1981; 2018; Moi 1999). Sonia Kruks (2018) indicates that Beauvoir’s theories in *The Second Sex* offer such a theory of freedom – a “freedom-in-constraint” (13) – that is provident and valuable for feminist politicisations of bodies:

“for if ‘I am my body’, how my body is defined will significantly shape my very existence” (Kruks 2018, 54), so that there is no freedom-without-constraints based on individual willingness and consciousness. As Kruks notes, this idea of freedom in Beauvoir’s writings based on women’s situations acknowledges both the socio-cultural construction of gender, and one’s body also as a situation to grasp and know the world. But unlike the inscription approach that interprets this situation as an effect of disciplinary, Kruks thinks that Beauvoir’s phenomenological approach is different for recognising women’s subjectivity in living with the situation as body-subject:

For “feminine” behavior is more than either a calculated strategy or a discursively produced effect. It is more than a strategy because being a woman is not an identity that an “inner” self could pick up or shed at will. It is more than a discursive effect because it is interiorized and taken up in ways that are both constrained and yet still indeterminate, and open to moral evaluation. (Kruks 2018, 83)

Young (2005) also agrees that Beauvoir’s phenomenological approach to women’s bodies theorises women’s subjectivity in a way that is distinct from the cultural inscription approach. In a woman’s existence, she writes, there is “a basic tension between immanence and transcendence” (Young 2005, 31). The lived body of women is a situation or site that enables the generation of subjectivity (Moi 1999). This ontological and epistemological view of the body-subject offers a justification for the view that all knowledge must be situated knowledge generated by the body, a position that also rejects the notion of completely objective knowledge (Olkowski 2006). Meanwhile, these feminist phenomenological theorists acknowledge that the body is always “in a situation”, which also means that it is continually being constructed by the cultural and historical context in which it is located. This situation, as Young (2005) emphasises, is a result of the unavoidable reality rooted in gender as a structure in the

patriarchal sexist society (42). The situations of the body, therefore, are not just a personal matter, as something that “is not, strictly speaking, ‘mine’ but is part of a more general situation that transcends my immediate experiences” (Kruks 2018, 60). Bodies in situations of structural social inequality can inhibit and suppress – although they cannot entirely cancel – the freedom of the body, its ability to act, move, and feel in certain ways (Kruks 2018). Overall, this approach allows for the acknowledgement of the existence of gender power relations in constituting and shaping gendered bodies, while, at the same time, recognising/accepting the productivity of the body-subject – its potential to generate (different) knowledge through the body’s mediation of the situation.

The tension between the primacy of discourse and experience remains at the core of the debates between poststructuralism and phenomenological orientation in feminist theories of bodies. In this phenomenological approach, bodies, rather than discourses, are taken as the primary condition for knowledge production. Compared to the poststructuralist emphasis on discourse, body politics and subject position, the phenomenological pathway provides an approach that emphasises lived experiences, embodiment, and subjectivity (Fischer and Embree 2000). Feminist theorists taking the phenomenology pathway insist that bodies and embodied experiences cannot be reduced entirely to discursive construction and that representation cannot fully capture the complexity of experiences (Kruks 2018). In opposition to this account, feminist poststructuralist theorists disagree with any reliance on women’s experiences as implying there is something in bodily experience that is authentic because they are prediscursive reality (Scott and Butler 1992, 31). Joan Wallach Scott particularly warns that taking experience as the foundational evidence of feminist political struggle risks naturalising difference, rather than approaching differences as constituted in power relations (Scott and Butler 1992, 25). To this end, Joanna Oksala (2016) provides a theoretical approach to experience that combines both discourse and experience, as she

argues that there is no need to establish a categorical opposition between poststructuralism and phenomenology (Oksala 2016b). Such an opposition unnecessarily interprets experience as a discursive effect and construction, or, reaching the other extreme, suggests that experience is a prediscursive field that is only available from the first-person perspective. Oksala agrees with Scott in challenging the use of experience as prediscursive evidence grounded in the commonality among all women. At the same time, she argues that a personal account of experience is still crucial for feminist politics to demand social changes. The problem is not lived experience itself, but any argument that takes experience as fundamentally self-evident (Oksala 2006; 2016). Instead, if we accept that the body-subject is always historically and thus socially and discursively constituted, experience can be taken by feminist theorists as a resource and as a means to emancipation.

In this debate, the corporeal feminist theories contribute to dealing with this tension by intervening into the complexity between cultural inscription and the body's materiality (Blackman 2021). Grosz's concept of "möbius strip" is one of the attempts to argue that the body's inside and outside are always forming a continuity. Grosz argues against the idea of bodies as passive entities – as blank pages or slates to be inscribed or stamped on by power. The specific materiality of the surface being inscribed on (Grosz 1994) is ignored. Aligning with other feminist critiques of Foucault's indifference towards sexual difference of the docile body, Grosz proposes that the inscription methods, although useful for feminist theorists, can be refigured for feminists to use them to analyse women's bodies. By theorising bodies as a "möbius strip", Grosz notes:

Bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between these two alternatives. The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which,

through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another. This model also provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside. (Grosz 1994, xii)

In Grosz's corporeal feminist theory, bodies are taken as an "open materiality" that "a set of (possibly infinite) tendencies and potentialities which may be developed, yet whose development will necessarily hinder or induce other developments and other trajectories" (Grosz 1994, 191). This is to say, Grosz provides a feminist corporeal theory that both acknowledges that bodies are being influenced by the socio-cultural forces, while indicating that these influences do not work as an inscription, but as a process of connection and circulations of intensities with the bodily materiality (Blackman 2021, 84). This "body materialism", as it is put by Braidotti (Braidotti 2011, 15), takes what can be called a new materialist approach by seeing the corporeal body as "neither a biological nor a sociological category" (25). Instead, the body is "the materialist but also vitalist groundings of human subjectivity and to the specifically human capacity to be both grounded and to flow." (25) In this way, the corporeal body is not passively receiving influences but is lived and vital: "bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable" (Grosz 1994, xi).

These works largely intersect with feminist affect studies. In Grosz and Braidotti's versions of corporeal feminism, affect is taken as intensities of the body, which is "a surface of intensities and an affective field in interaction with others" (Braidotti 2011, 25). Affect theories emphasise that bodies and affects cannot be fully captured and

transmitted by language or discourses (Massumi 1995), but rather “exceed these categories” (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012, 2). With this primary acknowledgement of the body’s capacities to affect and to be affected, feminist affect studies assemble a valuable collection of feminist theories of bodies ranging from post-structural, phenomenological, and corporeal materialist approaches. All of these works try to investigate the psychic sides associated with feminist politics while challenging the mind/body or reason/emotion binary (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012). By doing so, feminist affect theories and their applications indicate not only why, in some ways, feelings matter to feminism, but also how feminism is always inseparable from feelings. That is to say, feelings are essentially an important part of feminist politics, instead of merely as a tactic or tool for feminist political emancipation. For example, for Ahmed (2016), feeling is the start of one’s feminist politics, as “feminism often begins with intensity: you are aroused by what you come up against” (22). This role of affective sensations is even taken by Clare Hemmings (2012) to be a promising alternative to replace identity politics in feminist solidarity, as she insists that the affective dissonance “has to arrive if a feminist politics is to emerge, and for that reason it may even have the status of a universal condition” (158).

As I will elaborate and present my interview materials in later chapters (mainly Chapter 4 and Chapter 6), affect is a crucial point of access to the “men” question of contemporary Chinese digital feminism. In this thesis, I am particularly interested in the “ugly” affects that “read the predicaments posed by a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to society as such” (Ngai 2004, 15). If most of our attention to affect in feminist politics focuses on feelings that seem “effective” or promising, what about those feelings that may disturb, suspend, but nonetheless form part of feminist politics? Aren’t the ugly feelings in feminist politics also part of a situated feminist knowledge emerging from experiences of embodiment? To this end, I agree with Sianne Ngai (2004) that ugly feelings are political for

highlighting dilemmas that might otherwise remain invisible (15). Thus, turning to and away from ugly feelings in feminist theory and practice is also, in itself, a political act. To put it in Ahmed's words: "noticing becomes a form of political labor. [...] We learn not to notice some suffering, such that if the suffering of those deemed strangers appears, then it does so only dimly, at the edges of our consciousness" (Ahmed 2016, 32). So she suggests that "if we have been taught to turn away, we have to learn to turn toward" (32), to those disturbing feelings that are associated with pain, disapproval, and punishment – those feelings that kill other people's joy, and those that even kill feminist joy and our own joy. To do this, we need to turn back to the bodies and embodied subjectivities in their specific situation, asking what these feelings are, how they become available and unavailable, and what they are producing? This, I will argue, is a crucial point of access to the "men" question in contemporary Chinese feminist politics, and these feelings might shape our expectations, or drive us away from our expectations by exceeding and disrupting them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined a few problems with bodies within the existing studies of Chinese digital feminism. In Chinese digital feminism studies, men and masculinity studies, and local Chinese women/gender studies on bodies, the politics of bodies in feminism have not been sufficiently discussed. As I have indicated, the consequences of this insufficiency include a transcendental and simplistic account of feminism, the instrumental understanding/applications of affect and media discourses, and the lack of address of agency and embodied subjectivity in feminist politics. These are tendencies that I try to avoid throughout this thesis. If this attempt reveals any standpoint of my own, I should admit it. In a research project on Chinese digital feminism and its relation with men, I am no outsider. Even though my relatively privileged position as a Chinese

feminist scholar in Australia allows me a certain distance from aspects of this topic, I still cannot and do not want to run away from Chinese digital feminism, its disputes, affective connections, and its problematic sides. I am a feminist researcher who is also situated, positioned, and embodied. Thus, situated knowledge is not only how I propose Chinese digital feminism should be approached, but it is also this thesis's feminist methodology that "enables me, as a researcher, "to recognise and include [my] positionality in [my] research work" (Shaw 2013, 95) and actively reflect upon it.

After reviewing the feminist theorisations of bodies and affect in the three major fields of feminist phenomenology, corporeal feminist studies, and feminist affect theories, this chapter proposes an embodied approach to Chinese digital feminism. This means to approach the individuals – individual men and feminist women involved in this project – as embodied affective individuals producing their own embodied situated knowledges of feminism. The aim of my work here is to uncover these political dimensions of ugly feelings in the "men" question within Chinese digital feminism as much as possible. By "political", I mean more than simply being politically promising; I mean revealing the socio-historical context of the politics of Chinese digital feminism and the embodied individuals living with feminism. This exploration will begin in the next chapter, where I will turn to my interviews with 14 feminist women, discussing their everyday sensibilities in living a feminist life.

Part Two

Chapter 3

“I am a feminist, but...” Living a Feminist Life with Everyday Sensibility

Madeline: I won't define myself (as a radical feminist). I am a feminist, but I always decide not to belong to any groups, because I am pretty sceptical about the whole group thing.

Madeline is a young urban Chinese woman in her 20s, highly educated, and participating in feminism mainly through Chinese social media platforms. These characteristics align her with the broader profile of other feminist women I interviewed in this project. Such demographic traits are typical among Chinese digital feminists since the emergence of the #MeToo movement (Yin and Sun 2021). Madeline came to know about my project via the survey circulated on social media and expressed her interest in taking a follow-up online interview. During our conversations, Madeline enthusiastically shared her feminist thoughts with me, including her understanding of the foundation of patriarchal social structure, of the gender dichotomy, and her opinions on different feminisms in contemporary China. When Madeline talked about her appreciation of the development of Chinese radical feminism, I asked why she did not select the option “I am a radical feminist” on the questionnaire. She quickly clarified that she was not a radical feminist and refused to categorise herself as part of any feminist groups. “But I know their [Chinese radical feminists’] theories”.²¹ She added,

²¹ Chinese radical feminism (激女) is a local feminist development influenced by both Western and Korean feminism since the late 2010s. Yang Chun and Zhou Yongyuan's article define Chinese radical feminism as the “new feminist activism” (2023, 84) that separate its position from both liberal feminism and queer politics. Here, Madeline was referring to radical feminist theories as a developing a general hostility towards men.

“Many people do not like to listen to them. But I think their theories have practical meanings.”

Madeline’s attitude here reflects a tendency that is prevalent among my feminist interviewees. They are well acquainted with various feminist theories, propositions, and debates on social media in contemporary China, have a deep understanding of the situation of structural gender inequality, and believe in the necessity of feminist transformations. However, they often do not identify themselves with Chinese radical feminism, nor with any other specific feminist strands or groups. Their feminist practices and actions are less collectively organised but are highly individualist and grounded in practical politics on an everyday level. While these features are certainly outcomes of the Chinese political situation, which makes offline political actions and activist groups mostly impossible options for my participants (see Tan 2017), their reactions reflect more than a simple political risk-avoidance strategy. As I will show later in this chapter, there are many complex reasons why these young Chinese feminists hesitate to invest in an upfront feminist group identity or advocate for collective feminist activism. But among these concerns, they seldom express direct concern about the potential risks of being brought to the attention of an authoritarian state government. When Madeline briefly noted the difficulty of engaging in offline feminist activism in China, her expression was quite calm, and her response was simple: “Because we have our ‘Chinese reality’ (国情)”, she said, and then quickly explained: “[...] But [Chinese radical feminists’] arguments are also radical. Did you know the book called *SCUM Manifesto*?²² It is a reference book for many Chinese radical

²² *SCUM Manifesto* (Solanas 2004), published by American radical feminist Valerie Solanas in 1967. “SCUM” stands for “Society for Cutting Up Men”.

feminists now. [...] And Chinese feminists are also heavily influenced by the East Asian region, for example, South Korea. Do you know what 6b4t is?”²³

Madeleine did not say this to try and impress me with the “radical-ness” of Chinese feminism. During our interview, I was struck by how familiar Madeline was with all kinds of feminist theories and feminist political propositions – flexibly using abstruse terms such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, liberalism, foreign feminist theorists – and she clearly tried to use this knowledge to explain gender conditions in contemporary China through her own eyes. With her own understanding, Madeline had built her own system of knowledge. Her passion lay in using these theoretical tools to understand the world and to imagine what a different world would be like. I observed a similar enthusiasm in my other feminist interviewees. These young Chinese women may not all be equally knowledgeable about gender and feminist theories, but they are similarly keen to use feminism to critically interpret what is happening around them, while expressing their dissatisfaction or anger towards the current gender situation in China. They sometimes express these ideas publicly via social media. Yet they also often remain private and quiet. That is, my feminist interviewees leave me with the impression that they are “doing” or living a version of feminism that is simultaneously radical and highly individualised.

Considering how we should understand this individualised Chinese digital feminism is a core task for this chapter. Considering many of the popular public accusations of feminists “hate” men centres on the arguments of Chinese digital feminists being too emotional and individualised, this chapter starts from the basic enquiry of what does this sensibility and individualisation mean to Chinese digital feminism. In Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, I will gradually unfold how this individualisation feature is heavily

²³ 6B4T, or 10BT, is a set of radical feminist propositions originating from South Korean feminist communities. Its influence extended to mainland Chinese digital feminism in the 2020s.

embedded in the men question in contemporary Chinese digital feminism, so that this “men” question is impossible to be productively comprehended without a deep understanding of this individualised feminism. As outlined in Chapter 1, the individualisation of Chinese feminism has been a historical tendency since the 1980s, as the dominant force of feminism gradually transformed from state-led to cooperative social organisations, grassroots groups, and eventually to individual netizens on social media. Since the emergence of #MeToo, Chinese digital feminism has built multiple connective and collective actions to exert social influence through hashtag activism and other online debates (Xu and Liu 2024; Xue and Rose 2022; Zeng 2020). Meanwhile, studies also indicate that Chinese digital feminism shows features of elitism and neoliberalism (Yin 2021; Liu 2023; Peng 2021). As most participants and topics centre on middle-class urban young women, Chinese digital feminism often lacks visible representation of women from different age and class backgrounds, while often incorporating neoliberal discourses of self-empowerment and personal choice (Huang 2023).

Although these critiques of neoliberal individualisation nevertheless reveal some important characteristics of Chinese digital feminism, the ways in which individual feminists in neoliberal China experience and construct feminism from their own embodied positions remain underexplored. Following Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1997; see Chapter 2), I also question whether it is always meaningful to expect Chinese digital feminists to produce a form of feminism entirely disentangled from neoliberal frameworks within a neoliberal Chinese context. This chapter, therefore, explores the complexities of feminist life among the 14 self-identified young Chinese women I interviewed, by considering how the individualised aspects of their feminism emerge from their lived situations in the neoliberal post-socialist China. In the end, this chapter argues that the Chinese digital feminism embodied by these interviewed feminist women is characterised by a *feminist*

sensibility, which needs to be differentiated from the popular application of postfeminist sensibility described by Rosalind Gill in many Western contexts (Gill 2007; 2016). A feminism of everyday sensibility in the hostile, authoritarian, and neoliberal post-socialist Chinese context has replaced the conventional collective feminist activism as the core element of living a feminist life, defining what feminism means and what it means to be a feminist in *post-MeToo* China.

A Feminist Life without Organised Collective Actions

Living a feminist life does not mean adopting a set of ideals or norms of conduct, although it might mean asking ethical questions about how to live better in an unjust and unequal world (in a not-feminist and antifeminist world). [...] To live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable. The question of how to live a feminist life is alive as a question as well as being a life question. (Ahmed 2016, 1-2)

What is it like for my feminist interviewees to live their feminist lives in contemporary China? I started each of my interviews with feminist women with the same question: How did you become a feminist? In response, I heard 14 young Chinese women's stories about when they first learned about feminism, through which channels, how they gradually understood feminism through this process, and how feminism is usually practised and lived in their everyday lives. This section provides an overview of these stories, none of which are about joining feminist groups or social activism, but are instead about these women's gendered experiences and reflections on gender in their individual lives.

While widely reported Chinese feminist actions organised by grassroots feminist groups in the 2000s and early 2010s involved street performance and small-scale protests (Wang 2018; Wang and Driscoll 2019), such actions belong to an unfamiliar field for my feminist interviewees in their early 20s. Accepting the reality that offline collective feminist activism is mostly impossible under the state's strict regulations on social activism (Yuen 2015) and the mainstream discourses of stability and harmony,²⁴ my interviewees' feminist practices and actions are operated through social media. Individualised small offline feminist practices and actions are also part of their feminist lives.

Overall, no matter online or offline, my interviewees' practices can be understood as a form of everyday feminism focused on "what feminists can do to challenge gender inequalities as individuals in their day-to-day lives and which do not involve collective action" (Schuster 2017, 648). In other words, although their actions, especially their online participation, can together constitute a collective feminist effort to make social changes, the initial form of these actions is spontaneous, individualised, and mostly happens on the everyday level. These everyday feminist actions generally fit into James Scott's definition of everyday resistance (Scott 1985), which he notes is often distinguished from "real" political resistance for being "(a) unorganised, unsystematic, and individual, (b) opportunistic and self-indulgent, (c) have no revolutionary consequences, and/or (d) imply, in their intention or meaning, an accommodation with the system of domination." (292) In an environment which does not afford collective offline action, these individual everyday practices – such as speaking up on the Internet, backing up feminist posts, having daily conversations, and stopping sexist jokes – constitute the main forms of feminist action for my feminist interviewees.

²⁴ The harmonious society (和谐社会) is an official concept raised by President Hu Jintao during his leadership in 2002. The term is then adopted by President Xi Jinping in the Core Socialist Values promoted in 2012. Criticisms of this official ideology indicate that the concept of harmony is incorporated by the CCP to use traditional Chinese Confucianism values to minimise and suppress social dissidents and conflicts (Chan 2010; Lei 2017).

One of the most frequently used forms of online action among my interviewees was hashtag activism, understood by them as an action of “making voices” (发声) for women in Chinese society. These online actions are driven by their personal anger and sense of justice, but they also understand them as part of a bigger vision of feminist social impact that challenges structural gender inequality. A sense of social responsibility is embedded in these online actions through visibility politics (Clark-Parsons 2021) that draws public attention through platform mechanisms to widen the impact of gender topics. One of my interviewees, Carol, phrases it this way:

We pay attention to these [gender] issues and care about what happens in our society. I don't think everyone would choose to join the discussion by leaving comments and strong opinions. But we always keep an eye on these gender topics on social media.

As Carol's words also show, rather than being seen as mere “slacktivism” (Christensen 2011), simple “click” acts such as forwarding and “liking” gender issue posts on social media are considered as contributing to feminist influence. Compared to more active ways like publishing their own opinions and leading gender topic discussions, a lot of my interviewees admit that their online feminist participation in this way is usually quiet. Only a few said they had tried to produce feminist cultural products like podcasts and *WeChat* public accounts (which function like blogs) to actively lead online public discussions. Madeline is one who does have her own feminist *WeChat* public account where she publishes her theoretical analysis of Chinese patriarchy. But she also admitted that she rarely “promotes” feminism online in other proactive ways, such as calling on people to join or practice feminism. Similarly, other interviewees also explained that, instead of becoming online public opinion leaders, they prefer more private ways of participating in feminist discussions, such as leaving comments when

they see gender topics on social media or by communicating with other women, usually their friends or members of their existing online communities.

The reasons these feminist women stay cautious and quiet are multi-layered. One is, of course, concerns with their own safety. In a recent study of South Korean feminism, Jung and Moon (2024) define a quiet feminism as “an agentic, everyday feminist practice performed by self-identified feminists who maintain a low profile in sheltered environments under unreceptive social contexts toward feminism” (218). This type of quiet feminism happens in an everyday backlash environment, and therefore, women understandably prioritise individual safety over explicit collective actions. Their analysis indicates that Korean quiet feminism is more than a personal choice feminism driven by individualised consumerism as observed by some studies in Western contexts (Crossley 2010). Instead, it needs to be understood as a cautious reservation that protects an individual feminist’s identity in a hostile anti-feminist environment. Living in a similarly intense, hostile environment characterised by everyday backlash, platformed misogyny, and online censorship (Liao 2024), many of these feminist interviewees tried to avoid using explicitly political, aggressive expressions in their personal accounts in order to prevent being attacked and censored. This political environment in contemporary China characterises Chinese digital feminism as indirectly confrontational, focusing more on the private space rather than on public collective actions (Yang and Zhou 2023).

Beyond the publicly visible hashtag activism they acknowledge as a form of collective feminist power (Mendes 2019; Clark-Parsons 2021), there are other important but less visible ways these women practice feminism in their everyday lives. For example, their choice between different social media platforms for different feminist purposes is a daily decision. Ella here describes how she browses and responds to online gender discussions tactically by switching among platforms:

Well, how should I put this? I am the type of person who fears the Internet. Since my middle school age, I started to deliberately avoid leaving too many posts on the Internet. So, most of the time, I probably just click the “like” button without saying many words. [...] But if I am in the small-scale WeChat groups, I will express myself. Not on public platforms. [...] Sometimes, when I saw those terrible incidents being exposed online, I would also forward them to my private group and angrily criticises them [with my friends]. [...] Those public platforms have too many men. I also have concerns that my account can be blocked by the platform if I publish fierce content there.

As Ella’s words show, the relative quietness of such feminist action depends on the environment where one is speaking. Like Ella, most of my feminist interviewees mainly use *Weibo* to view gender topics and participate in hashtag activism. They sometimes transfer news and events onto their *WeChat* friends page to expand social influence. *Douban* offers a community-based platform where some interviewees have safer and deeper feminist discussions in a semi-public space. Even smaller and more private feminist conversations happen via personal *WeChat* and *QQ* instant messages, usually confined to close friends. Additionally, many interviewees are gradually shifting to *Xiao Hong Shu*, which is a more public algorithm-based platform where they view different public opinions on gender topics rather than participating in in-depth feminist discussion. Some of them also use *X* (formerly *Twitter*) to learn about less-restricted feminist opinion on Chinese gender discussions. These different platforms with different uses together comprise their feminist life in the digital space.

On the question of how effectively these everyday individual feminist practices contribute to social change, my feminist interviewees vision of making a feminist future in China exhibits ambivalence towards the effectiveness of individual efforts. On the one hand, they acknowledged the limits on any individual feminist's ability to create social changes and affirmed that Chinese feminism needs collective power and solidarity. On the other hand, this collective power is understood mostly as all feminist individuals doing their best in their everyday lives, rather than undertaking conventional collective political actions. In other words, they tend to believe that social change can only happen if many individuals change themselves first. Conventional collective feminist politics for my interviewees does not even appear to be a choice on the table.

Many of my feminist interviewees emphasised the importance of making feminist change by enhancing their own personal achievements in terms of education and career. This is key to why Chinese digital feminism has been widely analysed and criticised in recent studies as evincing a neoliberal entrepreneurial spirit that problematically underplays both social power and intersectionality, turning feminism into a question of personal capability (Liu 2023; Li 2024). This would seem to be supported, for example, by one of my interviewees, Donna, arguing that feminism in China could only be achieved through the efforts and leadership of elite, capable women:

For women, I think the first important thing is to develop their careers as much as possible, to put themselves in the position of having relatively more choices. Second, I think it's important to help women in their lives, to form groups to help each other. Last, if it is possible, without jeopardising their careers, women can try to initiate projects to make institutional changes. Only by doing so can women's living conditions be leveraged.

When I asked whether she thinks this is an individualised elitist pathway, Donna answered:

Well, I think institutional changes are also made by individuals or female-led groups. I don't like talking about feminism from a high ground perspective, or talking abstractly about how we should promote feminism. [...] I have also thought about whether this is elitist, and how we can help those women living in the most disadvantaged social conditions. But to "do" feminism realistically, step by step, we need to do it first as individuals. Or you need to be in a position of influence that enables you to make some institutional changes in China.

While this attitude can certainly be criticised as a form of neoliberal feminism that stresses self-responsibility and self-investment that fails to recognise the limits placed on subaltern women's participation in such feminism, the critical point in Donna's understanding is that contemporary Chinese political contexts allow no other ways to make institutional change. Unlike some of the "can-do" girls (Harris 2004) criticised by scholars of postfeminism for reducing structural gender problems to merely personal empowerment (Banet-Weiser 2018), I found that Donna exhibits a clear understanding of structural gender inequality and the necessity to make institutional changes. The key point is that her faith that these structural changes could be achieved is quite limited. She does not see any possibility for offline collective feminist action, meaning that such individual action is at least a path for some possible improvement. Many of my other feminist interviewees' view the possibility of feminism creating institutional changes in similarly gloomy terms. In another example, Kristy said explicitly that she thinks the

current Chinese system cannot be changed through digital feminist activism online, no matter how popular and visible these activities are:

The legal system, political system, socio-economic system ... I don't see any possibilities for them to be changed. Feminism in China is too suppressed. Changes are just impossible. [...] For example, you see movements like #MeToo creating such a huge real surge on the Internet, but as soon as this surge touches the upper political structure, it is immediately terminated.

Similarly, Lora offered a clear explanation of why she thinks investing in oneself is so important for Chinese feminists. She explained that individual empowerment matters for Chinese feminism because that is what enables a person to make institutional change in China:

You need to be “one of those in power” so that you can perhaps change this environment. But the first step for women to become those “in power” is already blocked. If you want to make any feminist changes in China, you cannot expect society to just change by itself. You might think, ok, some laws should be updated to promote society to change for the better. But for those changes to happen, you need to first become one person who can actually have the power to “change” the law. The pathway to becoming such a person is too narrow for women.

Against the background of this political pessimism, the other alternative my interviewees acknowledged was the need to act on whatever they can affect in their daily lives, especially to work at transforming and improving their own gender

consciousness and that of the people around them. For Jessica, for example, having private conversations between individuals is not just a “tool” to persuade or convince others to achieve collective feminist solidarity. She considered the act of having conversations itself as a meaningful feminist practice to exchange and deepen each other’s feminist thoughts. For the interviewees, informal, daily conversations happen in less publicly visible places and extend widely into both their online and offline lives. When I asked Jessica about her vision of a feminist future achieved through such everyday practice, she answered:

I think this [reaching a feminist future] relies on a lot of people’s efforts together. For example, let’s say our interview today. After we have this collision of feminist thoughts in this conversation, I will have new thoughts, and I may find new directions in my future practice of feminism. I think we need more and more “collisions” like this. If so, our whole society and country would be better in terms of gender equality.

Jessica’s answer emphasises the importance of collective effort in doing feminism, even though her thoughts on “new directions” of practising feminism sound vague. Based on our conversation, it seemed this “new direction” referred to her having a new understanding of gender and feminism by levelling up her consciousness and theoretical knowledge. This sense of uncertainty is widely shared by many of my feminist interviewees. They exhibit a keen desire for new possibilities in making a feminist future in China, but at the same time, finding it difficult to imagine ways to achieve this future aside from individual efforts in changing themselves. Another interviewee, Kelly, explained “keeping feminism moving forward” as acting through one’s daily conversations. She considered online and offline conversation to be the most

feasible way of doing feminism, after directly acknowledging that collective offline activism is impossible in the Chinese context:

Sometimes, maybe when you are talking with someone, or when you are having meals together, you can talk about these feminist things. It is not necessarily through your social media. We can act through talking in the real world. [...] In foreign societies, maybe, they have something like a parade or feminist march, but these are impossible in China. Our feminist actions are very restricted. Now, I think we act through conversations.

These comments suggest that the importance and political significance of daily practices in the private sphere need to be further explored in Chinese feminist contexts. As other scholars have already suggested (Zeng 2020; Yang 2022; Yang and Hu 2024), the core motivation for Chinese digital feminist actions is usually not a political sublime produced by feminist collective solidarity. Instead, these actions should be understood as mainly driven by a longing to build connections through conversation. Compared to offline collective actions, these conversations fit better to the definition of connective actions where “participation becomes self-motivating as personally expressive content is shared with, and recognised by, others who, in turn, repeat these networked sharing activities” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 752). These sharing practices might happen only among their close friends in small *WeChat* group chats, or simply between two individuals. In such small conversations, these feminist women build up the counter-public (Fraser 1990) or a “little public sphere” (Hickey-Moody 2016) where they share information, knowledge, opinions, and support that they find difficult to put in risky online public environments under the threats of misogyny and censorship. While many of these private conversations never turn into public actions, it is through this everyday communication that these feminist women deepen their feminist thought and make

gender issues a personally relevant matter. In addition, more private conversations are considered safer, as they are less subject to censorship or attack by backlashers. These relatively secure contexts allow feminist discussions to become more confrontational and “radical”.

A Feminist Sensibility

As I have outlined so far, under the hostile and authoritarian political situation of contemporary China, the feminist lives of my interviewees feature a general collective consciousness while recognising a lack of collective activist options. Their understanding and ways of engaging in feminist politics have been fundamentally shaped and conditioned by this political environment. Individualisation becomes, in this context, a way to preserve and radicalise feminism rather than simply depoliticising feminism into a personal matter. Drawing on my interviews, I want to continue to argue that one key characteristic of Chinese digital feminism is a *feminist sensibility*. This feminist sensibility emphasises individual consciousness and embodied feelings about and within everyday life. But first, I need to explain what feminist sensibility means, especially by clarifying it in comparison with Gill’s well-known conception of a “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill 2007; 2017) that may sound similar or seem to overlap with this term.

Rosalind Gill’s theorisation of postfeminist sensibility is one of the most representative frameworks in feminist scholarship criticising postfeminism. Investigating feelings in the construction of (post)feminism in popular media culture against the background of globalising neoliberalism, Gill influentially characterises postfeminist sensibility as a collection of “elements”, including femininity as “a bodily property, the sexualisation of culture, from objectification to subjectification, individualisation, self-surveillance,

the make-over paradigm, and the reassertion of sexual difference” (Gill 2007, 147). Gill’s critique is that these elements of postfeminist sensibility construct a culture that diverts attention away from structural oppression by spreading a questionable individual empowerment notion that women are entirely self-autonomous to make free choices. In the media culture where “anything [...] can be (re)signified as ‘feminist’” (Gill 2016, 619), Gill sharply indicates that feminism has been framed as an “individual rather than structural or system issue, let alone as connected to other inequalities or located in the broader context of neoliberal capitalism” (Gill 2016, 616). As an important contribution to this scholarship, Gill gets rid of the historical/generational and backlash frameworks in the controversies over the “post” in the term postfeminism, by instead focusing on the “feeling” aspects of postfeminism culture. For some scholars, Gill’s understanding of postfeminism as a sensibility is useful in transnational non-Western contexts, where the waves of white feminist histories might not exist, but a culture of sensibility is circulated and sold by global media industries among the privileged urban middle-class women in “the Global South” (Dosekun 2015; Iskra 2023).

What I found promising and especially fascinating about this term “sensibility” is how it applies to feminism as represented and constructed in media-mediated popular culture. As I have indicated earlier in this chapter, “postfeminism” does not sound like the correct term to describe the feminist women I interviewed in this project. But “sensibility” can still be a useful framework to understand Chinese digital feminism as a non-conventional feminist politics that is heavily reliant on social media and other forms of popular culture. However, the term “sensibility” itself is not very comprehensively explained in Gill’s original works. Her dialogues, clarifications, and critical responses to questions about this “postfeminist sensibility” often centre on problems with “post” or “feminism”, but much less on sensibility (for example, see Gill 2016). This might seem like an additional obstacle for my project as the term itself does

not have an accurate corresponding word in Chinese (and from my observation and teaching experiences, my Chinese international students also frequently get stuck on the word due to this cultural difference).

One phenomenon that is potentially led by this transitional ambiguity of “sensibility” in Gill’s postfeminist sensibility is that in many Chinese digital feminist studies, “sensibility” – as being used as a sentiment about gender in media culture mediated by the market force – is too often taken as a problematic object to be criticised. Since 2020, many publications that apply postfeminist sensibility in contemporary Chinese context started to emerge, critically discussing topics like women’s aesthetics (Jiang 2024), screen media popular culture (Cui 2024; F. Yang 2023; Xu and Zheng 2025a), social media self-branding practices (Wang 2025; Xu and Zheng 2025; Ge and Tian 2024), and some types of online feminist discourses (Zou et al. 2025; Liu 2022; Wu 2025; Ling 2022). While all these studies have importantly indicated the intertwining of consumerism, market-oriented media forces, and neoliberal values with different kinds of popular feminisms in China, what occurs to me is that sometimes the differentiation between feminism and postfeminism in these applications becomes too blurred, so that the feminist positions in these Chinese feminist media studies also become obscured. For example, Zou Wenxue, Yang Xiaoya, and Liu Zikun’s study (2025) phrases online grassroots feminist criticisms on heterosexual romance as an expression of Chinese postfeminist culture, as it embodies “consumerism, individualism, and poststructuralism” (14), and its “collective affective engagement” (14) in the commercialised social media environment fails to foster organised collective movements but instead “prioritize personal narratives and interpersonal dynamics over systemic critique” (14). Similarly, Wu Qi’s (2025) term “postfeminist humor” as a response towards anti-feminism, and Liu Runchao’s (2022) term “postfeminist rage” as a “pseudo empowerment” (68), both highlight a particular version of “radical” feminist expression on Chinese social media and align it with a postfeminist sensibility.

My questions are: why are these instances of “postfeminism” instead of just “feminism”? What are the empirical and theoretical criteria for making this distinction between feminism and postfeminism in China? Is “sensibility” – in the way these studies apply it, as referring to market-mediated affective feminist expressions in a neoliberal context – an inherent problem in itself? If so, how can a non-neoliberal feminism and an affective feminist politics become possible in a context like that of post-socialist China? These questions so far have not been clearly answered in the available scholarship. Consequently, from my point of view, postfeminist sensibility in this Chinese feminist media scholarship has been reduced to a buzzword that indiscriminately refers to a flawed version of feminism, so that any media-friendly feminist expressions/representations that do not involve activism or might be seen to exhibit “neoliberal features” of individualisation and responsabilisation can become criticised as evidence of a postfeminist sensibility. If we accept such a definition, it becomes too easy to reach to a conclusion that maybe everything in Chinese digital feminism is really postfeminism.

But “sensibility” itself is not the target of my criticism of the use of postfeminist sensibility here. Sensibility in Gill’s theorisation is developed from Raymond Williams’s concept of a “structure of feeling”, which he used to describe the experience of culture “in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity” (Williams 2019, 48). In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1985), Williams outlines sensibility’s early connection with sentiment, stressing that both carry the meaning of “a conscious openness to feelings, and also a conscious consumption of feelings” (281). Sentiment then evolved to mean the indulgence of oneself in huge emotions, while the meaning of sensibility departed from this indulgence of feeling to become “a whole way of perceiving and responding, not to be reduced to either ‘thought’ or ‘feeling’” (282). Gill’s critical development of this term is to put it in the context of popular

feminism in the neoliberal background to challenge a binary opposition between representation and subjectivity. Like this structure of feeling, Gill suggests the postfeminist sensibility indicates a common pattern of feeling embedded in contemporary culture that greatly shapes and limits the ways women approach and experience the world (Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017; Gill 2017). Drawing from Foucault, she argues that postfeminist sensibility reveals “the way in which power and ideology operate through the construction of subjects, not through top-down imposition but through negotiation, mediation, resistance, and articulation” (Gill 2008, 438). Thus, “sensibility” in postfeminist sensibility is a core term that highlights a complex relationship between women’s embodied subjectivity and media representation as the site of cultural / ideology production (Gill 2017; 2008).

This sensibility can still be a useful tool to study feminist politics, while taking Chinese digital feminism seriously as a feminist politics. After all, as I have outlined in the previous chapter’s theoretical framework, subjectivity has always been a crucial object for feminist theories and scholarship. However, the way sensibility is used in Gill’s work cannot fully be applied to form a feminism of sensibility. Because Gill primarily takes postfeminist sensibility as a *critical* object of study (Gill 2007, 148; Gill 2017, 230), her analysis of subjectivity centres on how media and ideological discourses discipline subjects and even agency in the neoliberal culture: “it is not simply that subjects are governed, disciplined, or regulated in every more intimate ways, but ever more fundamentally that notions of choice, agency, and autonomy have become central to that regulatory project” (Gill 2008, 443). Gill intensively discusses this disciplinary in her two articles about subjectivity (2008) and affect (2017) in postfeminist culture. In these articles, she sharply criticises the celebration of autonomous discourses in popular feminism: “one of the problems with this focus on autonomous choices is that it remains complicit with, rather than critical of, postfeminist and neoliberal discourses” (Gill 2008, 436). She then develops this self-internalised problematic autonomy to the

affective level of individual subject, by indicating the “ideological-affective made real” (Gill 2008, 440) and how “power operates psychologically, by ‘governing the soul’” (Gill 2008, 443) in postfeminist culture. Thus, drawing from Grosz’s comments on Foucault (Grosz 1994), it seems Gill’s sensibility largely inclines toward the “inscription” pathway that takes bodies and embodied subjectivity as being inscribed “outside-in” by cultural discourses, even though an individual may paradoxically actively seek and identify with that discourse.

This indeed brings to the fore questions of *how feminist agency works*, or about whether *there is any really meaningful agency/autonomy* by which women or feminists to resist the cultural discipline of gender in neoliberal culture. I think these questions are central in what I see as the misapplications of or generalisations using the term of postfeminist sensibility in Chinese digital feminist scholarship. Individual women or feminists are too-often implied as having no agency, or very limited agency, that could be used in “creating real changes” in commercialised media spaces in neoliberal China, so that their feminisms come to be criticised as flawed or incomplete. In my opinion, this tendency paradoxically re-invests in a fantasy of a transcendent “capable” feminist autonomy that can launch a “real” anti-neoliberal feminism that rejects the influences of its grounding neoliberal culture in post-socialist China. Here, I very much agree with Gill’s own questions, as she responds to the endeavour of arguing for a feminist agency by asking why “simply acknowledging cultural influence is seen as somehow disrespectful”, and “being influenced is regarded as shameful rather than ordinary and inevitable” (Gill 2008, 435). Moreover, as Angela Wu and Dong Yige have importantly warned early in 2019, “relying on this critic of neoliberalism to explain actually existing feminism in China amounts to a powerful ideological foreclosure.” (Wu and Dong 2019, 488) Instead, they strongly appeal that studies on Global South feminism need to be more cautious on applying neoliberal criticism that often neglects and undermines the Chinese post-socialist context. If not, “the neo-left intellectual critique risks being co-

opted by a societal backlash that holds grassroots feminism responsible for the worsening of the country's class-based tensions" (487).

Therefore, for sensibility to become a useful tool to study Chinese digital feminism, it needs to be revisited so that feminist agency can be acknowledged without being romanticised. Returning to the embodied approach I outlined in Chapter 2, I argue that Gill's sensibility can be replenished with a phenomenological embodied approach, so that it can become a *feminist sensibility*, or even a feminism of sensibility, in order to better acknowledge my feminist interviewees' everyday politics. To reconsider the term sensibility, it is first, as Gill has claimed, a mediated discursive construction. Yet meanwhile, for sensibility to be *sensed*, it also requires a body-subject. The phenomenological ways of using *sens* in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory take the body as the foundation of sensation and perception (Merleau-Ponty 2011). Merleau-Ponty's *sens* refers specifically to the body's sensational ability to feel, in terms of both the embodied sensations (like smell and see), and conscious perceptions (like one's sense of their being and existence). Different from the common English usage of sense as "meaning, intelligibility, or coherence" (Oxford English Dictionary), *sens* primarily refers in particular to the body's corporeal sensational functions that respond to the world meaningfully, with no pre-requisite of human consciousness. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty starts his discussion of perception with a close analysis of sensations. *Sens* describes the body's material status as flesh, meaning it is open to the world's stimuli through sensations of touch, smell, and sound. In this way the body is a lived subject that can sense the world, and this ability to sense also suggests that the body subject exists as sensory materiality that can be touched, heard, felt, sensed (e.g. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of touching one's own hand), and therefore connected with the world and others. In other words, this responsiveness – the body's ability to *sens* – emphasises the productive and active role of the (flesh) body in producing meanings by itself.

While what I want to call a feminist sensibility cannot be entirely equated with pure bodily sensations like seeing, smelling, and touching, I agree with some feminist theorists who find Merleau-Ponty's *sens* being helpful in highlighting the importance of the situated-ness of the material body in the existence of the subject (Kruks 1981; Grosz 1994). In Simone de Beauvoir's later development of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, sense is given another meaning that can be more broadly used to explain gendered experience or consciousness, such as the feeling of being a woman. Beauvoir uses this to refer to a subject's whole way of perceiving the world and its position of existence through the experience of a gendered body that can neither be reduced to bodily sensations or cultural inscription (Kruks 2018; Moi 1999). For Beauvoir, for example, women's bodies enable them to sense their own beings and to sense the world, and these senses are shaped by her embodied experiences in the situated socio-cultural constructions. From this perspective, Beauvoir's sense describes a feminist epistemology that a gendered body-subject is capable to have perspective experience and knowledge through *feeling* the world. This is an explanation that admits the cultural construction of gendered experiences, while acknowledging the embodied agency and subjectivity of individuals.

This feminist phenomenological perspective can help to build an approach defining sensibility as how one perceives and feels their existence and their subject position in their located context through active embodiment. Recently, the closest application of sensibility using this perspective is Ge Liang's concept of "post-(socialist-) feminist sensibility" (Ge 2025). Ge uses this term to describe an ambivalence of young Chinese women living in post-socialist neoliberal China, as they appear as "ambivalent desiring subjects" (4) who simultaneously resist and are influenced by Chinese heteronormativity. Even though Ge does not explain much about the epistemological ground of sensibility in this article, this approach highlights the subject's positionality,

so that sensibility is used to describe the “recognition of and response to the gendered culture and regulations of heteropatriarchy in post-socialist China’s everyday life, and transnational post-feminism” (3). Similarly, I consider that this interpretation of sensibility is useful to theorise a kind of insistence on feminist feelings among my feminist interviewees. In other words, the feminist sensibility could suggest a way for these young Chinese women to feel and then contest their existence as a gendered subject in the hetero-patriarchal Chinese contexts. My observation shows that the politicisation of this feminist sensibility is central to feminist identity formation for my feminist interviewees, while it is also based on a feminist sensibility on which the practices and goals of their feminism are constructed.

Sensibility as a Feminist Embodied Identification

This section investigates a specific question of feminist identification that emerged from my interviews with Chinese feminist women. Overall, this section indicates that feminist identification becomes difficult for many of these interviewees, and this difficulty is specifically brought by the situation of individualised feminisms in post-socialist Chinese contexts. Yet, these interviewed feminist women also actively reflect upon this difficulty and try to find other means to form a collective feminist identity in contemporary China. Feminist sensibility is taken by them as an alternative to the impossible organised-based solidarity of action, and as a critical response towards the problems of exclusive identity politics, to form an embodied feminist identification.

For my feminist interviewees, even though they all had ticked the option that declared “I am a feminist” on my initial survey, feminist identity appeared as a far more difficult question during our interviews. Scholarship on feminist identity usually understands it as a fundamentally collective identity, based on the “shared definition of a group that

derives from members' common interest, experiences, and solidarity" (Rupp and Taylor 1999, 365). Shared political goals and the experiences of collective participation are widely taken as an important condition for constituting and confirming feminism as a collective political identity (Nelson et al. 2008; Frederick and Stewart 2018; Kelly 2015; REGER 2002). However, the highly individualised everyday feminism that my interviewees practice often lacks the collective actions for this identity construction. In this situation, my feminist interviewees' establishment of their feminist identity is more complicated. Although individualised, the feminist identity of my interviewees is explicitly associated with political commitment that demands social transformation. During our interviews, they also do not hide their political stance and openly discuss feminism, patriarchy, and social changes. Their exhibition of explicit feminist commitment is different from the material generated by some other studies investigating women with post-feminist views, in which feminism is supported as an individualised matter of choice and belief while being rejected as a matter of political action and identity (Kelly 2015; Budgeon 2001; Crossley 2010).

In contrast to the widely documented phenomenon of women saying "I am not a feminist, but" (Williams and Wittig 1997; Zucker 2004; Buschman and Lenart 1996), what my feminist interviewees expressed during our conversations is more of a concern about "I am a feminist, but...". The first "but" expressed by my self-identified feminist interviewees is a hesitation about whether they are eligible to be acknowledged by others as feminists without "impressive" collective activism. Many of them wanted to check this with me before they agreed to be interviewed, asking whether I was looking for a particular version of feminism or involvement in specific feminist action for my research. Others brought up this concern during the interviews, worrying whether they were "eligible" to represent Chinese digital feminism, or whether they could be described as a Chinese digital feminist at all. Jessica's comment was typical:

I wonder what kind of person can be called a feminist. What things can I do to qualify myself as a feminist? For example, one big question I'm having right now is that I'm wondering, if I'm having a romance with a man, if I get married, or if I have children, does that mean I am not a true feminist? Am I betraying some of the ideas of feminism?

Her concern reveals several important features of the identity-building process in Chinese digital feminism. As feminism relies highly on individual everyday practices, personal willingness and personal effort are often seen and valued by many Chinese digital feminists online as a sign of one's feminist identity. This emphasis on individual dedication can sometimes be problematic, evolving into a sort of feminist policing, in which living up to a feminist ideal in various aspects of one's ordinary life becomes a feminist political commitment (Huang 2023). In another article investigating the Chinese anti-beauty feminists who shave their heads to resist patriarchal domination of women's bodies, I have indicated a feature of these feminists' claims, in which the feminist politics highly depends on "one's own willingness to reshape her body and how strong she can hold on to the feminist beliefs" (Lu 2025, 55). This individual commitment can be shown in one's personal acts of refusing beauty practices and also embodied in other personal positions like a feeling of repulsion towards marriage and reproduction (Tian and Ge 2024). Some studies have expressed concerns that this feminist emphasis on personal daily practices can become a problematic and "regressive" exclusion (Huang 2023, 225) of lower-class and married women, so that it not only replicates neoliberal values but also tears apart the alliance in feminist solidarity. However, from Jessica's statements it is clear that she is aware of this tension and is trying to cope with it critically. I observed such critical self-reflection in many other feminist women I interviewed in this project. When they talked about the trend of feminists "distinguishing" whether someone is a feminist or not by using external

criteria such as their appearances, marriage status, and consumption habits, they expressed their worries that this scrutiny might risk tearing Chinese feminists apart by leading to more internal quarrels and conflicts.

In other words, Jessica's hesitation also reveals another dilemma. Even though she identifies herself as a feminist, she can still often disagree with many other feminists' opinions/actions". There is no one single version of feminism in the Chinese digital space. Chinese digital feminism is never one homogeneous group but is inherently heterogeneous with many internal debates and dissidence. These differences and dissents within Chinese digital feminism are a complex living reality for these women. For all my feminist interviewees, living in close contact with many different feminist voices and propositions is common. These differences within Chinese digital feminism can become a barrier for one to assume a clear and specific feminist identity. For example, Lydia expressed difficulty in finding an accurate term or a specific feminist group to fully represent her understanding of feminism:

I'm a liberal feminist. I lean more towards that, but there are some places where it's also still (feels not right). It's a feeling that maybe I cannot distinguish (different feminist groups) that clearly. I also feel like maybe some of my ideas are a little different from others.

"Spectrum" (光谱) is the word used by some of my interviewees to describe this internal heterogeneity. This feminist spectrum describes how different digital feminisms in China are not simply distinct from each other, but at times merge with each other while maintaining incompatible tensions. On the feminist spectrum, one's feminist position may also be constantly changing, sliding from one position to another as time goes by. Taking Madeline as an example, she explains that her feminist stances have changed from time to time, making her unable to define her feminism with one simple term:

At one time, I was a more liberal feminist. I was more liberal in that feminist spectrum for a long time. And then I went to the university, and there at first I encountered Ueno Chizuko's *Misogyny*. This is a classic [feminist bestseller (in China)], everyone has read it. And then (Ueno's other book) *Patriarchy and Capitalism*. Basically, after reading these two books, I was more inclined towards Marxist feminism on the spectrum – yes, that's Ueno's stance. [...] And I was also learning online, like the radical feminism on *Douban*. And I read about radical feminism. I think some of these writers are highly theoretical, putting forward a lot of theories. These radical feminists make a lot of sense, and they've made a lot of contributions to the conceptualisation of feminism on the Internet. [...] And then, for myself, later on, probably I wasn't that enthusiastic about Marxist feminism either.

Madeline says that she never managed to “settle herself down” to any specific feminist group identity. She eventually questioned “the whole group thing” with regard to feminism by implying that all kinds of collective identities in Chinese digital feminism are impossible for her, because she feels her feminism is too fluid and multi-dimensional, like personal thought.

Even though these young feminist women have different reasons to hesitate over claims about feminist identity, I understand the fundamental issue underlying this shared tendency to prioritise individualised feminist identity as resistance. It is a response to feminism as a politics of representation, to making feminist identity a series of identifiable external criteria that can be judged by others on increasingly commercialised and precarious social media spaces. This resistance suggests a specific

dilemma faced by women engaging with feminism in contemporary China, where feminist politics can only exert its social influence through a market-mediated economy of visibility. As Clark-Parsons indicates, in visibility feminist politics in the social media era it is often individual visibility that becomes the foundation for collective feminist impacts (Clark-Parsons 2022). For these participants, this is especially applicable to Chinese social media contexts and has generated problems with feminist identification. All these young women identify themselves as feminists. They do value connection with other women and feminists, and their pathway to becoming feminists has often involved building a sense of “common fate” with other women who share some of their gendered experiences. But this self-identification encounters trouble when they feel that they need to “prove” their identity to others through self-representation.

For these feminist women, this suggests that being a feminist subject means more than being “hailed” into a system of fixed meanings in Louise Althusser’s sense of interpellation (Althusser 2006). In his famous example of being “hailed” into a subject position, a person responds to a policeman’s call of “hey!” This self-recognition, Althusser argues, makes an individual into a subject. It is a process by which individuals assign themselves to an available subject position in the existing apparatuses: the existing ideologies and social institutions. Similarly, when a person is knocking on someone’s door, answering “it’s me” to the question of “who?” from indoors involves subjectivation by being called into a system of existing meanings. Yet, for my interviewees, the call to identify themselves as a feminist does not directly lead to such clear interpellation. Rather, they hesitate in front of that door, wondering whether they should answer that call. What if they refuse to respond, but still consider themselves as feminists? One interviewee, Lisa, very clearly stated her disagreement with feminism becoming a title that can be earned by following certain criteria:

Many people are very fond of identifying whether other people are feminists or not on the Internet. They would say something like, if you make some kinds of outstanding social contributions, then you're a feminist. Or, if you don't let men do what they want to do, if you don't take bride price money, or if you don't get married, you don't have children, you hate men ... these would make you a good feminist.

For Lisa, demonstrating one's feminist identity through the exhibition of feminist "symbols" is not only superficial but also dangerous for feminist politics, because she thinks that people who claim to be a feminist often do not really mean to join feminist politics, but to use feminist titles and social media traffic to gain public attention. Another interviewee, Margie, had a similar attitude, arguing that even some girls who do not understand feminism are using these discursive labels as a kind of fashion icon:

I met a girl recently, and she immediately told me that she bought Ueno Chizuko's book *Misogyny*. I was like, well, it's true that I don't think there should be a threshold for this (feminism), but simply saying things like you bought a copy of *Misogyny* is ... I just feel it's not so different from many men (who, on social media, claim to be feminists). If she had come to talk to me about some of her feelings (感受), I think I would have felt that she was really expressing to me some of her feminist thoughts, some of her understanding of the matter. But she just said, "You know, I'm also very feminist, I have a copy of Ueno Chizuko's *Misogyny* at home". The way she narrated it made me feel that it was the same logic as those (self-claimed feminist) men.

“Feelings” (感受), in Margie’s opinion, are a more trustworthy sign of one’s feminist identity. Her emphasis on feelings is not about expecting others to feel “the way I do” but about seeing feelings as the basis for being a feminist. This is a preferable pathway for many of my interviewees to affirm their feminist identity: through embodied feelings. As argued by Shelly Budgeon, embodied identity is “the outcome of an individual’s interaction with her body and through her body with the world around her” (Budgeon 2003, 48). For these feminist women, they try to escape the identity politics of social media representation by prioritising feminist embodied feelings, which are produced through experiences of interacting with others and of living in gendered culture and society. From this perspective, Margie argues that feminism is something that can only be *felt* by individuals for themselves, even if this feeling is not named as feminism. In this way, even for women who do not know feminism yet, embodying this feeling becomes a prerequisite for Margie to trust them as reliable feminist companions. By doing so, emphasising the *feeling* or a feminist sensibility becomes a substitute to establish feminist identity, as a critical response towards the risks of feminist politics being commercialised and divided in social media representation politics. This emphasis on feelings arising from women’s embodied experiences is then well reflected in Margie’s words later, where she spontaneously moved from women’s feelings to talk about their sex acts:

Because sex is a very... Well, sex is very REAL. In the whole process, you can obviously feel many things, things that the man usually hides in normal conversations. But when you have sex, during this entire process, you will be able to tell whether this person truly sees you as a human or not. [...] I also talk with my female friends. Even if they are not particularly feminist awakened, they still feel uncomfortable during sex when there is a power imbalance. It’s obvious to them that they feel uncomfortable. It’s

just that, um, they maybe don't know where that discomfort comes from and why it arises.

This “discomfort” that does not require a feminist name in Margie’s expression reflects what Clare Hemmings calls “the affective dissonance that feminist politics necessarily begins from” (2012, 147). From such moments of dissonance, “affect might flood one’s being and change how everything else is seen and understood too, from this time on.” (Hemmings 2015, 153) Affective dissonance can lead to feminist solidarity and allow individuals who perceive some identity frictions to re-identify with feminist groups. This shift is exemplified in Joanna’s interview, when she explains how she moved from being a confused subject who didn’t know how to identify herself in relation to feminism, to a self-affirmed feminist:

So this is my relationship with feminism: it seems like I’m always on the edge of feminism, in interaction with its issues, but I also have a lot of contradictions with it. [...] When we’re talking about a feminist, or when we’re having this very consistent feeling of being a feminist, is it because people are thinking in a very self-consistent way, and feeling that their ideas are similar to many other feminists, so that they can be so sure about themselves being a feminist? I always have a lot of contradictions and confusion. There are times when my ideas just don’t fit in with, say, a certain kind of very popular feminist idea. And that’s when there’s friction. Then I might dis-identify with feminism. [...] Even though I often feel that I would question my feminist identity, there are always times when I am very convinced that I am a feminist. For example, when I come across some misogynists, I have a big reaction, thinking something

like hey how can you do that thing? These are the times when I can be sure that I am still a feminist.

Moments of shock and anger when Joanna has encountered misogynists repeatedly reconvince her that she is a feminist. This affective feminist identification does not require the meditation of “fitting in” or meeting a specific standard. Through affirming one’s own feminist identity through embodied feelings, this feminist politics has become what Sara Ahmed refers to as a sensational feminism, as “you are aroused by what you come up against” (Ahmed 2016, 22). Thus, feminism “can begin with a body, a body in touch with a world, a body that is not at ease in a world; a body that fidgets and moved around. Things don’t seem right” (22). For these feminist interviewees, instead of the conventional collective actions (that is hopelessly to happen) and the precarious representational social media identity politics (that policing and divides feminisms), this sensibility becomes an important affective substitute to build individual and collective feminist identification in post-socialist China.

Sensibility as Feminist Practice of Consciousness-Raising

In addition to building an embodied feminist identity, I observed across my interviews how this feminist sensibility also plays a crucial role in ways of “doing” feminism. As outlined above, Chinese digital feminism is generally independent from collectively organised action and relies heavily on individual efforts and everyday conversations in the private sphere. Brought together by this concept of feminist sensibility, my feminist interviewees’ efforts in this respect can be understood as doing feminism through consciousness-raising, which is perceived by them as the promotion of feminist awareness on an individual basis with the ultimate goal of creating radical cultural transformations in Chinese society.

Feminist consciousness-raising today is often considered old-fashioned, as “either liberal, passé, or self-evident” (Kinnamon 2024, 148). Its importance to Chinese digital feminism is thus interesting, especially when considering the local socialist history that shapes this practice as both resonating and deviating from the American feminist movements in the 1970s. consciousness-raising as a representative feminist tool stemming from American radical feminist groups has been a pivotal countercultural practice in bringing women’s private experiences into public political discussions (Sarachild 1975; Michals 2002; Rosenthal 1984). As contextualised by Kathie Sarachild, feminist consciousness-raising is significant to American radical feminism for being not merely “a stage in feminist development which would then lead to another phase, an action phase, but as an essential part of the overall feminist strategy.” (1975, 147) In fact, as Sarachild also emphasises, an important reason for feminist consciousness-raising to be a radical approach is exactly because it does not require immediate actions: “If women fear they have to take action on what they are talking about, especially action alone, as individuals, they won’t talk about anything they’re not ready to take action on” (149). This is very much consistent with the interviewed Chinese feminist women’s emphasis on daily conversations and personal reflections that do not necessarily change into collective political actions. In contemporary English contexts, digital feminist practices since #MeToo also engage forms of online consciousness-raising, utilising digital tools to insist that the personal is political (Gleeson and Turner 2019; Blevins 2018). While the significance of feminist consciousness-raising has been observed and indicated by multiple studies of Chinese digital feminism and women-centred popular culture (Tian and Ge 2024; Yang 2024; Liao and Ling 2025), the term and the practice itself are seldom connected with the specificity of gender consciousness in local post-socialist contexts.

Contemporary Chinese digital feminists' reliance on consciousness has a deep connection with the local academic and social emphasis of *nüxing zhuyi* (gender consciousness) over *nüquan zhuyi* (women's rights) at the end of the 20th century. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, the division of Chinese local feminism into two pathways is both a retreat from and a critical response to socialist gender discourses (Ni 2024; Meng and Dai 2018; Wu 2024). For Dai Jinhua, for example, Chinese feminism as *nüxing zhuyi* (gender consciousness) carries the crucial task of articulating alternative gender culture and ideology after the collapse of the radical socialist attempt and the capitalist transformation:

Feminism as in *nüxing zhuyi* is not the same as feminism as in *nüquan zhuyi*. Both are feminist. The former incorporates the latter, though not the other way around. Women's rights are not our biggest problem; gender ideology is the biggest problem. We had never considered how the PRC's women's liberation had shaped us. We took it for granted. The problem was that it was not enough. [...] But it was built on the basis of the equality of women, legally and ideologically in China. That is why I emphasised ideology. We were not aware of gender discrimination, so we didn't expect what came along with economic reform. The changes to the constitution were all retreating from previous laws. (Rofel and Dai 2018, 4)

Against this backdrop, *nüxing zhuyi* (gender consciousness) has been considered by Dai as an essential task for local feminist investigations, while its capability of raising political criticisms is gradually restrained. Therefore, contemporary Chinese digital feminism's consciousness-raising practices can be approached in line with this local feminist tradition for continuing the exploration of women's gender subjectivity, while endowing this tradition with new political meanings in the digital era. This feminist

consciousness, although has given up on reformations and direct confrontations of superstructures, has “widen the crevices of patriarchal constructs, shaking their foundations” (Xue and Rose 2022, 36).

The importance of “consciousness” is widely reflected in my feminist interviewees’ stories about their journey to becoming feminists. First of all, consistent with other studies of the key role of social media in Chinese digital feminism since the late 2010s (Xue and Rose 2022), most of my feminist interviewees admit that they learned about feminism via the Internet, especially through several Chinese social media platforms like *Weibo*, *Douban*, *Little Red Book*, and *WeChat*. Feminist online discourses exert significant impact on these women because they provide languages for them to explain what they observed and experienced in their own lives and in the lives of other women. Rose was one of my interviewees who emphasised having developed some early consciousness of the gender inequality phenomenon before they actually encountered the word “feminism” on social media. This initial consciousnesses often come from their own gendered life experiences during childhood and adolescence. Aside from a sociocultural preference for boys, other early observations mentioned by interviewees included being unfairly treated for being a girl in the family and at school. Ella described this initial feeling as an ambiguous “female consciousness (女性意识)”. She developed this consciousness after listening to her junior high school friend’s family story: “She [my friend] realised that she received less attention from the family compared to her little brother. [...] I developed this sense because she shared these experiences with me.” Ella told me her own little brother was also born during that time, and having experiences similar to her friend’s, and their sharing these stories with each other, made Ella feel they shared the fate of being women. Similarly, Donna’s early recognition of gender inequality came from observing and relating other women’s experiences to her own life. But she also recalled knowing these experiences from online communities:

It was around 2019 that I started to use *Douban*. At that time, my school life was not that busy. I was using some of the bigger *Douban* groups, for example, the *sheng-huo* group.²⁵ I read some posts about the experiences of women in their families. These posts are very specific about life details. [...] I read these posts about women's living situations. After reading more and more, I just felt something was becoming different. I started to sense what feminism is.

In addition to feminist discussions, usually centred on sharing personal experiences and reflections in online communities mainly composed of women netizens, these interviewees also pay attention to social events that centre on gender issues (性别议题) when these frequently break out on Chinese social media. Such events were also frequently mentioned by my interviewees and cover a wide range of public issues, but very often follow the exposure of serious social incidents of gender-based violence. The emergence of Chinese #MeToo in 2018 was a crucial time for many of my interviewees in turning them towards feminism. At the end of the 2010s, most of them were in senior high school or the early university years. Experiencing and participating in #MeToo on social media was a key stage for them in learning about feminism and realising the necessity of doing feminism in China. These experiences have also shaped their social media feminist practice since then.

One other channel frequently mentioned was learning about feminism through reading and education. This is a widely explored influential factor contributing to feminist consciousness and identity (Williams and Wittig 1997; Bargad and Hyde 1991), but it

²⁵ *Sheng huo* group (生活组), or the *life group* is one of the largest online communities on Douban platform. Most members of the group are women.

has been less explored in contemporary Chinese contexts. Only one of my feminist interviewees stated that she received a feminist education in an international middle school located in China. Some interviewees had taken gender-related courses during their overseas university studies. Others had undertaken gender-related academic research. While the prevalence of higher education experiences in my research sample may be seen as overly influencing this tendency, an interest in pursuing feminist knowledge through self-learning, especially reading, was also a commonly shared feature. These reading practices are mostly personal, but some also involve collective activities such as reading groups and book discussion sessions that allow some more public feminist discourse. The contents and genres of the books mentioned by the interviewees ranged widely from novels, social commentary, sociological studies, philosophical texts, and difficult feminist and gender theories. The most frequently mentioned author among my interviewees was the Japanese feminist scholar Ueno Chizuko, whose feminist sociology has been widely circulated in translation in mainland China. Other popular books brought up by the interviewees included works from Beauvoir, Korean feminist novels, and even Chinese web novels. Rose, in particular, claimed that her feminist thought was greatly influenced by the feminist consciousness reflected in Chinese women-oriented web novels. In such ways, reading for education has a similar function to reading social media posts, helping them recognise gender inequality as a deeply rooted, everyday matter. As Lydia commented:

I remember the first time I developed a female consciousness was because of a book. It's called *Kim Ji-young: Born 1982*.²⁶ It was the first time I got that feminist sense. Before reading this book, I was very determined that I would get married and have kids. But reading this book changed me.

²⁶ *Kim Ji-young: Born 1982* is a Korean feminist novel written by Cho Nam-Joo in 2016. The novel was translated and published in mainland China in 2019.

Compared to social media, however, reading and undertaking gender-related courses as part of overseas studies was often considered to be “the next stage” for my feminist interviewees. Finding books to read tends to happen when there is already a developed sense of gender inequality, with the books being used to explore deeper explanations of these experiences. For example, after learning about other women’s stories shared in social media communities, Donna started her reading in gender and feminist theories, and eventually developed what she saw as previously a vague female consciousness into an explicitly feminist consciousness.

Such a “consciousness raising” means not only establishing a feminist identity, but also involves an important change in how women see the world they are living in. Many interviewees describe this change as a process of “feminist awakening”, drawing a contrast between old and new ways of seeing the world. They tended to describe their past as non-feminist and to contrast this past self with their current life as a feminist. In this way, feminist awakening is described as a transformation of their subject position that allows them to emphasise differences in their experience now, and their capacity to reflect on the living world around them. Such a transformation can be seen in the very frequent use of metaphors around space and sight. In these feminist awakening / consciousness-raising stories, the “unawakened” self is usually represented by the interviewees as besieged within a narrowed, closed space, obscured by darkness. The awakening process is thus described as breaking out from this narrowed space and entering into a new position with access to a new horizon: a promising movement from inside to out. This is exemplified in Carol’s narrative, in which she describes the experience of taking a remote gender studies course during the pandemic lockdown:

It’s just a feeling that my whole worldview and my life values have been turned subversively upside down. I felt that there was a new

way out of my life, or a new door had been opened for me. [...] That period of time coincided with the worst time of the pandemic. I stayed at home every day, in a closed way. I felt that I did have a little mental health issue at that time, maybe a little bit depressed. And then, I took that course and read those materials. They gave me a spiritual outlet. The more I read, the more I felt that, oh, I seem to be able to see the world a little bit more clearly.

For another interviewee, Lora, this consciousness-raising was a process of “revealing” rather than a shift between spaces. She used the metaphor of a piece of cloth covering her eyes to signify this transformation, which suggests feminist awakening aligns with opening one’s eyes to see the world. Lora expresses this similarly to Carol’s movement from inside to out, through the figure of tearing apart a piece of cloth:

As for this process of awakening, it is not that a certain event, a certain book, a certain passage, or a certain thing makes me suddenly awaken. It is in the process of slowly growing up, by adding one thing after another. [...] You slowly grow up in the process of discovering that these (discourses around women) are lying to you. These are just used by people to discipline women or confuse women in a patriarchal system. [...] It (the feminist awakening) is like tearing away the cloth in front of you, piece by piece, and then you can gradually wake up, gradually realise that, oh, the world is not the way I used to see it. I can see more things. And then gradually realise that I should wake up, I should do what I want to do.

For Lora, the feminist awakening does not have an immediate effect. Lora's narrative highlights that this feminist awakening is not a sudden moment that dramatically changes one's life. It is a long process taking place often beyond one's awareness at the time. For example, she talked about how, as a child, she thought of being a faithful wife and a good mother as her dream life – at that age, she didn't think it was a problem. The piece of cloth that covered her vision was not detectable by her then, but only became visible when she looked back at her past from her current feminist position. As Sandra Lee Bartky emphasises in *Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness*, “As long as their situation is apprehended as natural, inevitable and inescapable, women's consciousness of themselves, no matter how alive to insult and inferiority, is not yet feminist consciousness.” (Bartky 1975, 429) For Bartky, a desire for change or a belief in the possibility of such change is the determining factor in differentiating feminist consciousness. Therefore, a gender consciousness awakening does not necessarily mean feminist awakening. Lora's expression “I should do what I want to do” at the end of the quotation above can be seen as signalling such a feminist consciousness.

Although this feminist consciousness is also considered by my interviewees as able to be fostered and influenced through media discourses, the embodied subject's feelings in gendered experiences are seen as the essential factor. In other words, this feminist consciousness is closely about a sensibility of how we *feel* the world and the self in living with the world. As Lazz Kinnamon (2024) indicates in her study of American feminist consciousness-raising of the late 1960s, consciousness-raising is “a self-conscious project that involved intentional theorisation about the feminised terrain of feeling and its place in radical social transformation.” Taking my interview with Kelly as one representative example, when I asked about her opinion on talking about feminism with other (non-feminist) women, Kelly said:

Just talking with her won't work. I think only by experiencing all those painful (inequality) things herself would she start to feel something. My opinion is that these women can only feel the inequality if they experience the inequality themselves. You know there's an old saying: you won't know the pain of the needle tip until it pricks your skin.

By saying so, Kelly did not mean to change these (non-feminist) women's lives, but to change the ways they feel about living their lives through feminist consciousness-raising. In doing so, this consciousness-raising does not simply mean spreading feminist knowledge or increasing feminist visibility. Rather, consciousness-raising actions need to make others *feel* differently so that their ways of perceiving the world are also thoroughly turned (Hemmings 2012). From this perspective, feminist consciousness-raising becomes a politics of life and survival, because this feminist consciousness raising is about changing how we feel about the world and our positions in it – by changing how we feel, a world without feminism becomes *felt* as unlivable.

Conclusion

In this chapter, my analysis of the interviewed feminist women reveals that the simple negation of individualisation in Chinese digital feminism oversimplifies the complexity of the ways individual feminists process and produce feminism in embodied contemporary Chinese contexts. This feminist subjectivity cannot be reduced to a localised version of postfeminism, even though digital feminism in contemporary Chinese contexts can indeed incorporate neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics (Liu 2023). My interviews with these Chinese feminist women exhibit a few prominent features that cannot simply fit into Gill's definition of a postfeminist sensibility (Gill

2007; 2016). For example, my interviewees never hide their conscious resistance to the sexualisation of women's bodies. A lot of them also worry about feminism being commercialised and appropriated by market logic. They also do not understand feminism in the past tense, but as an urgent present matter. Moreover, many of my feminist interviewees' emphasis on their embodied feelings is clearly a response to the difficult context of Chinese digital feminism, trying to thrive in a post-socialist authoritarian China with neoliberal characteristics.

I argue that the Chinese digital feminism lived by my feminist interviewees should be understood as a form of *feminist sensibility*. As I tried to clarify, this feminist sensibility shares some similarities with Gill's postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007; 2017) in terms of its reliance on media culture, its investments in subjectivity, and its entanglement with neoliberal discourse, but it cannot be reduced or equated to postfeminism. My discussion of feminist sensibility is thus adapted and expanded from Gill's postfeminist sensibility, engaging also with phenomenological approaches to how feminist knowledge is produced from the experience of embodied situations. This feminist sensibility offers a way to understand post-2020 Chinese digital feminism from a perspective that acknowledges its embodied and affective dimensions without eliminating its political radicality. With the embodied feminist identification and doing feminism through consciousness-raising, Chinese digital feminists exhibit a political commitment, which is once sharply summarised by Aviva Xue and Kate Rose (2022): "You forbid us to gather anywhere, so we will be everywhere" (167).

This is an approach that might also be used to analyse feminism in contexts and regions other than China. But I must also emphasise that the feminist sensibility discussed in this chapter is established in the very specific post-socialist Chinese context of my interviewees and cannot be applied as a universal set of characteristics for contemporary feminism or even digital feminism. Their feminist sensibility is

developed from lived situations where the restrictions on conventional social movements (e.g. protests, rallies and voting) have fundamentally conditioned and influenced their ways of understanding and doing feminism. Thus, while this feminist sensibility may also become a useful approach for understanding feminism in other contexts, it has a specific meaning for contemporary Chinese digital feminisms, where conventional collective political actions have been substantially replaced by a reliance on individual sensibility that grounds practices and imaginations of feminist political transformations. In the end, this chapter highlights the role of a Chinese digital feminist sensibility in the construction of the embodied feminist identity of my feminist interviewees and their ways of doing feminism through consciousness-raising. This feminist sensibility is grounded in the embodied subjectivity of Chinese digital feminists in a complex cultural-political environment of hostility and chaos, where feminist politics becomes not only a matter of rights but a matter of how to live.

In the next chapter, I will further this discussion of the interviewed feminist women's everyday sensibility to the specific aspect of how they feel towards men. If we can understand the importance of feminist sensibility to the feminist individuals in Chinese digital feminism, it is then possible to think about the "ugly" feelings within this sensibility – just as how this feminist sensibility might enable the politics to unfold in the restricted, difficult situations, the "ugly" feelings in this feminist sensibility may also disable the politics and even suspend the feminist agency in some other areas. My next chapter will elaborate on how such negative feminist feeling – specifically, feminist disgust – might function as affective politics of refusal in sustaining feminist subjectivity.

Chapter 4

“That guy *feels* like a *man*”: Feminist Disgust as Affective Politics of Refusal

Refusal in Euripides’s fifth-century tragedy, the *Bacchae*, occurs when the women (1) refuse work in the city, then (2) move outside the city where they live otherwise, then (3) return to the city with a set of demands. [...] As I read the play, the three refusals are connected stops on a single arc of refusal. [...] the bacchantes seem to be more worldly than worldless. Indeed, as I read it, the *Bacchae* teaches how even when refusal seems to reject the world, it betrays a deep attachment to it, if not to the world as it is, then surely to a more just world that is not yet.

Bonnie Honig (2021, 1-3)

To be disgusted is after all to be affected by what one has rejected.

Sara Ahmed (2014, 86)

This chapter reads expressions of *yan-nan* (misandry) among the young Chinese feminist women I interviewed as an affective politics of refusal. Continuing my discussion of what appears as a feminist sensibility in the previous chapter, I understand these interviewees’ attitude to men in their daily lives in terms of affect: as an embodied feeling that can be evoked even when it contradicts with their feminist stances and beliefs. But these feelings are still political. As Sara Ahmed puts it in the *Cultural*

Politics of Emotions (2014), “emotions show us how power shapes the very surface of bodies as well as worlds.” (12) The affects involved in these feminist women’s accounts of their encounters with men reveals important dilemmas entangled with being a feminist woman in the hostile and un-supportive environment of contemporary China. They also shed light on a core element of Chinese digital feminism’s controversial relationship with men: refusal.

In *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021), Bonnie Honig theorises such feminist refusal from her reading of Euripides’s ancient Greek play *Bacchae*. In this famous tragedy, the bacchant/maenads – a band of Theban women under the charm of Dionysus – gather together to leave the city of Thebes. In the mountains of Cithaeron, the bacchant dance and sing in revelry. When they discover King Pentheus of Thebes spying on their rites, Agave, who is among them but also Pentheus’s mother, mistakes him for a wild animal and leads the bacchant to brutally tear him apart. Agave brings her son’s head back to Thebes to proclaim her glory before she painfully recognises it is her son and is eventually exiled from Thebes.

What does this cruel story have to do with feminism? Honig asks us to move our attention away from the most straightforward readings of this story, commonly interpreted as the conflict between two “male” characters – the King Pentheus and Dionysus – while the bacchant are perceived as charmed women, under the power of Dionysus, who do not know what they're doing. Honig provides a counter-reading that avoids the pathologisation of women’s madness so that the *Bacchae* can be read as a feminist political fable. She interprets the bacchant as women who come together to fight against sovereign patriarchy. If the bacchant’s actions are taken seriously, their flight from Thebes, their carnival, and their violence, including Agave’s murder of Pentheus, can be read as deliberate behaviours of a collective feminist revolt. In this way, Agave’s action is not simply killing her son, but the murder of the king: “That is

to say, filicide and regicide will always coincide in patriarchy.” (Honig 2021, 59) In such a feminist reading, the bacchant’s actions are not crazy and blind but rather comprise a politics of feminist refusal.

What if we adopt a similar feminist approach to reinterpret *yan-nan* – Chinese feminist women’s confrontational attitude to men – so that *yan-nan* is not merely the wilful, violent, extreme, irrational outburst of mad feminist women as represented in common public discourse? It should first be noted that such a feminist attempt to break the associations between feminism and the stigma of irrationality is not new. Feminists have raised strong arguments that emotions such as feminist rage are essential for powerful political mobilisation (Lorde 1997; Cooper 2018; Gilbert and Gubar 1980; Butler 2002a). There is also an “affective injustice” that tends to interpret men’s anger as a reasonable response, while casting feminist anger as hysterical and irrational (Srinivasan 2018; Kay and Banet-Weiser 2019). These arguments are not about thus anger should be managed and expressed in a better way. As Jilly Boyce Kay and Sarah Banet-Weiser indicate, even if feminists tried to play by the rules and withhold expressions of anger in order to make more “reasonable” claims, “we would still lose, because the rules of the game are fundamentally rigged against us” (606). The public construction of feminist madness and craziness is not only fundamentally a part of the anti-feminist backlash (Faludi 1991; Moi 2006; Gilbert and Gubar 1980), but also a patriarchal discipline that continues to assign reason/mind/rationality to men and feeling/body/madness to women (Irigaray 1985).

These stigmatisations play a huge role in the contemporary Chinese digital feminist environment. In 2019, a Chinese meme *qi dou leng* (气抖冷, an abbreviation of angry, trembling, cold) appeared on Chinese social media to mock Chinese digital feminism for expressing emotions dramatically. The meme originates from a woman’s much-reported comment on news about a man randomly killing women on the street. The

commenter expressed her feelings in the following way: “I am so angry that my body is trembling after seeing these texts. The weather is hot, but my palms and feet are sweating from the cold.” Later, following the release of news that a female blogger had falsely accused a man of sexually harassing her, the “I am so angry...” comment was adapted into the meme *qi dou leng* to satirise Chinese digital feminists for dramatically exaggerating their feelings to maximise their personal interests. This is just one example of how Chinese digital feminism today is associated with excessive emotional expression.

For the interviewed men in this project, whom I discuss in more detail in the following two chapters, “feminists being too emotional” is a key reason they give for rejecting Chinese digital feminism. As one of them, Andre, described this, these feminists “are just venting their negative emotions. Expressing their grudge online. But they have no concrete actions.” In terms that resonate with Honig’s argument, Andre saw Chinese feminism as a “revelry of extreme speeches”. For another interviewed men, Kim, such emotional feminist online speeches are “fun” to watch because they sound hilarious. “They sound pretty *chou-xiang* (抽象) to me. [...] Do you understand the meaning of our *chou-xiang* culture on Chinese Internet?”²⁷ By making this comparison, Kim concluded that feminist content should not be taken seriously, as they are phrased in absurd ways. A lot of these overtly emotional feminist online speeches to which the interviewees referred are those with content that targets men. For many of these young men, this feminist content is too extreme and problematic – associated with women’s emotional outbursts.

²⁷ *Chou-xiang* (抽象) is a popular subculture that emerged in Chinese social media culture since the mid-2010s. It features condensed sarcastic and nonsensical memes and expressions (see Fang 2020). Sharing some similarities with earlier Chinese *e-gao* and *diaosi* culture, *chouxiang* also originated from male-centric online communities and often contains lots of misogynistic content.

Some numbers can be helpful for us to see Chinese feminists' own accounts of their attitudes toward men. Even though I am not focusing on quantitative analysis in this thesis, I think the numbers from my survey results still say something to this end. In the preliminary survey to screen potential interviewees, I asked a few questions about people's attitudes to the term *guo-nan* (国男),²⁸ a popular online term used by Chinese digital feminists to negatively satirise Chinese men. Respondents were asked to reply on a scale (spanning from 5 for agree to -5 for disagree), indicating whether they thought *guo-nan* accurately described some existing traits of men. Attitudes towards *guo-nan* gathered from the 373 surveys varied considerably between male and female respondents (see Table C below). The mean of the answers given by the female respondents was 3.35 (agree more), while the mean of the male respondents was only 1.25 (slightly agree). While female respondents tended to agree more on the accuracy of the term *guo-nan* than males, from the survey results, their degree of approval also increased in line with their identification with the terms feminist and radical feminist. Among the 147 female respondents, the mean value of the answers given by the 87 women who chose the identity of "I support gender equality" was 3.18, which was slightly lower than the mean value from the female respondents overall. For women who chose "I am a feminist", the mean value of the answers was 3.52. And this number reached 4.00 for women who chose "I am a radical feminist".²⁹

In the follow-up question, "I think the term *guo-nan* is a deliberate smear of men" (5 for agree to -5 for disagree), there was also a big gender difference. This question was used to measure the intentional hostility underlying the term. The result for female respondents was -2.59, indicating that women generally disagree that *guo-nan* is a

²⁸ The abbreviation of "Chinese men" (中国男人), which is usually used negatively by feminists to satire Chinese men for being despicable (see explanation in the Introduction).

²⁹ As I explained in my Introduction, the interviewed men also had the option to choose their self-identities in relation to feminism. The reason I am not using this data here is that their definition of feminism and their self-identity was too varied and contradictory to be similarly categorised.

deliberate smear. In contrast, male responses averaged at 0.73, showing only a slight agreement that *guo-nan* is a smear to attack men. To offer a parallel to the results for the previous question, out of the 143 female respondents, the mean for answers from women who identify with supporting gender equality was -2.2; the mean for those who identify as feminists was -2.98; and the mean for those who identify as radical feminists was -3.86.

Questions	Male	Female	Female (Select Gender Equality)	Female (Select Feminist)	Female (Select Radical Feminist)
I think "guo nan" describes some existing traits of men	1.25	3.35	3.18	3.52	4.00
I think "guo nan" is a deliberate smear of men	0.73	-2.59	-2.20	-2.98	-3.86

Table C: Means for Respondents' Attitude Towards *guo-nan*, Categorised by Gender and Feminist Stance

From these two questions it is clear that, compared to male respondents, female respondents share a more positive attitude toward the term *guo-nan*, and this positivity rises in line with the degree of self-identified radicalisation of their feminist stance. While this may seem to support the popular notion that “feminists hate men”, the results of the second question suggest a noticeable gap between the low intentional aggressiveness from the female respondents and the perceived threats from the male respondents. In other words, male respondents feel *higher* levels of hostility in *guo-nan* than female respondents, and this sense of hostility can exceed what is intended when this word is used. The feminist interviewees recruited from the survey explained to me later that if they use this term themselves it is because it objectively grasps common features of Chinese men: for them, it is not a smear because they believe it accurately describes how men really are. “For me, these words are not meant to ‘insult’ men,” Lora, explained, “because I think that’s just how men really are. Maybe men are offended because it is only in their eyes that these words are insulting.” In other words, when

using the word *guo-nan*, these feminist women like Lora do perceive men negatively. The difference is that they do not intend this to be an insult.

This high-passivity with low-intentional-aggressivity fairly accurately represents the majority of my feminist women interviewees' attitudes towards men. And this is clearly not the emotional, strong hatred or rage that some men interviewees tend to associate with feminism. Overall, these feminist women's positions on Chinese feminism's relationship with men varied greatly, from seeing men as potential allies (and thinking that feminism should try to engage more with men) to seeing men as the major obstacle for feminist struggles (and thinking feminism should not involve any unity with men). However, none of my feminist women interviewees exhibited aggression, hatred or anger toward men. This is not to say that they expressed no feelings at all. On the contrary, regardless of their different feminist positions and opinions on Chinese feminism's relation with men, certain feelings were commonly shared by these young feminist women. While *everyone* talked about their negative feelings towards men, these feelings were neither hatred nor anger. As my analysis in the following section will show, they are instead *disgusted*.

Feminist Disgust in *yan-nan*

I call this shared feeling disgust because I noticed that when my feminist interviewees talked about *guo-nan* they frequently used descriptions and metaphors associated with unpleasantly visceral sensations, especially sensations relevant to smelling or touching filth. Here are a few examples of responses when I asked my feminist interviewees to describe *guo-nan*:

Jessica: They have such the kind of... kind of greasy feeling. Maybe having a big belly (大腹便便). Super confident. Maybe you'd think that he's slovenly at first glance. I think a *guo-nan* might be this type of person.

Ashley: [I think *guo-nan* are] chauvinistic and misogynistic. They are a very despicable group of people. And then, they are nationalists. For example, on those social media platforms like *Hupu* and *Zhihu*, their comments and speeches are “stinky”(恶臭). I think those men who make these comments are *guo-nan*.

Kristy: First, I think *guo-nan* are those who disrespect women. Then, in my impressions, they are not clean, they cannot live by themselves, they tend to be social Darwinists, their brains are full of traditional thoughts, and they are often overconfident but, at the same time, have very low self-esteem. And of course, they are nationalists and racists. All these points are irrelevant to their education and family background. They can appear in any social class.

Neither “greasy” (油腻) nor “stink” (恶臭) was coined by my feminist interviewees themselves. These are words widely used by feminists on Chinese social media to describe men (Sun 2017; Zeng 2017). In common usage, these adjectives do not always refer to men's physical appearance; that is, they do not signify that the guy is literally unclean or smelly. Take, as an example, the word “greasy”. It has been frequently used in social media discussions to describe a famous Chinese male actor, Huang Xiao-ming. Although Huang has a clean, handsome face, “greasy” is used to satire his offensively macho personality. Therefore, a greasy *guo-nan* may not actually look dirty or ugly – on the contrary, he might have a pretty face and a conventionally appealing body shape. But in online culture, men can still be described as “greasy” or “stinky” due to their personalities and behaviours, and this is especially so when they are deemed to behave

or speak misogynistically or chauvinistically. Similarly, the words “greasy” and “stink” as used by my interviewees also do not refer to the specific unclean male body. As their descriptions reveal, their encounters with *guo-nan* often happen in the digital space, which means that they usually do not have physical contact with these men’s real-life bodies. However, when these feminist women tried to define *guo-nan* for me, they often used descriptions of appearance (e.g. big belly, slovenly, poor hygiene), as if they had actually seen or touched these men.

The dirt associated with *guo-nan* is a *feeling* rather than a physical attribute. This recalls Mary Douglas’s influential work on dirt in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (2002), in which she argues that dirt does not lie in the object itself but is perceived as dirty when it disrupts boundaries or order in social systems, as “matter out of place” (43). For Douglas, the discomfort of us seeing a toilet brush on a dining table works in a similar way to the Havik man she researched seeing a leaf touched by a low caste person in his dining hall – both are a violation of normative social order. In this way, dirt always suggests the existence of a system, because it signals the disruption of a systematic order — “ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (44). Douglas’s theory of purity has long been applied to discuss the pervasive associations of dirt and pollution with women in various cultures, especially in menstrual taboos (Bobel 2020). Such notions of dirt and pollution have also been frequently associated with sexual minority groups (Tebble 2011; Nussbaum 2009). Critical investigations of these notions of purity reveal the systematic power of heteronormative societies in constructing proper/clean and pathologised / dirty sexual and gender bodies. In the case of *guo-nan*, however, it is difficult to simply reach a conclusion that men are abnormal bodies in a dominant social order, given that contemporary Chinese society is still predominantly hetero-patriarchal.

Some theorists (Belton 2017; Duschinsky 2013) have argued that Douglas's classification of purity and dirt tends to be overly static, presuming that a thing stays either clean or dirty in this social symbolic way, without considering any possibility of social change and without any middle ground between clean and dirty. However, lived cultures are not so neatly aligned with a single static order, and what is considered dirty and residue in one classification system may be central to other systems (Valeri 2000). From this perspective, Julia Kristeva's (1982) theorisation of abjection offers a comparatively more flexible way of understanding the construction of dirt through a psychoanalytic account of subjectivity indebted to Jacques Lacan. Kristeva focuses on the individual's subjectification process in abjection: "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being." (Kristeva 1982) For Kristeva, it is through abjection that the subject draws the boundaries constituting the self. In other words, before I know what I am, I first abject – I know what I am not.

This process of subjectification in Kristeva's theory comes closer to explaining these feminist women's perception of men (*guo-nan*) as a disgusting object. Using Kristeva's theory, we can think of feminist women's disgust as an effort to maintain the borders of a feminist subjectivity. She argues: "In the first place, filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin." (Kristeva 1982, p.69) I argue that, for my feminist interviewees, the *guo-nan* are rejected as a sort of filth that threatens feminist subjectivity. This disgust has two integrated dimensions that make it a form of feminist refusal. It is first a feminist sensibility that refuses *misogyny*, which is perceived as an outer threat taking the shape of the abstraction "men". It is also a refusal by these feminist women themselves to "become "women", as construed by a dominant heteropatriarchal order; that is, a refusal of the socially constructed gender roles of women perceived as inferior by patriarchy, and of femininity (as compared to masculinity) as construed by heteronormativity. Disgust in *yan-nan* involves this

subjectifying process of drawing affective borderlines around what feels disgusting for a feminist woman.

Understanding misandry or open feminist hostility/criticisms towards men as a response to misogyny is the argument most widely supported by feminist scholarship in contemporary China (Zhang and Zhang 2025; Hou 2024), as well as in other cultural contexts such as America (Lawrence and Ringrose 2018) and South Korea (Jeong and Lee 2018). These studies emphasise that feminist misandry does not appear unprompted. Similarly, my feminist interviewees' disgust towards *guo-nan* is also a reactive process that involves a cognitive construction of the bad object (men) from the embodied experience of negative affect. During our interviews, misogyny was the word consistently brought up by the interviewees to describe *guo-nan*. However, from each of their interviews, these feminist women never arrived at a consensus on the definition of misogyny together. For example, many interviewees use misogyny to refer to the use of aggressive or dirty women-abusive words like “bitch” or “black fungus”.³⁰ Among my feminist women interviewees, Donna stressed that an intense degree of aggression was not required for something to count as misogynist. She explained that any generalised negative descriptions of women could be classified as misogyny, including using negative gender stereotypes only because someone is a woman. Lora and Lydia's explanations of misogyny also extended to men's non-negative and even “good” intentions in their interactions with women, such as believing that a man should be responsible for a woman after having sex with them or praising a woman for looking attractive or pretty. Their understanding of misogyny tended to include all use of gender stereotypes and traditional gender norms, as well as blatant sexism.

³⁰ “Black fungus” (黑木耳) is a slang term that is used to refer to the colour of women's genitals to imply the frequency of their sexual activity. In Chinese popular culture, it usually means something similar to “slut”.

The vagueness of this definition lies in the ambiguity of the term misogyny itself. Despite its popular applications, misogyny is still a term that is difficult to define even for feminist scholars (Wrisley 2023). In *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2017), Kate Manne defines misogyny as the “law enforcement” system of patriarchy that “has the overall function of policing and enforcing its governing norms and expectations” (78). Misogyny distinguishes between good women and bad women, and punishes the latter through humiliation and violence. For Manne, disgust is also one of the patriarchal mechanisms that supports misogyny, enforcing social rejection of women who fail to meet gender norms. Although misogyny and sexism are both institutions that sustain patriarchal social order, Manne stresses that the two terms need to be distinguished. Sexism only helps “justify” the reasonability of patriarchy, usually through sex differences, while misogyny actively “corrects” the rules (Manne 2017, 80). Therefore, misogyny carries the intention of hostility and manifests itself through hate speech, harassment, and violence (Richardson-Self 2018). Samantha Pinson Wrisley, in fact, defines misogyny by its affective dimension, as the “normative affective orientation towards women” in a male-dominated society (2023, 204). This takes misogyny as different from sexism and sexual violence because the former does not always require affect while the latter can just be violence.

Such sensitive differentiations are not exhibited by my feminist interviewees. My observation based on considering their comments together is that, for them, misogyny would be better explained by how feminist subjects *feel* when facing sexism, instead of by any assessment of the intention or feelings of those responsible for what they feel is misogynistic. No matter whether a man is extremely hostile (abusive and violent) or mildly sexist (praising a woman for being sexy), this can be recognised as misogyny where they feel uncomfortable or disgusted by it. This definition shares some similarity with Manne’s (2000) earlier definition of misogyny, which is about women’s *felt* hostility instead of about men’s hostile intentions (to harm or dominate women) or their

affective status (relative to hating or liking women). Most of these interviewees admitted that they were more influenced by the Japanese scholar Ueno Chizuko, especially her popular book *Onnagirai* (2015; 2010). Unlike the widely accepted definition of misogyny as a “hatred of women” (Manne 2017), Ueno defines men’s misogyny as “contempt for women”. This contempt is especially manifest for Ueno in men treating women as sexual objects in an erotic fetishism of feminine symbols constructed by the binary heterosexual gender order:

Misogyny is translated as “*yan-nv*” (a dislike of women). But many men who exhibit misogyny actually say they like women. It sounds so contradictory that one could “dislike women” yet “like women”. Therefore, misogyny has a better translation: contempt for women. These men see women only as tools for sexual release. Any women – so long as she bears feminine symbols like nudity or a miniskirt – can trigger their reaction, like Pavlov’s dog salivating at the sound of a bell (Ueno 2010, 11).

This definition can be read in parallel with my interviewee Lora’s description of *guo-nan*:

For example, when a pretty woman posts a photo, a *guo-nan* would leave some comments like wow babe your legs are so long. It is this kind of uncomfortable feeling that these men leave. You cannot say he is a bad person at these moments, but he shows disrespect for women. I think this [*guo-nan-ness*] is something that all men have. He can’t be aware of the points he makes that cause you to feel uncomfortable. He’s just going to violate your boundaries.

In both Ueno's definition and Lora's narrative, there is a distinct connection between misogyny and a feeling of disgust that arises from feeling disrespected. Ueno's writing suggests that defining disgust is not a Chinese phenomenon: she immediately associates misogyny with the disgusting image of men as salivating dogs. Lora's words help further reveal the core of this discomfort, as the sense of boundaries being violated. This sense of violation is not restricted to experiences of being gazed at as a sexual object but also includes the *felt* contempt of not being seen as equal on other occasions. For some other feminist interviewees, their definitions of *guo-nan* similarly centre on men's disrespectful attitude, making their abjection of *guo-nan* a form of self-defence that refuses to be positioned as inferior. These descriptions frequently emphasise men's threatening arrogance and overconfidence in communications with women:

Carol: I think they give me a feeling that they tend to have deeply embedded, predetermined opinions. No matter what the result of our discussion is, no matter whether you are right, or I am right, they just make me feel that, well, they are very chauvinist, or very like a *guo-nan*. He would just dump an opinion on you and say ok this is my conclusion, and then he would just immerse himself in his desire for expression. He won't listen to what you are saying at all.

Such contempt needs to be rejected and excluded to protect feminist subjectivity. Noticeably, this constant refusal of misogyny is exactly the condition of Ueno's definition of being a feminist in this influential popular feminist book. In *Onnagirai*, after defining misogyny as men's contempt towards women and as women's self-contempt, Ueno claims that "A feminist is someone who consciously realises her own misogyny and decides to fight against it", so that without a recognition of misogyny a feminist "loses the purpose of her struggle, and loses the reason to be a feminist" (233).

Feminist subjectivity, then, is established by this endless refusal. Refusal, disgust, or the abjection of misogyny, serve as the affective means of establishing feminist subjectivity. The affective rejection of misogyny in the objectification of *guo-nan* is thus a subjectifying process – a becoming feminist through the affective rejection of being a woman who cooperates in reproducing hetero-patriarchal misogynistic culture.

The disgusting object *guo-nan* is an affective construction that involves assigning “badness” (disgusting misogyny) to a “bad object” (men) (Ahmed 2014). This means that what is fundamentally abjected in *guo-nan* is not the specific group “Chinese men”. In interviews, many of these feminists accepted that *guo-nan* is a feeling that can be embodied by individuals who are neither “guo” (Chinese) nor “nan” (male). In other words, to be disgusting “guo-nan-ness” does not need to be embodied in specific Chinese men. This “Chinese man” being abjected has no concrete body for what is, importantly, a digital mode of feminism. This disgusting body has no necessary material shape. It is more like a faceless digital ghost that cannot generate any physical contact. The feeling of disgust generated during these feminist women’s interactions with it is materially real, but the disgust in *yan-nan* does not rely on the physical body of men. In fact, as some feminist interviewees mentioned, the disgusting body does not always need to be a male body: for some, a woman who exhibits misogyny and chauvinistic attitudes is similarly disgusting.

I should thus also recognise that, in the case of *guo-nan*, the word “men” itself, for my feminist interviewees, has become an abstract affective referent instead of referring to actual men. Adopting a popular online expression in Chinese social media, “being a man is a feeling” (男的是一种感觉), the word “men” as used by my feminist interviewees also needs to be understood as a sensibility. This is reflected in my observations of my feminist interviewees’ surprisingly common use of the word “men” (男) as an adjective (even though this is incorrect in Chinese grammar), for example, in saying a guy or an

online community “is too men” (太男了). Kristy’s interview provides an example. She described the discomfort she felt when browsing certain male-dominated social media platforms:

I have this feeling every time I see these men’s online posts. I have *Zhihu*, but I don’t like it. [...] Because I think these communities are too “men”, you know what I mean? they have this “scent of men” (男味). For example, on *Zhihu*, there are a lot of men trying to give commands on how the world should function. And a lot of answers there have misogynistic tendencies. [...] They always use that teasing attitude that makes me feel very suffocated. So, my feelings about using these communities are not good. After viewing them, I feel upset and bad. Maybe I am a little bit *yan-nan* now [laugh].

She also used “too men” (太男了) as an adjectival description to complain about some men’s pursuit or embodiment of Chinese hegemonic masculinity.

I really think we should abandon the crazy insistence on gender stereotypes. No one should be “too men”. Well, how should I put it? I think being “too women” is not always a bad thing. But “too men” is too bad. I think people should try to be more neutral.

This suggests that while feminist *yan-nan* is often described and perceived as an essentialised gender opposition in popular discourse, it is much more complicated than simply rejecting all men for being bad (Hou 2024). Opposing the seemingly binary essentialist usage of “men”, Kristy and some other feminist women I interviewed were clearly strongly opposed to any binary gender division, including gender stereotypes in

China. In their use of “men” as an adjective, they also use the word to describe those men who hold onto traditional, strict binary divisions of men and women, and the binary gender social expectations. Some interviewees also clarified that they have some male friends or pro-feminist men they can trust, because these men give them a feeling that these men are not “too men” but can embody some “femininity”. Many also described their homosexual or non-binary friends as examples of “not being too men” – these were men who made them feel respected, listened to, and supported.

Finally, I want to reiterate that the feminist subjectivity being constructed centres on a refusal to “become women”, understood as those who cooperate with misogynist heteropatriarchy. Understanding this feeling requires paying greater attention to the relative youth of these interviewees (most were between 18 and 25). This refusal to “become women” appears as a refusal of normative adult female roles and of the processes of fulfilling a socially prescribed destiny as heterosexual partners and mothers (Zheng and Xu 2022). These feminist young women’s refusal responds to both dominant gendered social expectations and to the misogyny that emerges during unpleasant experiences interacting with men. During my interviews, *guo-nan* was also frequently associated with a disgust for men’s sexualisation and objectification of women’s bodies. Therefore, my interviewees’ *yan-nan* does not only contain disgust towards “men” but also disgust towards a fate to “become women”, understood specifically as a socio-cultural construction which is inferior and sexualised within dominant Chinese gender discourses. This disgust refuses the traditional women’s gender roles and expresses simultaneous disgust at socially constructed womanliness. These women often took the female body as a feminist battleground in ways widely apparent among Chinese digital feminists, who often fiercely resist associating women’s bodies with hetero-family-centric femininity that embodies a female sexuality aligned with motherhood (Tian and Ge 2024). This in turn evokes a further feminist

disgust in finding oneself being alienated from one's own body for subjects who identify as women constrained by a hetero-patriarchal order.

It needs to be clarified here that, while expressing repulsion towards being seen as sexual objects by men, the feminist women I interviewed were not all single or lesbian. Although some of them did express the view that they did not want any relationships with men at all, most of them revealed during the interviews that they understood themselves to be heterosexual. Many were not opposed to having sex with men, and some were also actively involved in heterosexual romantic relationships at the time. Yet, their heterosexuality in these cases did not prevent them from having moments of *yan-nan*, and heterosexual contacts bring more probability of evoking disgust. Rose, for example, told me that she wants to have heterosexual romantic relationships, but this wish always contradicts her constant feeling of discomfort with men:

I am heterosexual. But let's say, if we are waiting in an elevator that men fully occupy, my colleagues and I always feel that we are suffocating. It is very uncomfortable. [...] And you know, for many men, when they are looking for girlfriends, they only value women's faces and body shapes. When they comment on their male friends' girlfriends, they also only comment on women's faces and body shapes. They never really respect women.

This affective resistance to being reduced to a mere sexual object is also revealed in my interviewees' narratives about romantic and sexual experiences, in which it becomes important for them to determine whether they are being made to feel alienated and objectified. The interviewees who told me about their relationships kept emphasizing the importance of feeling respected and being treated as an equal individual by their boyfriends and sex partners.

Existing studies have not fully investigated the affective dimensions of Chinese feminists' resistance towards "become women" in this way. In dominant Anglophone feminist scholarship, this feeling of women's bodily alienation is often explained as shame, which Bartky explains as "occasioned by a self or a state of the self apprehended as inferior, defective, or in some way diminished" (1990, 85). This framework is used to analyse women's sense of the self-body relations in patriarchal societies. My identification of this feeling as disgust is instead inspired by Simone de Beauvoir, specifically by her analysis of girlhood in the second volume of *The Second Sex* (1989). Long before talking about shame, Beauvoir first analysed the feeling of disgust in girl children during their gradual realisation of sexual difference during puberty:

[...] we met a certain man who showed us his sexual parts and asked us, 'Don't they seem good enough to eat?' Our disgust was inconceivable and we were literally nauseated. [...] the little girl is revolted when she understands that she is virgin and sealed, and that to change into a woman a man's sex must penetrate her. (327-328)

"Women" in Beauvoir's account does not refer to an eternal destiny or any kind of essence of woman. Instead, disgust arises when the little girl *feels* a sense of culturally prescribed destiny for her in becoming a woman that contradicts her understanding of her own material body. Disgust is related to a fear of alienation or being reduced to material – mere flesh of breasts and vagina – to cater for men's sexuality. Her face, legs and body suddenly do not belong to her as pure existing materials sustaining her aliveness and perception of the world; they are seen as usable sexual objects. In other words, she finds out that "she is neither gold or diamond, but a strange matter" (Beauvoir 1989, 331). In Iris Marion Young's explanation, this suggests the specific

situation of being a woman in a patriarchal society, in which there is always a possibility that “one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject’s intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention” (Young 2005, 44). Thus, feminist disgust at “becoming “women” is the experience of discovering that one is living in such a situation and affectively refusing to accept it.

The Arc of Feminist Disgust

Considering that disgust has generated so many social problems related to exclusion and the stigmatisation of minorities, some scholars like Martha Nussbaum (2009) have argued that disgust is not necessarily a “better” feeling, especially in comparison to anger (although they perhaps would agree that disgust is better than hatred). As disgust has long been analysed from the perspectives of marginalised oppressed groups, there are theoretical appeals to thoroughly abolish disgust politics, arguing disgust cannot offer any foundation for legal and moral judgments (e.g. Nussbaum 2009; 2010). For Nussbaum, who famously argues that disgust is an irrational rejection of humans’ animality, disgust is not only harmful in politics but also implies a moral arrogance that contrasts with equality and love (Nussbaum 2021). Thus, disgust is considered by Nussbaum to be essentially harmful to democracy and social justice.

Making a judgment on whether or not disgust is a “good” feeling is not my intention in this chapter. I explore disgust among my feminist women interviewees because this is the feeling that arises in their representations of their interactions with men. Judgements about whether feelings are good or bad often seem to suggest that feminists *should* have alternative feelings, or they *should* constrain themselves to feel in some other way – that they should not feel *bad*. I also want to avoid these implications because they fall

back into the mind/body split by implying that feeling is something that can be controlled by rational human consciousness. This judgmental position can also easily convert into some doctrine of positive feelings, including the confidence culture that has been criticised in critical feminist scholarship on postfeminism (see McRobbie 2015; Gill 2017; Henderson and Taylor 2020; Gill and Orgad 2022).

Using Sara Ahmed's phenomenological model of emotion in the book *Queer Phenomenology* (2020), I want to instead consider the feeling of feminist disgust as a matter of being "oriented" by the lived power infrastructure that comprises the situation of my feminist interviewees'. In other words, I consider that feminist disgust, as an affect, is produced by these feminist women's embodied situations of their context. As Ahmed explains, orientation is about "not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward" (Ahmed 2020, 9). In considering what "orients" or enables these feminist women towards disgust in their living in the world with men, this chapter also pays attention to the socio-cultural mechanisms that enable/allow the flow of disgust in contemporary Chinese digital feminism.

I need to return here to the definition of disgust as policing borders and particularly as distinguished from anger. A key feature of disgust as a feeling is that, as Douglas and Kristeva also recognise, it is self-referential. It thus lacks any aggressive intention, a feature which often matters in feminist politics. Feminism can channel a strong willingness to correct the injustices of the world into feminist anger or rage (Castells 2015; Friedrich 2025; Lorde 1997). From the perspective of a phenomenology of emotions, Jasper Friedrich (2025) indicates that anger indicates a particular perceived relationship between a subject and the world of its inhabitation. He defines anger as a response to being thwarted when an affordance of removing the obstacle appears: "What is essential to anger is a perception that the obstacles in my way can be removed

through aggressive action; that I can assert myself and force the world to give in to my demand that it change.” (Friedrich 2025, 8)

However, disgust is primarily about recoil and disavowal (Tomkins 1963). In the early definition by Charles Darwin, disgust was explained as a species’ defensive mechanism, especially in relation to consuming contaminated food. Silvan Tomkins draws on this explanation to understand organic disgust as “a defensive response which is auxiliary to the hunger, thirst, and oxygen drives” (404). Disgust towards other kinds of objects, such as moral disgust, is then often thought to function similarly. That is, it functions to distance oneself from objects that are disgusting to one’s moral cognition, sustaining the hierarchies and boundaries of a social system by identifying the polluted or untouchable (Miller 1997). In other words, compared to anger, the affordance of aggression is perceived as unavailable in disgust. Given this distancing tendency, Mairead Sullivan (2022) argues that for social politics movements like feminism disgust is not a promising emotion. Disgust encourages recoiling from instead of confronting injustice:

Disgust is flaccid because it only disavows, and it only disavows at the individual level. Disgust is protective for the disgusted. But disgust is not anger. Disgust is not outrage. Disgust is not indignation. Disgust does little to mobilize further response. (Sullivan 2022, 82)

The key claim in Sullivan’s criticism of disgust here is also that disgust (exemplified by disgust towards Harvey Weinstein in *#MeToo*) diminishes problems inherent in social structures by focusing on individual actions, especially in the social formulation of “creep tales”. From this it would follow that disgust towards a particular criminal man diverts attention from structural gender inequality to the specific badness of an

individual (he is a creep) who becomes by inference a mere aberration. In this way, Sullivan argues that disgust restrains and limits the feminist politics of #MeToo by replicating the monster hunting modes since the late 20th century, which was criticised for directing the feminist focus to kill the patriarch instead of patriarchy (Faludi 1991).

My understanding of the feminist disgust manifested by my feminist interviewees is very different to this. They tend to experience misogyny or men as disgusting exactly because they *cannot* be distanced from it. So even though, in disgust, there is a wish to recoil from the disgusting subject, the recoil often cannot succeed. As in Tompkins's explanation, the precondition of disgust is contact: "intimacy of contact with a repulsive object is a prime factor in the arousal of disgust" (Tomkins 1963, 406). For my interviewees, feminist disgust in *yan-nan* is a continual *and* impossible recoiling from misogynistic culture, something that these feminists are trying to get rid of but which always threatens to stick with them. In "grease" and "stink", the feeling of unspeakable discomfort is expressed by the body becoming dysfunctional when being affected by these bad objects: they may become sticky on the surface of my skin, too oily to be wiped away; or they may become too smelly when they approach, making me hold my breath and generating a sense of suffocation. In the analysis of disgust, Ahmed's explanation of stickiness makes sense in this situation (Ahmed 2014). She argues that stickiness "involves a form of relationality, or a 'with-ness', in which the elements that are 'with' get bound together" (91). Thus "stickiness becomes disgusting *only when the skin surface is at stake such that what is sticky threatens to stick to us*" (90, with my emphasis).

In direct contrast to individualising *guo-nan* as particularly bad individual men who behave badly, my feminist interviewees' descriptions of *guo-nan* express their sense of feelings about a pervasive misogynistic culture in China. It is impossible for Chinese women to fully distance themselves from *guo-nan* because it is rooted in the

misogynistic gender culture that exists in every corner of one's life. For example, when I asked Ashley about her understanding of the scope of the term *guo-nan*, she answered that she “never met a guy who is not a *guo-nan*” in her life:

Is there really such a guy who is not overconfident, not chauvinistic, not misogynistic, not a nationalist, and does not “stink”? I think if you think a guy is not a *guo-nan*, it's either that you are not familiar with him enough, or you haven't broached these topics in your conversations. For all men in my life, whenever you talk with them, they all have these kinds of features to a certain degree.

This is not a unique attitude. None of these feminist women considered that *guo-nan* referred to a certain group of bad men. As I've already mentioned, almost all of them said the word adequately describes the majority of men in contemporary China. In other examples, Ella's opinion was that every Chinese man has different levels of *guo-nan-ness* with him. She explained that, because men grow up in this masculine, misogynistic culture in Chinese society, it is almost impossible for them not to be cultivated into a *guo-nan*. Kelly described the pervasiveness of *guo-nan* as the “fundamental base” (基本盘) of Chinese society – using here a term that means the common status of the majority of people. Lydia agreed that *guo-nan* is an accurate description of the “vibe” of most Chinese men. “This [*guo-nan*] is also a problem that is shaped by the big environment due to our society and culture.” She said. “But it's really hard for me to take them as ‘innocent’, you know? I feel very contradictory on this matter.”

Powerfully memorable moments when the borders around their own self-protective distance from *guo-nan* were broken by *guo-nan* happened to many of my feminist interviewees on different occasions. Here, I want to share three specific stories told by Joanna, Ella, and Lora. For each of these women, their disgust arises as a sharp, intense

emotion when they experienced the “puncturing” of the borders of the everyday space in which they supposed themselves “safe” from *guo-nan*. In each, disgust reacts to the boundaries between their feminist digital space and the material world, it is separated from being broken down so that the abstract *guo-nan* becomes an actual body within physical reach in their everyday lives.

Joanna’s first experience of disgust at this was an adolescent experience that transformed her friendship circle. During her childhood, she made friends with more boys than girls. But this became difficult when they reached puberty in the junior high school, and boys around her started to talk about sex, masturbation, and girls in misogynistic ways. Suddenly, her friends made her feel “gross”. She described this feeling as a “man moment” – a point when she suddenly realised that her friends were not “genderless friends” but “men”. Such a moment of gendering had returned in a more recent experience with a male friend, who was interested in and studying queer and feminist theories:

In my understanding, I think many men have already started accepting those so-called “feminine traits” in themselves. Such as being emotional or crying in front of you. These do not really trouble them. It’s alright to be fragile. At least in my mind, I think they accept these. My friend is also curious about queer and feminist theories, and he is willing to explore these. But, sometimes, I find that some men like him use the theories they have learnt to justify some of their male behaviours, especially when they are doing something not so feminist. And then I would realise that ‘You are still a man!’ You know, that “man moment” would come to me.

Ella's experience involves a similar "man moment". This happened in her own home when she suddenly discovered that her younger brother was using "typical" misogynistic *guo-nan* slang:

Because if I believe that I might never meet this guy in my real life, it does not matter if he is a stinky bug living in the bin or a nasty garbage in the sewer. I would deliberately avoid these men in my real life. So in online spaces, I can feel some distance (from *guo-nan*), because I know this guy is not in my world. It would feel like just watching a joke or something. So, when I discovered that my brother is a person like this, I felt even more uncomfortable. I felt a man like this had suddenly appeared in my own home. This is driving me crazy.

For Lora, this feeling that safe borders had been breached also happened in her everyday life, with her family, her parents, and her workplace colleagues. When Lora told me about this experience in our interview, her voice started to take on a sobbing tone. After her words, we sat in long silence in front of the dark screens, until her breath became calm again:

Yes, I know that there are so many... How should I put this? Many men deserve to be fiercely criticised on social media. But in your real life, you rarely talk about feminism with your colleagues, relatives, or even friends. So those men you see online and those men you meet in your real life can feel a little bit differentiated. But after more and more [backlash] things happened on the Internet, you would realise that people around you every day, your colleagues – those men who look not bad at all – they also say such

things online to humiliate female victims. Like, for example, before the Tangshan Incident³¹ happened, my dad... Well, you see, he supported my education, and he thinks that women should work hard and so on. It seems that he is treating you nicely, even though he has some limited views. But when you discuss this Tangshan incident with him, even for my mum, their first response is that no wonder these women get beaten if they go to eat BBQ late at night. And then you can realise, oh, those online opinions are just around you, in your reality. [...] At that moment, you really feel that we need to change the whole social environment as soon as possible. There are no other ways to achieve a feminist future unless we change this whole environment.

These moments suggest an affective arc of refusal that recalls Honig's argument. The Bacchantes' refusal is an arc that involves three steps: inoperativity (refusing to work in Thebes), inclination (leaving Thebes to form solidarity with other women in Cithaeron), and fabulation (demanding transformed and rearticulated meanings after returning to Thebes) (Honig 2021, xiii). Honig emphasises that feminist refusal cannot be a linear departure or withdrawal. As a worldly politics, feminist refusal aims to achieve social transformation, so that the Bacchae must return to Thebes to take action. Without fabulation – without a reimagining of the world – inoperativity and inclination “will always be vulnerable to reabsorption into the dominant frames that silence or exceptionalise feminist agencies” (Honig 2021, 116).

Taking up Honig's feminist refusal as a political fable relevant to my interviewees, disgust as an arc of feminist refusal can be the affective mechanism for reclaiming the

³¹ The Tangshan incident was an event of public gender violence that happened in Tangshan, China in 2022 (see Gan 2022). Reports on and the video of this violence was widely spread and discussed on Chinese social media.

city, even when collective actions are heavily suppressed in contemporary China. As I have indicated in my previous chapter, these feminist women live in an authoritarian environment where offline collective feminist activism is largely unavailable. Their feminist actions can only be relatively individualised and cautious, so that aggressive feminist social transformation feels very difficult to achieve. In this context, feminist inoperativity often manifests as withdrawing from spaces shared with men to avoid experiencing discomfort. In contemporary Chinese digital feminism, women's space (e.g. toilets and all-women groups/facilities) is often conceptualised and idealised as creating a resisting space to claim women's domain in gendered public space (Tian and Ge 2024), or as a space safe from being contaminated by misogyny and harassment (Yang and Hu 2024). My feminist interviewees suggest that such "safe" places are fragile, as their boundaries can be unexpectedly broken down by the ways dominant culture and social structures continue to produce patriarchal misogyny. When Lora eventually said, "we need to change the whole social environment", she was insisting that there was nowhere to escape sexism in her current lived world. A forever safe Cithaeron as a refuge where the bacchantes gather and celebrate is only a temporal heterotopia (Honig 2021, 85). Thus, returning to reclaim the city is not merely about a feminist determination or consciousness, but is facilitated by the affect of disgust that threatens to stick with them.

Reading disgust as an affective arc of feminist refusal requires us to reconsider and explore negative feelings in Chinese digital feminist politics. On the one hand, we need to acknowledge that negative feelings like disgust have affective intentionality: after all, to be disgusted is to be disgusted *by something* (Whitney 2018; Ahmed 2020). Using Marilyn Frye's terms, Shiloh Whitney indicates that feminist feelings are often not "uptaken", as if "it is a reflection of psycho-physical events inside the angry person only, an outburst that reflects her as an emotional person, but bears on nothing in the world we share" (489). Whitney argues that this tendency reduces and denies the

intentionality of affect; that affect is always *about something* that is not purely internal on some level. Acknowledging feminist disgust as an intentionality is to urge us to take seriously the social mechanisms of producing misogyny culture in contemporary China. The availability of feeling disgust in feminist relations with men, rather than anger or other emotions, points our attention to the cultural and social systems that allow such disgust to merge and stay in feminist bodies. Based on my discussion of feminist sensibility in the previous chapter, I suggest that the feminist disgust of *yan-nan* is also related to political pessimism, in which making actual feminist social changes is heavily restricted by the authoritarian political system, and social hostility towards feminism. This passiveness of feminist disgust thus connects these feminist women with the world in a different way from anger. Without feeling the hope of change, disgust associates them with the world that they cannot turn away from. The misogynistic world drags the feminist body back to live with the endless affective refusal, which is, as I continue to discuss in the next section, a specific kind of affective load that features the dilemma of individualisation in Chinese digital feminism without systematic support.

Living with Feminist Affective Loads

I do not intend to idealise or romanticise feminist disgust. My aim in delineating the arc of feminist disgust in *yan-nan* is to reveal the affective dimensions of the feminist women I interviewed. At the same time, this is not to say that living with feminist disgust is not painful and difficult. In this last section, I point out that feminist disgust has a limit, because the affective load that a feminist body can bear has a limit. In the intensity of negative feelings, feminist bodies can experience monstrous chaos, pain and desperation that puts feminist politics in danger of separation and antagonism (for example, see Huang Qiqi's (2023) criticism of feminist anger in Chinese digital feminism). However, until we take the negative feelings of individual feminist bodies

seriously and stop perceiving them as things that need to be overcome, negative feelings like disgust will continue to create an unbearable affective load in feminist bodies, and drive feminism into deadlock. In other words, we should pay attention to the socio-cultural mechanisms that continue to construct the situations that foster the negative feelings to persist in feminist bodies.

When I read the Chinese version of Nussbaum's *Citadels of Pride: Sexual Abuse, Accountability, and Reconciliation* (2023) on a Chinese e-book reading platform, I noticed that other readers became confused when Nussbaum suggested replacing feminists' vengeful anger towards men with love and benevolent listening. Many left comments asking why such benevolence responsibility falls on the shoulders of women again to deal with men's endless impatience and hostility towards feminism. I checked the long comment section at the end of the book on this e-book platform. One reader left a long review of Nussbaum's attitude in which, with a hesitant tone, she asked whether this "motherly benevolence" was the privilege of white elite women.

I heard a similar "scream" of "I cannot do it!" from the feminist women I interviewed. Most of them recalled experiences of trying to communicate with men about feminism. As discussed in an earlier chapter, acting through individual everyday conversations and raising feminist consciousness are very important to Chinese digital feminism, and these everyday conversations include conversations with men. When I asked about their specific experiences, however, almost none of my interviewees replied that such experiences had been pleasant or effective. Some still believe that working with men and teaching men about feminism were important. For Joanna and Carol, who repeatedly emphasised that they do not want Chinese digital feminism to be "woman-only" feminism that risks replicating a gender binary system, they still experienced tension between this stance and their embodied feelings when interacting with men:

Joanna: Although on a rational level I think using terms like *guo-nan* may not be a good thing emotionally, I can't help agreeing with it. [...] In my daily life, I indeed have these feelings. When I see those men, I can't help thinking, oh yes, they are *guo-nan*.

Carol: There are too few men, Chinese men, who can understand what we feminists are thinking and trying to say. There are too few of them, almost none! Is this because I have too little experience? I am not sure. But I have never met one in my life. [...] We [feminists] often discuss feminism only with women. I always want to have a "big party" and discuss feminism with everyone. But now there are only women there at the party. I just wonder whether it's possible to include some men? [...] But there are really too few men who can sit down and talk about this topic. [...] From the beginning of these conversations [with men], I already feel that exclusion vibe from them. Then how can we sit calmly and talk about feminism? I feel really contradictory about this. And I am suffering a lot. On the one hand, I think we need to hear many more different voices. But on the other hand, I am reluctant [to have these conversations with men].

Many others frankly admitted that they had stopped seeing men as hopeful allies, had given up, often because the experiences were too bad, and they failed too many times. They explained that they saw no use talking about feminism with men, because they simply wouldn't listen at all:

Rose: I changed. I used to think that perhaps I could make them understand. Now I think it doesn't matter. They cannot be

persuaded anyway. [...] Perhaps because I tried too many times to reason with men, and found out that they did not speak reason at all. Their mindsets are just different from ours. They cannot understand what we say.

Kristy: Nowadays, I don't think I will try to educate other people, to educate men, or women. I just stopped *zhi-jiao* (volunteer teaching). I give up. Haha. If they can understand, they will just understand feminism by themselves. [...] I think for a person who even has a slight amount of sympathy, or at least some ability to think, as long as they see the social news and online comments, they will support feminism. I really think that those who do not support feminism are abnormal. I think this is a basic criterion for a normal person.

Kristy here used the word *zhi-jiao* (支教, volunteer teaching), a term commonly used by Chinese digital feminists to refer to helping other people understand feminism through conversation. The original meaning of *zhi-jiao* denotes educated individuals going to schools in underdeveloped rural or township areas for volunteer educational work. Kristy's use of *zhi-jiao* thus suggests that teaching feminism is experienced as a form of individual responsibility, making feminists themselves accountable for resolving other people's queries and misperceptions about feminism. The meaning of *zhi-jiao* also implies that such actions of feminist education should be voluntary, mobilised by individual feminists' sense of morality and political enthusiasm, and without receiving sufficient repayment and support. Digital feminist scholarship in the Western context has acknowledged the influence of online education conducted by individual feminists in bringing visibility and public awareness (Kannen 2020; Flores et al. 2020). However, my interviewees' experience further suggests that in contemporary China the primarily

responsibility for such education, and for ensuring feminist politics take effect, is understood to rest with individual feminists. In an environment where systematic support is unavailable and feminist communities are constantly disbanded, discomfort and other forms of negative feelings during this online education have become individual burdens to overcome. Aside from negative feelings such as disgust, anger, disappointment, or fear that arise from bad experiences talking feminism with men, and along with an expectation that they constantly clarify and justify themselves as “peaceful” and “rational”, individual feminists also bear a subjective load that can be explained as the burden of “constant negotiation or making and remaking of the self” (O’ Brien 2024, 3). Such affective burdens continue to position feminist women as responsible for emotionally managing themselves and others, so that it again puts women in the position of producers, responsible for relationships and positive emotions (Oksala 2016).

Several feminist interviewees directly told me that they think feminist *zhi-jiao* has exceeded the limits of individual feminists’ capability. After all, changing a person’s mind is a difficult task, and it cannot simply be achieved through individual conversations. Lisa received a feminist education since her early years in an international high school in mainland China. For her, this experience is crucial not only to her, but also to her male classmates who gained a basic sense of feminism through proper education:

You see, if a man has never received this kind of thorough education, [...] Can I pay his tuition and send him back to take classes? It’s impossible, right? [...] I think there are some things that are too difficult to change. So these *guo-nan* make people feel that they are incurable. I think maybe, under this kind of feeling,

feminists invent words like *guo-nan*. You truly feel a sense that changes are impossible to happen.

Recognising this affective load helps us better recognise the exhausted, burned-out bodies that are so common in Chinese digital feminism. A lack of any systematic support for Chinese digital feminism is heightened by censorship, restrictions on activism, and patriarchal family-centric dominant gender discourses. As indicated by Jacqueline Kennelly (2014) in her study of women's affective participation in social activisms, emotional support for women in activism needs to be recognised as a basic political need, because feminism and other kinds of social activism “must be understood as indelibly embedded within a web of human relations. Such relations, though often read in individualised terms such as ‘giving support’, are in fact the bedrock upon which political organising and action can unfold” (256). In this sense, the kind of affective solidarity advocated by Clare Hemmings (2012) is not merely a substitute or means of achieving political solidarity and building feminist identification. It also needs to be the support system for what is felt as an everyday feminist affective burden. When the feminist body becomes too disgusted and too tired to respond, solidarity based solely on individual effort and individual resilience might also fade because, as affective stamina drains, hope drains away with it.

Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the complex feeling of disgust among the 14 Chinese feminist women in their attitudes towards men. My analysis here clarifies a few common perceptions of *yan-nan* (feminist misandry) as a hatred towards men, feminist separatism, or simple gender essentialism and binary opposition. Overall, I argue in this chapter that disgust in Chinese digital feminism must be taken seriously as an affective

politics of refusal. Disgust is primarily an ordinary feeling of these feminists' experiences of living with misogyny, functioning in sustaining a feminist subjectivity by producing the abjection towards "men" and by rejecting the fates of becoming "women". In a hostile environment where feminism lacks collective organised actions or systematic support, disgust forms an affective arc that ties the feminists to the world they do not want to live in. In this sense, disgust is ugly, intense, heavy, and painful.

This feminist disgust can be described as a form of affective load of deviation, being further intensified by the specific difficult situations of post-socialist China. In my later chapters that discuss men's responses and feelings towards feminism, I will continue this discussion of affective loads by comparing how this affective load is different for Chinese men – these men are gradually noticing that they seem to be unavoidably living with feminism in contemporary China, while realising that they are perceived as unwelcome or being part of the problem. I will now turn to the last part of this thesis, starting from an investigation of these interviewed men's gender subjectivity in living with feminist criticisms.

Part Three

Chapter 5

To be a Better Man, or Not to Be: Reassuring Hegemonic Masculinity through Feminist *Yan-Nan*

Jeff: In my understanding, feminism should be a more inclusive, less monstrous thing. It pursues equal opportunities for both male and female individuals. But for many people who claim themselves as feminists on Chinese social media, they hate men.

Like many other Chinese men I interviewed in this project, Jeff has some complaints about Chinese digital feminism. During our interview, I nevertheless became convinced that Jeff genuinely identifies himself as a feminist man. A well-educated young man, Jeff reads feminist books, pays attention to discussions of gender online, discusses feminism with his friends and colleagues, and even teaches feminist concepts to people around him. Unlike my pessimistic feminist women interviewees who generally find men difficult to change, Jeff's optimistic attitude towards a more inclusive Chinese feminism comes from his "easy" process of transforming himself into a better man. "I started this change a long time ago." He explained. "I think it's not a very difficult process. [...] Now I am confident that in all aspects, I am different from those '*guo-nan*.'"

In this chapter and the next, I turn to how the self-identified men I interviewed responded to Chinese digital feminism, especially online feminist articulation of *yan-nan*. A self-reflexive comment on doing feminist research will be useful before I begin.

Compared to my previous chapters on the women interviewees, and especially feminist women's disgust, my approach to what these interviews with Chinese men produced is clearly different. This difference might seem to some readers as less engaged on my part and that I am less attentive to the men's feelings. I acknowledge that this is partially true, because most of these men responded to this project very differently compared to the feminist women. However, as a thesis with an embodied approach and a primary interest in affect, I am indeed interested in exploring these men's feelings in facing Chinese digital feminism. Considering the complexity of their positions in relation to feminism – necessarily including my evident position as a feminist – I have adopted a different organisation of the discussion in this third part of the thesis discussing the men's interviews. This chapter will focus on Chinese men's embodied gender subjectivity through a theoretical revision of Raewyn Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell 2005), and I will turn in Chapter 6 to a more intensive discussion of these men's feelings about feminism and perceptions of Chinese men's misogyny. Through these two chapters, I hope to unveil that these Chinese men also have embodied, affective, situated responses towards Chinese digital feminism; yet the way they response are quite different from the feminist women interviewees. As I summarised earlier in the Chapter 2, if we could also adopt an embodied approach to investigate these differences, we would be able to see that these men in feminisms are also merely embodied subjects. This approach aims to break the myth of men as either self-determined subjects or as passive victims being captured by the hierarchy of masculinities.

I wish to emphasise two things at the outset of Part Three by opening it with Jeff as an example. First, men's attitude towards feminism is far more complex than a simple pro-feminist and anti-feminist division. As Linn Egeberg Holmgren and Jeff Hearn (Holmgren and Hearn 2009) argue, men's gender consciousness positions are better described as a continuum or a matrix of overlapping and intertwining ideologies

(Messner 1997). In general, all 16 Chinese men I interviewed for this study claimed to support gender equality and acknowledged that there are existing problems of gender inequality in China that need to be solved. However, similarly to findings in other Western studies of men's contradictory attitudes towards feminism (Edley and Wetherell 2001; Kean and Buiten 2024), these interviewed men also tended to distinguish between bad feminism (represented as not only radical and emotional but even evil) and good feminism (represented as rational and mild). This judgement is not only based on the division of a legitimised state socialist feminism and the stigmatised grassroots digital feminism. As Chinese digital feminists are not a singular group but often appear as a collection of contesting voices, making this distinction also helps these men to navigate and interpret feminism when they encounter different feminist information in everyday lives. This differentiation partially explains the significant gap between survey and interview results of participants who were men. While the initial survey result shows that 7 of the 16 interviewed men self-identified as feminists, only 2 men in fact exhibited clear support for Chinese digital feminism during the interviews. The other 14 men all expressed a disapproving attitude towards Chinese digital feminism and differentiated it from an authentic gender equality movement. Half of these 14 men completely disagreed with Chinese digital feminism, while the other half exhibited some level of agreement with or willingness to understand Chinese digital feminism but maintained a generally defensive attitude towards it. In the cases of the 2 men who explicitly supported Chinese digital feminism, only one of them identified himself as a feminist, while the other one claimed that although he supports digital feminism, he felt ineligible to claim himself as a feminist because he did not contribute enough to any feminist action or discourse. Based on my interviews, I could crudely divide these men's attitudes into three groups: anti-feminist (7), in-between (7), and profeminist (2) (see Appendix 3). While I acknowledge that this is not the kind of nuance I took to the feminist women's interviews overall, this schematic distinction offers me a starting point for highlighting some differences between the men.

Jeff is one of the men who are “in-between”. As evidenced in his words above, Chinese men who are becoming increasingly familiar with digital feminist content and debates are not passive receivers of feminist criticism. Instead, they often actively explore and interpret feminism with their own understandings, while seeking to find out their own positions in the feminist world. In this sense, I agree with the existing trend in critical men and masculinity studies that takes men as active participants in feminist and gender discourse (Kean and Buiten 2024; Waling 2019b), especially where that analysis takes men’s embodied subjectivity as immediately caught up in the meanings they make of gender, including the meanings they make of feminism. With this in mind, I want to interpret my men interviewees’ negative attitudes toward Chinese digital feminism, where they appear, not merely as misperceptions or as intentional smears aimed at buttressing patriarchy, or even as a backlash strategy in the terms some feminist scholars have suggested (Sun and Dai 2024; He 2023; Venäläinen 2022). These men’s attitudes toward Chinese digital feminism are reflections of their understanding of themselves and their gendered subject positions in their experiences of a gendered world.

Given that they are encountering a world in which “being a man” is increasingly negatively viewed by Chinese digital feminists, I was interested in how these men processed this challenge. Does awareness of this feminist criticism change their understandings of themselves as gendered subjects, and lead to any deeper recognition of gender construction at a socio-cultural level? My research and analysis in this chapter explore how these men prevent themselves from identifying with men and a male-dominated society as the central problematic object of feminist criticisms. I will argue that, through a process of de-gendering the men of feminist critiques and re-gendering themselves as good Chinese men, most of these interviewees create a safe distance from feminist scrutiny for themselves while also maintaining their gendered identity.

Revisiting Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell 2005) in this chapter, I will argue that through such processes of the interpretive negotiation of feminist *yan-nan*, men transformed threats of being identified as a problematic man in ways that allowed them to further solidify a masculine identity by affirming the idea that there are always ways to become a better man. This investment in the promised stable position of being a man continues to divert men away from forms of instability threatened by feminist contestations, including feminist disgust as well as calls for structural transformation of Chinese culture and society.

Reviewing Chinese Masculinity Theories: Men's Studies without Feminist Origins

As a global gender studies field, men and masculinity studies (MMS) emerged as a response to feminist activism and theory in the late 20th century (Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2005). However, in local Chinese contexts, the development of Chinese MMS since the early 21st century has hardly offered a response to local feminist criticisms. As summarised by Kam Louie (2014), scholarly attention to Chinese men and masculinities has predominantly aimed to amend the "overlooking" of men in Chinese gender studies, and the overlooking of Chinese men in global masculinity studies. In other words, local theorisations of men and masculinities can be summarised as mainly an effort to rebuild Chinese men's positions in social and academic fields, thereby often lacking a primary feminist focus.

In Chinese MMS, the key influential strand summarises Chinese masculinity by studying ancient literature and historical materials (Lei 2022; Hirsch 2013; Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002). This approach can be represented by two influential paradigms: the *wen-wu* theory as articulated by Kam Louie (Louie 2002) and the *yin-yang*

framework, with origins in ancient Taoist philosophy, as articulated by Song Geng (Song 2004). The *wen-wu* paradigm refers to a dynamic exemplification of men's potential that distinguishes cultural or scholarly attainments (*wen*) from military physical performance (*wu*). Louie argues that during some periods in feudalistic China *wu* masculinity could be valued more than *wen* attainments and seen as exemplifying manhood due to the demands of warfare and military force. However, Louie argues, most dynasties of ancient China gave *wen* primacy over *wu* based on Confucian doctrines extolling the virtues of knowledge rather than force (Louie 2002). This preference for a "softer" scholarly masculinity is also supported by Song's *yin-yang* theory (Song 2004). For Song, the attribution of *yin* (with connotations of femininity) and *yang* (with connotations of masculinity) in ancient China was determined by relative power relations regardless of the person's assignment to the dimorphic sexual categories man and woman. For example, while a husband can represent *yang* relative to his wife, he can also be positioned as *yin* relative to his male superiors, such as his father or the emperor. Song emphasises that men behaving softly or effeminately in traditional Chinese culture does not necessarily suggest a deficiency of manhood. Rather, it can be a common or even exemplary way of representing oneself as a loyal literati. The *yin* or "softer" masculinity is therefore inherited as a position of value by the ancient Chinese elite class, which was largely constituted by male scholar-officials.

While Louie and Song's approaches influentially suggest how alternative understanding of gender roles may emerge from traditional Chinese culture, their attempts to identify and summarise a representative pattern of Chinese masculinity are often associated with the claim that there is a distinctive local Chinese masculinity contrasting with Western masculinity. Louie indicates, in the preface to *Theorising Chinese Masculinity* (2002), that his motivation for studying traditional Chinese masculinity is inspired by the common misrepresentation of Chinese men in modern Western society as weak and feminine. This longing for Chinese men to be recognised

on the global stage is also apparent in the first sentence in the preface of Song's *Fragile Scholar* (2004): "The effeminate young man in traditional Chinese theatre has notoriously been considered as a symbol of 'lack of masculinity' in Chinese culture by Westerners." (Song 2004, vii) Thus, these studies of Chinese masculinity aim to establish a legitimate Chinese male subject position. These efforts to find a legitimated local Chinese men's subjectivity resonate with the anxiety of Chinese male intellectuals during the late 20th century, when re-establishing the manhood of Chinese male intellectuals in front of white men on the global stage was a key motivation for their participation in early 20th-century women's movements (Zhong 2000; Lei 2021). As I have illustrated in the first chapter, Chinese men were seldom questioned as a gendered subject in the early 20th century. The wide social attention to Chinese men's gender consciousness in the 1980s emerged when efforts to reclaim gender differences became prominent in post-socialist China. Finding 'real' Chinese men in this historical context was a response to the end of a socialism that had exhorted full economic participation regardless of gender and thus the undermining of some stark symbols of sexual difference – the end to which was closely tied to rhetorical and economic opening of Chinese society and culture to the global capitalist world (Zhong 2000). Turning now to the dominant scholarship on traditional Chinese masculinity, as represented by Louie and Song, I want to consider them in the same vein. In the post-colonial global political context of post-socialist China, Chinese men and masculinities have been heavily weighed down with anxiety about a Chinese national subject. To a certain degree, this stream of local Chinese MMS aligns and resonates with the trend of the "male crisis" discourse, even though this crisis carries more complex entanglements with the local Chinese demands of searching for a subject position in the global order after its colonised history.

As a result of this primary concern with finding a legitimate Chinese male subject position, such attempts as Louie's and Song's to approach Chinese men as a gendered

category respond to discourse on Western men rather than critically theorising local Chinese gendered power relations. Although men's dominance over women is often addressed as an important background in these studies, women's subordination is not a core issue in this vein of Chinese MMS, even being marginalised or disregarded. Both Louie and Song have acknowledged that their paradigms of traditional Chinese masculinities are theorised on the basis of "the complete exclusion of women from the signifying system" (Song 2004, 12) in pre-modern Chinese society. For Louie, this factual social condition enables a relatively independent study of Chinese men and masculinities as distinct from local women studies, and has helped prevent an indiscriminate application of his *wen-wu* masculine theory (Louie 2014). However, this also means that, as the theory is established on the condition that women are entirely excluded from its scope, it lacks deep critical examination of the relational construction of gender. Song's theorisation of *yin-yang* pays more attention to gendered power relations than does Louie's, and Song has gestured to the prevalence of misogyny in traditional Chinese masculinities by utilising Eve Sedgwick's theory of homosocial desire within his account (Song 2004). Nevertheless, Song's focus is on power relations among men and his use of traditional Chinese gender theory – a hypothesis that pre-modern Chinese gender discourse is "more power-based than sex-based" (13) – oversimplifies sexed embodied subjectivity as well as marginalising tensions in contemporary men and women's lived experiences.

This tension in the intersection of masculinity and race in MMS has been addressed and debated in a range of different cultural contexts, especially in black MMSs and their relationship with black feminist theory (Awkward 1997; Carbado 1999; Hooks 2004; Springer 2002a). Many of the earlier black feminist theorists and activists' arguments about feminist and anti-racist solidarity across gender are based on their observations of the hostility and sexism targeting black women within the black communities in America (Lorde 2019; hooks 2014). As Audre Lorde curiously questioned in her essay,

black women are sometimes taken by black men as the target of their rage, so that black women talking about feminism seems to make them “less black” (Lorde 2019, 51). Similar to the voices in traditional Chinese MMS, black MMS scholars have raised the argument that black men and masculinities are marginalised in black gender studies (Gadsden and Harris 2022). Black feminist theorists are implicated in – if not directly blamed for – this discriminatory marginalisation, due to a perceived internalised white supremacy in gender studies. In line with this view, O’Shan D. Gadsden and Harris T. Travis insist that black feminists’ address to gendered power relations within blackness contributes to the stigmatisation of black men who, historically, have been depicted as more likely to be rapists, misogynists and violent criminals. The alternative approach raised by black MMS scholars, as represented by Tommy Curry (Curry 2017; 2022), is to use a black-men-centric perspective that considers black men as outside the patriarchal gender system established on the ground of white-dominant history. Curry draws comparisons between the subordinate status of black men and white women, arguing that black men and boys have been deprived as the “man-not” (Curry 2017). However, in these theorisations, Curry seldom gives attention to black women and gendered power relations in black patriarchy. Black women tend to be mentioned most often when feminist theories are being accused of contributing to the racist problem by an over-emphasis on black patriarchy overshadowing racial concerns.

Similar tensions continue to be exhibited in contemporary social disputes around Chinese digital feminism. As noted in chapter one, after the 1980s Chinese economic turn, local feminisms have been increasingly repositioned by mainstream discourse away from being allied with the socialist Chinese nation to being an opposing foreign-fostered force. In anti-feminist narratives, a popular accusation is that Chinese digital feminism is funded and organised by foreign conspiratorial institutions in order to weaken Chinese national power (Huang 2023a; He 2023). Young Chinese feminist women are often attacked online for being potential racists because their use of *guo-*

nan can be interpreted as favouring non-Chinese and especially white men (this was also suggested by some of my men interviewees, such as Andrew and Ray). The key problem to consider here, in facing these active racial concerns, is the constant reference to the masculine subject's connections with the same national, racial discourses being critiqued by feminist voices. These connections continue to be highly gendered, considering the historical fact that Chinese local women's movements have never yet successfully developed into an independent movement with the power to question embedded gender issues in male-dominated institutions.

Consequently, contemporary attempts at recovering the legitimacy of Chinese male positions using historical masculine theorisations risk reviving what feminists find inherently problematic. As both Louie and Song's studies are anchored by reference to a pre-modern context, use of these approaches tends to emphasise a continuity between Chinese masculinities and traditional Chinese culture. These contemporary applications can overshadow gendered power relations in favour of addressing the "Chinese-ness" of contemporary masculinity (Louie 2012; 2014a; Liu and Huang 2024). Their selective adaptation of traditional Chinese values also serves to re-create the dominant status of a male subject identified with the state and to at best indirectly uphold patriarchal hierarchies in contemporary China (Hird 2020). Before these historical accounts are adopted they should be examined more cautiously, as men's everyday experiences of gender relations have been dramatically transformed from the feudal dynasties to the 21st century.

From a strictly feminist perspective, I want to further ask why we always need to search for such a legitimated stable subject position for Chinese men? Instead of querying whether there is a way to secure a stable subject position for Chinese men on the global stage, I have tried to focus my chapters on these men who volunteered to be interviewed by me on how they experience their everyday life in the contemporary world. This

world is indeed highly gendered. It is also always fully relational, and it is moreover becoming increasingly infused with feminist discourse. In looking for a critical theoretical framework to study contemporary Chinese masculinities, my attention was thus drawn to Connell's classic hegemonic masculinity theory rather than to any of the available local Chinese MMS masculinity theories, which lack the same critical attention to gendered power. But before a too simplistic usage of the term "Chinese hegemonic masculinity", I would like to approach Connell's theory more cautiously with my own understandings to demonstrate how such a classic "Western" concept can still be critically applied in the situated context of Chinese men and masculinities today.

Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critical Theory with Feminist Principles

Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as the most rewarded way of being a man in context: as "the configuration of gender practice ... which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominate position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 2005, 77). As a key theorisation in the field of *Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities* (CSMM), Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory is grounded in an assessment of both inter-gender and intra-gender relationships. This approach to masculinity also starts from the profound intertwining of masculinities and patriarchy and, therefore, is a form of masculinity theory grounded in "feminist principle" (Demetriou 2001, 343).

For Connell, hegemonic masculinity is defined primarily by its relations with others, and in particular women/femininity. In Connell's definition, masculinities are not simply what men do but also express what has been culturally constituted as the acceptable ways of being a man. This proposition shares an important basic similarity with Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, in which gender in a heterosexual system is constructed by repetitive iteration of discursive structural forces that naturalise and sustain the binary division of gender (Butler 2002). For Connell also, the

construction of masculinity relies on a basic binary division of gender: “A culture which does not treat women and men as bearers of polarised character types, at least in principle, does not have a concept of masculinity in the sense of modern European/American culture.” (2005, 68) Hegemonic masculinity relies on the construction of the binary gender categorisation, which simultaneously enables the superiority of one over the other. This feminist ground for Connell’s work is made clearer by Carrie Peachter (2018) in her exploration of hegemonic masculinity’s relationship to femininity. Peachter clarifies that hegemonic masculinity works within a broader system of hegemonic gender performances, which “act, within a particular context, to uphold a gender binary and maintain traditional social relations between genders” (Peachter 2018, 124).

The significance of Connell’s hegemonic masculinity theory comes from its focus on how multiple masculinities work together in sustaining the binary gender categories man and woman and also men’s overall domination over women. Connell emphasises the existence of multiple masculinities and their inter-relations in a hierarchical system: masculinities can be identified in forms of hegemony, complicity, subordination, and marginalisation (Connell 2005). This approach echoes an important feminist insight: the relationships among men are important mechanisms in enabling and solidifying patriarchy, as argued in Gayle Rubin’s analysis of “the traffic in women” (Rubin 1975), or in Sedgwick’s theory of male homosocial desire (Sedgwick 2015). While both Rubin and Sedgwick focus on bond-making and gender alliance between men, Connell explores the hierarchical relationships among masculinities, in which masculinities compete with each other and get positioned by their relative agreement with or distance from a hegemonic masculinity cultural ideal. From this perspective, the relationships and interactions among men – even without the participation of women – can never be separated from patriarchal gender construction and power relations.

Challenges to Connell's hegemonic masculinity in MMS frequently claim that it implies a certain gender essentialism, and also tends to portray men and masculinity as completely negative (see, for example, [Whitehead 1999](#)). In response, Connell has explained that hegemonic masculinity, implicit in the term itself, is a relational concept: masculinity performance that might be recognised as hegemonic in one place at one time may not be hegemonic in some other contexts (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Therefore, the exact traits of hegemonic masculinity are not universally shared but can constantly change in accordance with the relevant dominant culture. The consequent fluidity of hegemonic masculinity theory enables it to be applied in a wide range of cultural contexts and with reference to different temporal and spatial backgrounds.

However, as it has become popularised, the application of Connell's hegemonic masculinity often shows some level of vagueness. Hegemonic masculinity is frequently used as a self-explanatory concept to refer to toxic masculinity, or to negative forms of masculinities, with little consideration of what specifically is hegemonic in a given context (Waling 2019a; Driscoll and Grealy 2022). For example, in a qualitative report published by UNFPA, based on a survey conducted in 2011, the researchers conclude that the high level of women experiencing gender-based violence in contemporary China should be explained as a result of hegemonic masculinity (Wang, Fang, and Li 2019). The study equates hegemonic masculinity to toxic masculinity that is responsible for high levels of violence, as hegemonic masculinity simply refers to the masculinity that "encourages men to be tough, use violence and not control sexual desire" (91). On many other occasions, when conventional violent and dominant masculinities seem to be challenged, studies in CSMM will respond by creating a typology of masculinities to "effectively 'name' masculinity" – inventing new categories to explain men's practice ([Waling 2019, 94](#)). This trend is evident in the field of studies "metrosexuality" (Simpson 1994; Wen 2021; Hall and Gough 2011; Chiu et al. 2019) and "soft masculinity" (Jung 2009; Shiau 2016; Yu, Sandel, and Chan 2024), which are

increasingly popular in Asian masculinity studies. Yet, as critically argued by others, the non-conventional metrosexual or soft types of masculinity can also function as an “operationalization of male solidarity” (Shugart 2008, 292) and even help to selectively secure masculinity norms, such as sexual access to women and men’s financial success. These more sceptical studies help reveal the fact that, even though men’s practices might have changed in a way that disobeys traditional gender norms on the surface, these transformations do not necessarily reflect a challenge to conventional gender power relations. Such confusions around the misapplication of hegemonic masculinity theory have led to the proposal from Jeff Hearn (2004) to replace the concept of hegemonic masculinity, as the concept “has generally been employed in too restricted a way” (59), so that it is better to return to the clearer concept of the hegemony of men.

Another key theoretical debate arising from Connell’s hegemonic masculinity, as I have briefly outlined in Chapter 2, is centred on its difficulty with male subjectivity. Critical feminist MMS, represented by Connell’s hegemonic masculinity, is criticised for leaving MMS in a “double bind”, in which “men are both total victims of, and yet responsible for (but not agentively responsible), their actions in line with masculinity.” (Waling 2019, 103). In Hearn’s words, this is the “double complexity” of men’s subjectivity: “men are both a social category formed by the gender system and dominant collective and individual agents of social practices” (Hearn 2004, p.59). This pattern of contradictions signals a weak structuralism in the current critical MMS field. Chris Beasley argues that MMS scholars often selectively cite post-structuralist theories in inconsistent ways, such as partly adopting the term “subjects” as a gendered construction, while still resisting to use power “as constitutive and not merely prohibitive” (Beasley 2012, 756). As the post-structuralist approach has been widely adopted by feminism and gender studies, this tendency to address masculinity in loosely or specifically structuralist terms can create the impression that MMS is “outdated” (Berggren 2014).

Notwithstanding these defects, I consider hegemonic masculinity theory a useful theoretical tool in approaching masculinities critically, from a feminist perspective, without necessarily reducing men to passive receivers of masculinity discourses. To illustrate the possibility of this objective, in the following section, I suggest clarifying hegemonic masculinity theory into three layers, each revealing an embedded major principle in Connell's masculinity theory. The differentiation of these multiple layers of meaning within hegemonic masculinity theory allows for an embodied approach that can pay more attention to men's embodied subjectivity in the matrix of gendered power relations.

Revisiting Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

In dealing with the ambiguity of the application of hegemonic masculinity, Hearn once asked for more clarity: "Are we talking about cultural representations, everyday practices or institutional structures?" (Hearn 2004, 58) While Hearn reaches the conclusion that it would be more productive to shift the focus away from masculinity to the hegemony of men, I find his specific questions here do not necessarily contradict Connell's theory. If we consider the concept of hegemonic masculinity as having the three aspects I outline below, we can see how it enriches the understanding of masculinities as forms of practice, gender ideals, and subject positions respectively.

First, hegemonic masculinity can be used to refer to a specific set of *practices* associated with ideal manhood, which could differ depending on specific cultural contexts. Aligning with Connell's definition, masculinity performances are not static but are fluid over time and space, being constructed by specific culture and historical discourses: "Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social

setting.” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 836). There is thus no one universal prototype of “real men” as suggested by bio-determinism. Masculinities, in this sense, can be understood as forms of gender performativity that can help to identify and solidify the gender category of men. In this first layer, hegemonic masculinity can be studied as the mainstream or the most common *practices* and characteristics of men in a given socio-cultural context.

In the second layer, hegemonic masculinity can also refer to the existence of a masculine *ideal*. While in one context there can be many different masculinity performances that may differ and deviate from the ideal, there exists a form of hegemonic masculinity that outlines the most ideal or desirable way of being a man in that context. And still, the concrete features of this ideal form of hegemonic masculinity are shaped by particular local conditions. The traditional Chinese MMS stream from Louie (2002) and Song (2004) can both be considered as categories in this approach, as they aim to delineate the dominant masculine ideal (such as *wen* and *wu*) in different historical periods of ancient China. As Connell also indicates, the hegemonic masculinity ideal may not be embodied or otherwise actualised by the majority of men in the particular society under analysis because it is the image that is often highly idealised (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Hegemonic masculine ideals may differ from different cultural contexts, and there could also be different contesting hegemonic masculine ideals held by different individuals even within the same contexts. The key point, therefore, is not that the same ideal is shared or upheld by men in a context, but the belief in the existence of an ideal for men to look forward to. The existence of the ideal may work in similar ways, as a dominant gender ideology being discursively and affectively articulated. Nevertheless, the existence of the ideal is collectively shared and upheld. It works as a bellwether that guides men to recognise and aspire to images of men or maleness they believe to be closer to the masculine ideal.

Therefore, in the third layer, hegemonic masculinity theory also leads to the exploration of the individual subject's *positioning* in the hierarchy of masculinity frameworks. On the subjective level, the existence of the hegemonic masculinity ideal provides a seemingly ultimate subject position for men. Men can then position themselves and each other by comparing each other in relation to the ideal they hold, which can be articulated by the dominant gender ideology as well as one's positionalities in intersectional social relations. In other words, the hegemonic masculinity ideal helps create a hierarchy in masculinities depending on one's distance from the ideal, by asking how far one is away from the ideal image of the best man. It is during this process of constant self-positioning that male subjectivity is embodied by individuals. At the same time, even if one is far away from a masculine ideal, male subjectivity may continue investing in the hegemonic masculinity system and sustaining the gender order to find their position in comparison with other men in the system of hierarchy. Therefore, in this sense, hegemonic masculinity can be understood as the existence of hierarchical relations among masculinities produced and internalised by men, who together construct men's gendered subjectivities.

These distinctions can help clarify consistent, circular debates about whether hegemonic masculinity is challenged or reproduced every time men seem to act differently. As the concept of hegemonic masculinity incorporates different layers, a change in one single aspect is not sufficient to prove that the system of hegemonic masculinity can be overthrown.³² Hegemonic masculinities can be considered not as a structurally oppressive force, but as a synergy of these multiple inter-related layers, in which male subjectivity is not passively suppressed but actively embodied. Taking this view, we can thus revisit the core idea of power in Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory, which has been widely criticised for its implication that power is an oppressive,

³² See controversies surrounding Eric Anderson's inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2010; Anderson and McCormack 2018; O'Neill 2015).

negative force (see Beasley 2015). If taking men's subjectivity into account and considering an individual man's relationship with hegemonic masculinity as a matter of positioning, then power cannot be reduced to a powerful force that compels any individual to act in certain ways – in so doing making a male subject a victim of hegemonic masculinity. Instead, a man can also live with this image with contradictory feelings of enjoyment and restraint. He might, sometimes, not want to accept that ideal and choose to resist becoming that kind of man; but on other occasions, as indicated by Andrea Waling (2019), the same man might also live with the ideal with pleasure, enjoyment, a sense of pride and achievement, and other positive feelings (102).

In analysing my men interviewees in this chapter, I use hegemonic masculinity to refer to this three-layered system, which centrally affirms the existence of an ultimately stable subject position to which men can orient themselves for various degrees of investment in the competitive masculine system. In other words, hegemonic masculinity offers the *promise* of a stable subject position that functions to stabilise existing gendered power relations. This promise is not made by a visible dominant entity with a public contract. It is a promise implied in the form of a self-integrated ideal, gradually learned and reinforced in an individual man's living with gendered discourses and everyday experiences. By interpreting hegemonic masculinity theory in this way, I understand the core of hegemonic masculinity as a belief that there is a most secure way of being a man, and together with this belief, an invitation for men to reach that secure position. In this promise, there is always a possible way to be a man. Hegemonic masculinity secures the boundary of "men" as a gendered category, no matter how masculinities are criticised or seen as risks. Specifically, for my men interviewees, I see a re-stabilisation of this kind being achieved through their de-gendering of men by distancing them from feminist criticisms, and then their re-gendering of themselves as a promising good man in comparison with the bad *guo-nan*, who is deemed to have failed to pass the challenges raised by Chinese digital feminists.

De-gendering Men to Distance from Feminist Scrutiny

Among the 14 men interviewees who complained to me about Chinese digital feminism, the de-gendering process I refer to here is apparent in two major narratives. The first is an apparent rejection of traditional male gender roles. In these narratives, these interviewees reject the social requirements for men to “be like a man” and distinguish these expectations from “being myself”. While this differentiation involves rejection of certain toxic masculine behaviours and rigid gender stereotypes, it leads to an understanding of one’s self and their everyday experience as naturally non-gendered and thus should be exempted from feminist critiques. The second de-gendering rationale appears in the interviewees’ denial of the relevance of gender in some criticisms proposed by Chinese digital feminists. By emphasising that gender inequality is not men’s problem specifically but every human’s problem, some interviewees interpret the “man question” raised by feminism as in fact gender-less – meaning, in practice, largely as a matter of individual faults in some men. Thus, the gender issue to a human issue. In both ways, the result is to create a distance between the man’s sense of himself and feminist critique. Despite being able to identify and reject certain toxic masculine problems, the “authentic” self being endorsed by the men interviewees represents a transcendent notion of selfhood that detaches the body from the materially and discursively situated world of gender.

“Being Myself” instead of “Being Like a Man”

Compared to the feminist women I have discussed in the earlier chapters, the notion of “self” is understood distinctively differently by the men interviewees. While the feminist women exhibit a distinct struggle in living in the gendered world and with a keen desire to withdraw from the “fate” of becoming women, the masculine self does

not exhibit such strong tension. For the 14 men interviewees, they often implicitly make a conflict between their “real inner self” and the outer masculine expectations being forced on them – understood by the interviewees as a rigid requirement coming from society, and sometimes from women, including feminists. The “self” is often interpreted as something naturally non-gendered. However, at the same time, my observation is that their gender subjectivity seldom generates intensive contradictory feelings about their existing positions of being men: they acknowledged that there are some outer social expectations on being men, but many of them described these social expectations as something they can easily resist and get rid of, by just ignoring, or selectively incorporating them on some occasions when they want to. There seems to be a freedom of “getting in” or “withdrawing”.

On the surface, the interviewees can identify that there are certain cultural and social requirements that determine how to be a man. Some of the interviewees actively resist these masculine expectations and agree that gender-based stereotypes should be discarded. The masculine expectations they disagree with are often those associated with traditional gender roles, as one example from Andrew shows:

This “being like a man” is a stereotype on men that comes from the old time. For example, one stereotype is that men need to go out to work and women must stay at home (男主外女主内). This is a social requirement of men. You need to do this and that, to actively take responsibilities...Well, I think this division of labour should be based on individual personality and capability instead of gender.

Aside from the idea of men needing to be responsible breadwinners, other masculine stereotypes the interviewees actively deny include personality traits such as men

needing to be tough, determined and straightforward and, in terms of physical appearance, muscular and rough. This is distinct from the search for “real men” in the late 20th century post-economic reform era in China, when the admiration and advocacy of tough Chinese guys emerged as a social resistance towards the gender discourses in the socialist period (Zhong 2000). In contrast, during our interviews, many of these young men seemed to have no problem talking to me about how they did not fit into a hyper-masculine model. When I asked them about how they think of themselves as masculine, many responded that they are not like a man when they have no observable signs of shame or hesitation. For example, Erick and Dennis talked about how they are “not so men” because of their appearance and personality. Both drew a clear division between “outer” or observable masculine expectations and what they “really” are. They emphasised that they prefer to remain ‘themselves’ rather than complying with the mainstream ideas of what it is to be a man. However, it should be noted that this resistance is mostly phrased as “men don’t need to be”, and not a demonstration of strong opposition to or a lack of appreciation of the hyper-masculine men. In other words, even though their expressions of “remaining themselves” also frequently refer to their embodied presence’s contradiction with their subjectivity, in comparison with the feminist women who constantly feel they fail to escape being perceived as sexually objectified women, these men’s idea of “remaining themselves” is less confrontational:

Erick: I think being masculine is like... being physically muscular. My opinion is that...well, see what I look like now. I have long hair and other “feminine” traits. I don’t think I fit into that image of a very masculine man in the traditional sense. Personally, I just feel like masculinity is a definition made by society.

Dennis: I am really not masculine! How should I put this... Let me give you an example now. Some people often talk to me about why you are so “exquisite” (精致) in a satiric way. Because I wear sun cream every day for five years! When I say something like “oh wait, I need to apply sun cream”, some people would act like “what are you doing?” and laugh. I also have another example. I was very introverted and sensitive in my childhood. ... These traits would be negated at first because they are different from the widely accepted masculinities in the society, such as being brave, straightforward, and rough, right? But my personality is like...put in a good way, I am a thoughtful person; but to put it in a bad way, I am just indecisive.

This sense of being perceived as masculine as “not being like myself” is also conveyed by some interviewees’ as men being able to accept or deny what Louis Althusser would call their interpellation by masculinity, based on their willingness to do or be what is expected of men in different situations. Ray’s account, for example, shows an understanding of masculinity as something not part of himself but rather something “performed” as a strategy to market yourself. When asked about his idea of a good man, Ray answered that a good man has the capability to defeat other men in competitions. However, he explained this from a stunning utilitarian understanding of masculine competitions:

I think (only after defeating other men) he would be eligible to define himself as a good man. Maybe he is not a really good man, but he would be able to define himself in that way. He can define and promote his image as a good man.

This expression shows a contradiction in differentiating the self from “being like a man” while at the same time affirming the masculine hierarchies. Similar to Erick and Dennis, Jack implies that he wishes to distance himself from a mask of socially accepted masculinity. For Jack, “being like a man” was also a masquerading strategy that could be selectively performed when certain benefits or interests are promised. Jack also does not integrate the “mask of masculinity” into his self-identity. He does not question the existence of the masculine norms involved in that mask, however, and even validates the belief that conforming to certain masculine norms is in fact beneficial:

I think this masculinity is a problem of playing certain social roles. In this society, I might need to put on a mask of masculinity and perform some masculine actions. If this allows me to receive positive feedback, or increases women being attracted to me, then I might do it.

These interviewees reveal the complexity of men’s self-positioning in their relationship with masculinities. They do demonstrate an inclusive understanding of different and even non-conventional ways of being a man so that, for example, it should be acceptable for men to wear sun cream, to have long hair, or to be soft, emotional, or indecisive. Their rejection of conventional gender roles exhibits something of a rebellious attitude towards certain rigid and even toxic norms of masculinities. They are aware of the social constructedness of gender norms for men and are capable of actively aligning with or resisting these norms. Rather than “seeking real men” or seeking the masculine pride popularised in previous generations, these young men do not see being a “real man” as desirable or worth pursuing. In this sense, we might conclude that they show some critical gender consciousness that enables a more “inclusive masculinity” (Anderson 2010).

On the other hand, when discussing more inclusive ways of being men, aside from showing an acceptance for men doing things in different ways, the interviewees show no desire to break the legitimated masculine ideal – at most, they discuss their intention and ability to freely withdraw from that ideal. This withdrawal needs to be carefully examined, because the claim that one has the freedom to withdraw seems to leave an impression that men are only gendered when they want to be men; in other times they are non-gendered creatures. It therefore draws a risky line between “performed” gender and one’s authentic self as independent from gender. In all these cases, the role of men is perceived as a suppression of the authentic self, who is believed to be non-gendered by nature. Therefore, once they reject external discourses on masculine expectations that they don’t want to perform, they feel entitled to consider themselves genderless humans rather than gendered men. The “self” among these interviewed men is thereby successfully de-gendered. When I asked Erick about whether he wanted to be “manly” after he explained his understanding of “being a man”, he answered:

I don’t do it. [laugh] I think it is fine to just live happily. I prefer to see myself as a human without too many tags. Although out there in the society people tend to label others, and this labelling sometimes troubles me. But I think, for myself, I don’t want to ... well, put myself in that category? I don’t want to define myself as a man, or an heir of a family. I don’t like to confine myself within a certain role.

By considering the authentic self as un-gendered, even it is pushed by outer social norms to behave like a man, these men interviewees exempt themselves from being integrally part of any structural gender issues. Their descriptions of masculine traits as an outer social requirement also leads to minimal critical gender reflection on their current ways of being themselves. For some of them, such as Jack, this is particularly

evident in the fact that they have incorporated misogynistic notions and problematic feminist understanding, with a tendency to protect men's rights from women. For example, having positioned the self as the non-gendered being that is sometimes forced to "perform" like a man, Jack also complains that the pressures of being masculine come from women's expectations. Thus, "being a good man" benefits and even privileges women by doing women's favour or giving them money. Therefore, Jack's understanding of his "true self" as non-gendered could be embedded in more implicit but also problematic gender power relations.

De-gendering The Men Problem into a Human Problem

A second rationale for the de-gendering I discuss above is the idea that gender inequality is a "human problem". Within this explanatory paradigm, gender as a social factor and as their self-identity are often emphasised as an unimportant factor. In these "human problem" explanations, interviewees offered two ways of marginalising men's gender. The first is by presenting the "men's problem" not as a gendered problem, but as a non-gendered human problem shared by all human individuals. The second narrative is attributing men's problems to the faults of specific individuals' behaviours. In both cases, the "men" question is re-interpreted as a genderless human question, thus disavowing men's responsibilities and roles in systematic gender inequality.

In re-defining gender problems as human problems, the interviewees sometimes instead use an egalitarian socialist justification. Calvin, for example, explains feminist concerns not as a gender problem but as a global "human rights" problem. While acknowledging that there are existing gender inequality problems in China, Calvin disagrees with what he understands to be the dominant position of Chinese digital feminism because he believes that the current feminist debates should not be centred on gender but on human rights. Due to the lack of human rights protection, Calvin suggests, men as well as

women are oppressed, so that both genders are experiencing social injustice and inequality. When asked about his differentiation between feminism and what he meant by human rights, Calvin clarified that feminism only emphasises the interests of a limited group of people – women –while overlooking the shared interests of men:

The current mainstream social values are not only oppressing women but also are oppressing men. ... For example, in traditional Chinese notions, men should not behave weakly. A man is not supposed to cry or express his feelings. [...] This is a matter of human rights in this society. No matter whether you are a man or a woman, a person is first a human by definition. A human being naturally needs some moments to express feelings. So, I think it is neither men's rights nor women's rights, but human rights.

Another interviewee, Kevin, adopts a more aggressively socialist approach by describing feminism as a social struggle over wealth distribution shared by both men and women. Considering himself a pro-feminist man, Kevin noted that feminism is a very important force for institutional transformation to achieve a socialist society. For Kevin, this is also based on the understanding that men and women are jointly socialist comrades and that real feminist struggles for a fair distribution of interests would in the end benefit all human beings.

Phrasing the “men” question as a statement about men and women’s shared interests becomes a point of conjuncture for men like Calvin and Kevin, allowing them to connect with feminist demands. However, at the same time, this de-gendered way of understanding feminism eliminates any potential tensions in gendered power relations and allows men to distance themselves from feminism whenever it raises questions

about men's accountability. Kevin's attitude towards feminism was clearly ambivalent, based on his own definition of real feminism as a sublime socialist struggle. When asked about Chinese digital feminism, he categorised these online activities as "trivial things", not worth any attention because they are not "true" feminism which should address the important question of unequal interests.

Many interviewees also interpreted the "man" question by diverting their focus to individual behaviours. Some of them complained that feminists' criticisms of men are a problematic over-generalisation. Their reasoning centres on the presumption that both men and women can exhibit problematic behaviours, and thus feminist criticism should not target only men. Alex, for example, insisted that every human should be recognised as an individual, capable of doing something wrong regardless of their gender:

In my opinion, as different individuals, every human has different personality. It's not like only men would behave like this. [...] I think an expression like *guo-nan* is an over-generalisation. Similarly, those backlash expressions of "Chinese women" are also an over-generalisation. It is not a gender problem. It's a matter of difference between human beings.

The "individual" rationale in Alex's explanation is one way to respond to feminist criticism by disassembling men as a gendered category, insisting they are individuals with all different personalities and characteristics. By doing so, Alex considers that the gender of men in general cannot connect him to feminist criticisms. This distance enables him to avoid the feminist scrutiny. Similarly, Gary also argued that feminist gender criticism should focus on the individual instead of talking about men in general:

Put it in this way. As a man myself, I also feel disgusted by some men. But on the Internet, some feminist comments escalate this personal emotion to the level of criticism towards the entire group. [...] Using a small number of men...or some men's problems to attack all Chinese men is an over-generalisation. This is not a proper attitude to fight for one's rights or to discuss serious problems.

While downplaying the significance of gender in favour of focusing on the individual, Gary does acknowledge that many men (*guo-nan*) are indeed problematic in the way feminist criticism suggests. Alex, too, provided me with the example of one of his older relatives being a *guo-nan* when I asked him to explain his understanding of the term. In these incongruous explanations, the despicable men who initiate feminist rage are understood by both Alex and Gary as failing to behave well, as good humans, regardless of gender. Again, gender itself is denied as relevant in this problem:

Gary: I think this is something embedded in both men's and women's subconscious. Sometimes, due to their own experiences or their educational background, these “ugly” sides of human nature, or these ugly things embedded in men's nature, are exposed and exhibited.

While the judgements made by the interviewees are claimed as gender-neutral and applicable to all humans, their ways of using these narratives in fact reveal an unrecognised incorporation of masculinity hierarchies. As Gary's words also imply, some men are held to be better than others because they are better educated and can control themselves more rationally. In the next section, I will unpack how this implied

logic of cultivated and controlled masculinity works in re-gendering the masculine self in a hierarchical system of beliefs.

Re-gendering Good and Bad Men

In all the interviews in this research, both men and women interviewees were asked to describe their understanding of *guo-nan*. Comparing the results turned out to be interesting. As discussed in earlier chapters, while most of my feminist interviewees told me that they have never met a man who is not a *guo-nan*, none of my men interviewees considered that they themselves fit into that category. As a small-scale project with only 16 men interviewees, it is possible that my participants are a tier of Chinese men who do not represent a broad range of views. However, as one of the interviewees, Dennis, noted awkwardly during our interview, if a man is confident all the time and believes that he himself is not a *guo-nan* “this guy is in fact the one who will be reproached by feminists as a *guo-nan*”.

Dennis is a self-identified pro-feminist man with female feminist friends. Still, after scrutinising himself, he carefully explained that he is not a *guo-nan*: “...but the reason sounds too narcissistic! [...] Well, I have examined myself for the points that they (feminists) are criticising. And I think I am... ALRIGHT. It is really awkward when I say this myself.” Dennis’s honest embarrassment speaks to two important points. First, the rise of digital feminisms in China and worldwide after the #MeToo have formulated a “counter-public” (Ip and Lam 2013; Liu 2025; Trott 2021; Jackson and Banaszczyk 2016), to adopt the term fundamentally defined by Nancy Fraser as challenging Jürgen Habermas’s singular public sphere of rationality and objectivity (Fraser 1990). In this Chinese digital feminist counter-public, men now stand in the spotlight and are inspected by sceptical feminist eyes. And second, Dennis knows he cannot speak in his own defence. His testimony will condemn him in feminists’ ears. It will sound like

evidence of crimes. Therefore, in agreement with many of my other men interviewees, Dennis adopted the seemingly relatively safer strategy of justifying himself by victimising other men.

The way my men interviewees talked about other men reflects their understandings of masculinities. In our conversations around the topic of *guo-nan*, my men interviewees seldom talked directly about themselves. In fact, Dennis is only one of two who admitted their own associations with *guo-nan*. It seems reasonable not to expect my men interviewees to actively identify with an insulting term that they widely perceive as problematic and offensive. However, during the later coding stage of my research, I realised that when we started to talk about *guo-nan*, my men interviewees always exemplified *guo-nan* through discussion of other men, especially “low quality” men (劣质男性) with low cultural and economic capital, whom they saw as despicable. In their detailed elaborations of the bad characteristics of certain types of low Chinese men, they found reasons why they would be understandably hated by feminist women. And then, by distancing themselves from these *guo-nan* – these men who fail to be good men (优秀男性) – they re-created and confirmed a more ideal masculine subject position for themselves. Clearly, these tactics reflect the interviewees’ internalised understandings of a hierarchy of masculinities, and it is important, therefore, to reflect on where they position themselves in this hierarchy.

The “Bad Men” Who Are Not Me

“Low quality men” are the types of men that the interviewees do not want to be. But on what criterion are these judgments of quality made? By classifying what is bad, the interviewees simultaneously show how they define a good Chinese man; that is, the type of men they respect or would like to become. Overall, from the interview results, the ideal masculine image that is constructed as different from that low man is a successful middle-class urban entrepreneur with various forms of economic, cultural,

and social capital. This image is generally consistent with the form of Chinese white-collar masculinity described by Derek Hird and Louie Kam, as they indicate that this model of masculine subjectivity is promoted and preferred by the Chinese party state in an era, in post-socialist China, when class and economic relations are increasingly significant (Hird and Louie 2016). This subject is categorically white-collar: “a highly educated, market-oriented, urban, depoliticized, ‘civilized’ subject who helps propel China’s economic development and national honor on the world stage.” (142)

In contrast, “low quality men” are described by the interviewees as men with low social status, with limited education and unable to restrain themselves, especially in their sexual desires toward women. Some interviewees also talked about this category of men as presenting such behaviours as disrespecting women, judging and evaluating women’s bodies, and tending to be dirty and having a dishevelled lifestyle. As summarised by Gary in his understanding of *guo-nan*:

These *guo-nan* have some problems in common. For example, they are “greasy”; they tend to use filthy language; and they judge women on their appearances and actions. And they often feel too good about themselves.

These common problems described by Gary were explained by the feminist interviewees using expressions of their embodied feelings of disgust in encountering men, and a suffocating, pervasive and inescapable sense of gendered structure of social and cultural power around them. However, the interviewees express these points by reference to particular actions and types of men. As I’ve shown above, Gary and many other interviewees also repeatedly emphasised that these problems are only embodied by some specific Chinese men, so that calling all men *guo-nan* is a false generalisation. Therefore, in contrast to the feminist women in my previous chapter, these men’s

disgust towards *guo-nan* does not point to the socio-cultural construction of misogyny. As *guo-nan* is understood as specific individuals who engage in certain bad behaviours, it is therefore possible for men to distance themselves from *guo-nan*.

In addition, these “filthy” men are associated with low social class and poor education. Gary explains their problematic behaviours as being a result of a lack of good self-discipline, which is attributed to their low education. Similarly, another interviewee, Andrew, stated that the main problem for *guo-nan* is that they are “not responsible for themselves”. He identifies three key points to illustrate his opinion: these men are lazy, disorganised, and irresponsible. In this individualised account, it is a man’s own fault for becoming a contemptible *guo-nan* if he has failed to control or discipline himself well. This fault is presented as resulting from his lack of self-control or lack of desire for self-improvement, both of which are typically associated with successfully rational masculinity.

This emphasis on men’s capability of self-discipline is also reflected in some interviewees’ narratives of men’s controlling of their sexual desires. Aside from career development and entrepreneurial spirit, the ability to restrain and control one’s sexual desire is also brought up as one criterion to be a “respectable” man. One interviewee, Jack, whose opinion of feminism I discussed above, told me that he understood why many women hate some types of men. According to him, these men are too desperate to have sex with women – and so end up annoying them. He also agreed that these “horny” men are bringing shame to the men as a whole, because they have lost themselves and their dignity in losing control of their desires. As revealed in Liu Chong and Huang Qiqi’s study of the contemporary Chinese abstinence culture, abstinence has become a way for Chinese men to achieve self-actualisation and pursue an ideal Chinese masculinity of self-responsibility and restraint (Liu and Huang 2024). Although other more pro-feminist men interviewees may not have agreed with Jack’s

opinion of the goal of feminism, they do seem to recognise a shared logic that deems a man is despicable if he indulges the badness within himself. One of the pro-feminist men, Alex, explained that he believes that “human is essentially evil”. He thus considers *guo-nan* to be a result of both men submitting to their own self-indulgent nature and of social influences from culturally dominant discourses of masculinity. For either reason, the “badness” of men is natural, if not inevitable, and only through education and one’s determined consciousness can this evil indulgence be overcome and restrained.

Therefore, in this masculine ideal of self-restraint and discipline, what was valued by the interviewees was not just a man’s material success – as indicated by some existing studies, the ability to make money (Liu, Wang, and Lin 2021; Song and Lee 2010) – but also his progressive spirit and determination in transforming and improving oneself in the modern society. This feature is typically represented by interviewees’ comments on older generations of Chinese men. Some interviewees used their elder family members and relatives as examples of *guo-nan*. These older generations of men are described as adhering to a “toxic” traditional culture of generational and gender hierarchical obedience with outdated patriarchal values, even though they have achieved financial and career success and obtained authority in certain aspects. These older men are seen by many interviewees as not able to change their traditional mindset and so failing to keep up with modern social changes. For example, when asked about *guo-nan*, Kevin’s instant response was that for him, this term does not sound like to refer to young men like himself:

Those men being attacked by feminism are not our age, right?

Not us. Not people in their 20s. Because I think feminism is attacking those men who are big-bellied, in their middle age, and who strongly believe in social tradition and conventions.

Not young men of our age.

When it comes to these men's generational comparisons, here is an interesting contradiction between the feminist women and these men I interviewed in this project. While some feminist women also used older generations of men as examples in their descriptions of *guo-nan*, they do not necessarily think younger generations of men are better. For example, aside from the feminist women who claimed that *guo-nan* can be used to describe all Chinese men, Jessica, Kelly, and Lydia specifically emphasised that they think *guo-nan* appears in all different generations, so they cannot define the age range of *guo-nan*. For some feminist women, younger Chinese men, including men of their peer age and even younger boys, are even worse than the older generations. Ella told me about her concern that younger Chinese boys are too easily exposed and attracted by misogynistic culture on social media. And Kelly considered the younger generations of Chinese men are "much worse" for her, because some older men may never have heard of the term feminism and thus have no idea about it. But for younger men who grow up with social media and the growing coverage of feminist information online, Kelly perceived them even worse because "they already encountered and know, yet they refuse to admit their privileges".

In contrast, for the Chinese men I interviewed in this project, they tended to stress that the problem of *guo-nan* will be gradually improved as time goes by. Dennis and Michael, like Kevin, said that as time continues to pass and generational attitudes shift, these older men will gradually quit the stage. For example, Michael's opinion is that *guo-nan* occupied 90% of Chinese men if tracing the time back to 50 years ago. But he thinks that nowadays, even though there still exist many *guo-nan*, men are becoming much better. By this contrast between the older-tradition and young-progressives, older men are criticised by many interviewees for sticking to unchanged traditions and thus giving up on continuing to improve themselves or keep up with more open modern values. As younger Chinese men in their twenties, the interviewees distance themselves

from being part of the problem of *guo-nan* because *guo-nan* is defined as mostly traditional old men. As I will continue to discuss in the next section, the bad *guo-nan* is taken as equivalent to a fatuous rejection of modern progression and individual development, while these young Chinese men view themselves as being alert and open to criticism so that they can improve themselves and get prepared to face the latest challenges (e.g. from feminism) in the world to come. This requires a man to remain modest and consciously improve himself in a changing world with a constant modern self-reflexivity.

The “Good Men” and Gendered Modern Reflexivity

In contrast to the low-quality men and traditional older men, “good men” (优秀男性) are regarded by many of these interviewees as men who actively seek progression and strive to be a better self. “Good men” are conscious of “moving forward”. This is not just a criterion they use to evaluate other men, but also a requirement they have for themselves. In particular, when facing the broad existing feminist criticism of *guo-nan*, some interviewed men interpret this criticism as a warning that they need to keep up with emerging social requirements, adapting themselves in order not to fall into the category of “bad” Chinese men. Michael, for example, humbly stated in his interview that trying not to be a *guo-nan* is a requirement he has for himself:

My requirement for myself is to try not to be a *guo-nan*. Sometimes, due to the limitation of my knowledge, or due to my mode of habitual thinking or stereotypes, I might fall into that category of *guo-nan*. But still, I try to force myself not to be one of them. Therefore, I need to constantly learn and hear other people’s opinions.

This modest self-reflection on men trying not to be a *guo-nan* can be seen as a positive sign, especially MMS scholars who endorse the idea that there has been a transformation towards a more positive because less sexist form of hegemonic masculinity. As Yang Yuchen asks, “What if, one day, feminists successfully overthrow patriarchy and establish a ‘new hegemony’ that subordinates sexism and homophobia?” (Yang 2020, 321) This question resonates in Michael’s response – under the influence of feminism, he speculates, toxic masculine behaviours, such as explicit sexism and misogyny, are defined as the traits of bad men. Yang’s challenge to Connell’s hegemonic masculinity theory, questions whether hegemony can also be potentially progressive because more positive forms of hegemonic masculinity may replace the more problematic ones and thus delegitimize patriarchy. In this way, men like Michael might come to be appreciated for eliciting a less toxic construction of being a man. It seems that feminism, and perhaps also Chinese digital feminism, has made progress here.

Is it really so? In this chapter, I have shown how my men interviewees exempted themselves from feminist criticism by claiming that only the bad *guo-nan* is responsible for sexism. Good Chinese men, on the contrary, remain safe if it can be ultimately achieved through hard self-monitoring and actualisation, so that eventually the “good” Chinese men become a safe position where all criticisms can be successfully resolved. In this way, although the good Chinese men acknowledged in Michael’s comments might signal a positive transformation of a more inclusive masculinity and a close relationship with feminist public inquiries, this narrative is still highly gendered in some way: it functions to protect an intact masculine subject who rationally manages himself to avoid sexism. In the end, this imagination of a positive masculinity carries a longing to be distanced from feminist critiques of men in gender power relations. In other words, this implies that if a man successfully becomes a good man, he will not be involved in trouble with feminist criticism. A good man would be exempted from any form of outer

threat from feminism, except the modest self-criticism made by himself. From this perspective, the inspirational good Chinese man invoked in Michael's narrative shares similarities with the anti-feminist account made by Ray, who recognised that a good Chinese man will not find himself in feminist troubles:

For more outstanding Chinese men, I think they won't be attached with such labels [like *guo-nan*]. In my opinion, a good man must know how to fight back, has ways to justify and clear himself out from the trouble. Right, I think these men won't allow themselves to be associated with those labels.

Compared to Ray, many other interviewed men have different opinions on the ways “good men” free themselves from feminist trouble by using power or respectable morality, but together these narratives consolidate the same image of a stable, safe masculine subject position. A good man is pictured as someone who is free from threats. Even if he is exposed to potential risks, he has the capability to take control over the risks and safely eliminate them. In other words, this ideal ‘image’ of men is presented with a capital “I” by the masculine self. On the pathway towards this ideal, a man needs to keep learning, aware of the constantly emerging risks and challenges in this world. Responding to feminism is one of these risks, and the properly self-reflexive man bound to self-improvement will learn how to master it.

What these interviewed men have demonstrated here, I would argue, is a form of self-reflexivity contrasting with the feminist reflexivity described in previous chapters. While feminist self-reflexivity often shows a tension that risks fragmenting the self, these Chinese men's sense of reflexivity here should be read as a modern reflexivity (Giddens 2013), which aims at taking control of the foreseeable risks to keep the self in one piece. As indicated by Antony Giddens (2013), “in the context of a post-

traditional order, the self becomes a reflexive project” (37). Modern reflexivity, according to Giddens, is rooted in the proliferation of plural opportunities and risks in modernity, in which “the more the individual seeks reflexively to forge a self-identity, the more he or she will be aware that current practices shape future outcomes.” (121) Calculating and dealing with risks are therefore crucial for a modern individual to protect one’s ontological security, which involves a sense of continuity in maintaining order as well as consistency in one’s self-identity. Thus, Giddens reads modern reflexivity in a way that suggests one must desire a stable subject position in the world. As criticised by Shelly Budgeon (2003), this late modern self-reflexivity in Giddens’s theory grounds actions on an intensive self-monitoring of the body, in which the body “becomes a project [...] colonised and made subject to constant revision.” (36) In this view, the social actor becomes a reflexive mind or consciousness instead of an embodied existence, and therefore reproducing a mind/body dualism that is often associated with a devaluing of feminine (Budgeon 2003; Shilling and Mellor 1996).

For some interviewees, this modern reflexivity is embodied as a hybrid combination of neoliberal entrepreneurial spirit and sublime post-socialist Confucianism that represents an attempt to “transcend ambivalence towards Western modernity through embracing an imaginary of the Confucian sublime that provides a sense of wholeness and attainment both at a personal level and for China’s place in contemporary globality” (Hird 2020, 20). The revival of traditional Confucius values has been a crucial tactic in achieving neoliberal governance in contemporary China under Xi’s leadership (Kubat 2018). On the one hand, this reflexivity aligns with modern progressive culture centring on self-development and positions the individual as responsible for their own wellbeing and happiness. And on the other hand, it appropriates and thus seems to align with the traditional Confucian doctrine by which an introspective *junzi* (gentlemen) should cautiously and constantly examine himself in order to be or become qualified as the morally sublime man who exhibits his sense of responsibility to a collective society

(Hird 2017). This introspective doctrine considered a traditional Chinese value is apparent in Dennis' cautious response to feminist criticism of Chinese men. While he explained that a Chinese man should not be too confident or think of himself as categorically not a *guo-nan*, this modesty is then interpreted through Confucius doctrine. A man, he indicated, should not consider himself as already good enough, because that dangerously leads to arrogance, preventing him from continuing to pursue goodness. Dennis explicitly indicated that this is the sort of good value men need to inherit from traditional Chinese culture:

I think a truly good Chinese man must understand and master traditional Chinese values. For example, the Confucian culture – he should learn the values of benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom and trust, instead of principles like the three obediences and four virtues.³³ [...] If we simply talk about how a man can be good, I think the best way is not to think of yourself as being good enough.

Here, gendered modern reflexivity is highly relevant to discussion of masculinity, because it promises a more secure masculine subject position is available to men as long as they keep improving themselves and moving in the right direction. It first ambivalently replicates hegemonic masculinity hierarchies by drawing comparisons and categorising men. Then, by individualising and isolating masculinity as a property only of individuals, it excludes men from being part of the gendered world and thus contributes to sustaining male domination and gendered power relations. As men like Michael and Dennis demonstrate in their interviews, the sense that, if they successfully become a good man, they will not be the target of feminist criticism is tied to obtaining

³³ Three obedience and four virtues (三从四德) refers to a set of moral principles on regulating women's morality and behaviours also drawn from Confucianism (see Gao 2003).

a more stable and safer position in the face of the fragmented and evolving, unstable world. Their belief that there will always be an available subject position for them in the future is enhanced rather than contradicted by this form of modern reflexivity. In other words, even though masculinity itself is being increasingly re-interpreted and deplored by Chinese digital feminists, modern reflexivity here helps to strengthen an attachment to masculinity: the promise of being a man is always there, and feminism has just become another newer challenge for men to overcome.

Conclusion

This chapter aims to revisit Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity as a valuable tool for a critical feminist interpretation of men's responses to feminism. By examining the hegemonic masculinity system as a way of stabilising the promise that there is always a place for men to be good men, this chapter interprets the responses of interviewed Chinese men to Chinese digital feminism as a continual effort to find a secure position for men's subjectivity. This tendency resonates with the search for Chinese masculinity throughout modern Chinese history, reinforcing the idea that there should and will always be a safe space for men to be men. In pursuit of this promise, feminism becomes a modern challenge or a "test" for these men to overcome, enabling them to eventually escape critical scrutiny and attain a complete, stable position. While for some participants, these efforts can indeed help break traditional gender stereotypes, fostering more inclusive masculine practices and encouraging a greater understanding of feminism and gender inequality, my analysis also indicates that the participants persist in investing in the idea of a non-gendered, independent, and capable self, which ultimately allows them to distance themselves from feminism. As I will further illustrate in the next chapter, in fact, when these Chinese men realise they cannot escape feminist criticisms even after sustained efforts to be a "good man", many turn to dismiss feminism as irrational and extreme. In my final chapter, I will explore the affective side

of these participants' responses to feminism, focusing specifically on the prominent feeling revealed in the interview materials – guilt.

Chapter 6

How Is It Guilty to Be a Man? Feeling (Not) with the Feminist World

Ex-husband: *[To Wang Tiemei, his ex-wife]*

Since we split, I've been learning and growing. I know what "structural oppression" is now. *[Turns to Xiao Ma]* You know that? We're beneficiaries of it. We've taken too much from gender privilege.

Xiao Ma: *[Nods]*

Yeah, all men carry that "original sin".

Ex-husband:

How do you know that? Where did you learn it? *[Turns to Wang Tiemei]* Did you teach him that?

Xiao Ma:

I've been learning on my own.

Ex-husband:

Ok...How many books by Ueno Chizuko have you read then?

Her Story (2024)

This scene of two men in competition over their feminist knowledge comes from the Chinese movie *Her Story (2024)*. The movie became a huge smash in China, when it was released in 2024, for bringing heated Chinese feminist topics to the big screen. The whole story centred on the daily lives of Chinese urban middle-class women in Shanghai from the angle of an independent, capable single mom, Wang Tiemei. In this scene, Wang's ex-husband (played by Zhao Youting) competes with Xiao Ma (played by Zhang Yu), Wang's current dating partner, for Wang's attention and praise. But

Wang and the other women at the table were not moved or impressed by either of these two men. In the end, she impatiently asked the men to stop the quarrel by sarcastically calling them “feminist performance artists”.

I start this chapter with this movie scene because it signals a few interesting things that I also found among the Chinese men I interviewed in this project. First, as I have presented in the last chapter, the younger generations of Chinese men find themselves living in an increasingly feminist world where the idea of “men” is more frequently associated with negativity. Second, even though many have started to actively negotiate and explore their position in relation to feminism – as I suggested in the last chapter as well – they may still ultimately fail to find an acceptable safe position for men in feminism, no matter how “supportive” they think they are to feminism. Finally, and more fully in this chapter, I want to consider the affective aspects of men’s negotiation with feminism. One of the pivotal affective dimensions of my interviews with men is at the heart of this chapter: guilt.

In the previous chapter, I argued that, in responding to feminist criticisms of *guo-nan*, men interviewees used feminism to rebuild their sense of being a good man and thus further affirm the promise of a stable masculine subject position in line with hegemonic masculinity. This contrasts starkly with the feminist women I interviewed, whose attitude seems to suggest that *there are no ways to be a good man* and no good place for men in feminism. My feminist women interviewees did not have a standard for dividing good men from bad men: they were generally pessimistic and suspicious about men being changed and becoming feminists. This cautious attitude towards what in a popular public sense might seem like men’s promising transformation in awareness of gender privilege is similarly exhibited in the movie. Although this scene in *Her Story* dissolves the tension in masculinity politics into a hilarious, harmless romance joke, it also helps delineate the situation of men in feminism in contemporary China. Men are

not provided with a stable, safe subject position to become a “good man” in feminism, even if they actively show their pro-feminist attitude. Throughout the movie, men in the story are depicted as non-traditionally masculine men who are more fragile, emotionally open, and willing to learn about feminism. The ex-husband was a full-time househusband during his marriage with Wang, and Xiao Ma is a shy, poor drummer. Nevertheless, they are not presented as ideal good men. Instead, the movie carefully presents them in a way that does not invite sympathetic readings from the audience – for example, the ex-husband played by Zhao Youting has no name throughout the movie. The movie also constantly reminds the audience about the hypocrisy and problematic sides of these men under their gentle, friendly appearance. Indeed, this dinner table quarrel is immediately followed by a mansplaining scene, when the ex-husband starts to judge other women for not being feminist enough, and claims he would give them Ueno Chizuko’s book to educate them. In this way, the movie establishes that these men’s pro-feminist claims are not trustworthy, not only because they are shallow and inauthentic but also because they serve to strengthen traditional masculinity and men’s supremacy through a detour that looks suspicious to feminist audiences.

This constant, careful feminist scrutiny of men is not a phenomenon unique to Chinese digital feminism. Even though there are many feminist writers and theorists, such as bell hooks, for example (Hooks 2000; hooks 2014), who argue for a more inclusive feminism that takes men as potential allies, feminist critical studies on men and masculinities also often argue that efforts in changing and transforming men too often reinforce problematic notions of hegemonic masculinity (Hayes, Burns, and Egan 2024; Carian 2024), putting men’s domination under the guise of inclusiveness and softness (Schmitz and Haltom 2017; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; O’Neill 2015). While feminist criticisms are important, Waling significantly notes, they do not “provide consistent guidance as to what can or should be done, or what subject positions men could or

should take up.” (Waling 2023, 146) The consequence, sometimes, leads to what Allan Jonathan referred to as a paranoid reading in critical masculinity studies, in which the tautology of masculinities in critical studies repeats, again and again, that men are becoming more progressive, while they continue to benefit from patriarchy (Allan 2022, 45).

For some men, being unable to find a safe subject position in feminisms can make them feel frustrated. It may seem like that feminists never tell them what a man should do to avoid being criticised. For example, as a pro-feminist masculinity theorist, Jeff Hearn (2013) has discussed men’s personal confusion and a sense of loss in trying to respond to feminism: it feels like men’s answers to feminism always sound inappropriate. His conclusion, from his own experiences in being a feminist man, is to stay quiet: “In light of this, forms of silence may at times be the most appropriate or most informative response” (162).

That men’s responses to feminism have a strong affective dimension was apparent in my interviews with 16 Chinese men. Many of these interviewees told me how Chinese digital feminism makes them *feel bad* or uncomfortable. For example, both Kim and Erick claimed that they used to be “pro-feminist” men, but now they do not want to support Chinese digital feminism anymore. Both emphasised their discomfort when explaining their changed positions towards feminism:

Kim: I absolutely agree that gender inequality truly exists as a problem. [...] I think my position is that, huh, instead of saying I oppose feminism, I think, well... [...] Some feminists’ behaviours and opinions, and maybe some other aspects too, make me feel uncomfortable (抵触).

Erick: I initially thought I was a pro-feminist man. But those feminist “fists” scared me. [...] Those extreme feminist online comments attack every normal man. They indeed make me feel, well... It’s not like I am attacked or criticised by feminists. I am a pretty easy-going person. It’s just seeing those extreme comments makes me feel uncomfortable. They made me wonder, Is that what I am supporting? No way. Impossible. So I prefer to call myself a supporter of gender equality or something similar.

These men expressed different views on what in feminism makes them feel bad, including reasons like feminists being too emotional, using extreme or *yan-nan* expressions, creating “privileges” for women over men. But although they had some differing opinions and attitudes about certain aspects of feminism that they dislike, feeling uncomfortable was highlighted as an important reason for men turning away from feminism. Many also emphasised that feminists should be more supportive and inclusive, to avoid making men feel bad, no matter whether the goal of feminism is to make men critically reflect on themselves to change, or to make men be feminist allies:

Kevin: If words like *guo-nan* are widely used by feminists, the whole gender group of men would develop a deeper aversion to feminism. This is bad for the development of feminism itself.

Henry: In my opinion, the consequence of words like *yan-nan* is more likely to make men angry rather than making them reflect. Let’s say, for example, if you call a man something like “little dick”, do you think he would peacefully reflect on what he has done wrong, or he would get pissed off? Which one is more likely to happen?

For the interviewed men who hold a more profeminist attitude, such as Dennis and Alex, they shared with me their frustrating experiences as pro-feminist men who were excluded and criticised by feminists. For instance, Alex was once rejected and disparaged online by feminists when he believed he was advocating for women to support feminism in an online debate. However, some feminists regarded him as hypocritical, labelling him a *guo-nan* and urging him to stop pretending. After these negative experiences, Dennis and Alex have not become anti-feminist men, but the negative feelings stemming from these encounters have led them to develop questions and doubts about Chinese digital feminism. They now believe feminists should refrain from pushing potential allies away by being overly exclusive and harsh towards men in general.

Alex: I *really* meant to speak for women at that time. So that [excluding experience] had a significant impact on my feelings towards feminism. I think those words like *guo-nan* are so bad. It's too risky for feminists to use them. And they should not appear at all.

Dennis: It is so difficult for men to realise the inequality of gender already. So when a guy finally gets that sense, you should not trample him like that. For example, if the guy is like oh I finally know that women are living such an uneasy life, so I want to help women. And then one day he comes across an extreme feminist cursing all men to die. He would feel like, emm, well, you know?

These narratives highlight that a simple reason for these men quitting or turning away from feminism is that feminism makes them *feel very bad*. Here, I do not intend to

challenge the authenticity of these men's negative feelings: their discomfort, confusion, and disappointment exhibited during the interviews were intense. But I was surprised by how my interviewees assign such importance to their own feelings. Men's responses to feminism are often interpreted and framed as matters of rationality and discursive articulation. As Timothy Laurie (2015) indicates, the jargon of "strategy" and "tactics" is frequently employed in masculinity studies to depict men's actions as rational and calculated. While this approach explains many anti-feminist discourses, it assumes that practical reason fundamentally drives and dictates men's actions, leading to the presumption that "for any activity that a man participates in it is too easily presumed that beneath confusion we will find clarity" (Laurie 2015, 17). For instance, studies on men's claims of being victimised by feminism are often interpreted as men attempting to reclaim their interests and resources from feminists (Yang et al. 2023). Feminists using affective approaches also explore how certain emotions (e.g. woundedness and shame) are articulated as affective-discursive devices to sustain men's rights movements and anti-feminist propositions (Dickel and Evolvi 2023; Venäläinen 2022; Wu and Zhang 2025). While it is crucial to acknowledge that men's affective responses to feminism can often reinforce existing gender power structures in problematic ways, my observations do not necessarily support this. These individual men do not seem to strategically advocate for men's negative feelings because they oppose feminism. This proposition could even be reversed: *because they feel negative*, they may turn to opposing feminism.

This is to say that feelings may play a more important role in men's responses to feminism than is often discussed. This affective aspect of their relationship with feminism, I suggest, complicates and on some occasions is a core motivation in their attitudes towards feminism. But in acknowledging that feminism does sometimes make men feel bad, I do not support the argument that feminists should make adjustments in order to make men *feel better* about themselves. As Connell also criticises, men's

feelings about feminism often slide in a sentimentally therapeutic direction (Connell 2013, 204). As Victor Jeleniewski Seidler exemplifies, one influential thread of men's studies argues that men are victims of patriarchy because their feelings are suppressed and controlled by masculine pressure (Seidler 1997; 2007; 2009). This suppression disciplines men so that they are unable to feel or to express their feelings in certain ways. This is part of an association between masculinity and rationalism inherited from the Cartesian tradition that involves "a disavowal of bodies, sexualities, and emotional lives" (Seidler 2007, 9). Based on this, Seidler argues for attention to men's emotional life, and that recognising and being open to men's vulnerable and painful feelings might allow for more caring, connective way of being a man that will benefit both men and feminism. While this proposition is founded on profeminist ground, others have argued that this transformative masculine politic is too uncritical because the primary focus has been put on curing men's emotional wounds (Ashe 2007). Indeed, as it dovetails with other voices from the longer historical range of men's studies and men's rights movements (see Bly 2015), I agree that this proposition can support contentions about a men's crisis, and at its most sympathetic to men's feelings over anti-sexism positions feminism as a threat to men's identities and well-being.

For my investigation on the men interviewees' affective responses to feminism in this chapter, Seidler's approach is nevertheless insightful for indicating one thing: men's relationship with feminism is an experiential, embodied, and emotional process. This approach allows an embodiment, affective investigation towards men's negotiation with feminism and their gendered experiences. Kalle Berggren's interpretation of Seidler from a phenomenological perspective argues that Seidler is right about at least one thing: men's responses to feminist criticism is never merely an act of rationality and will – nor is it a reasonable reaction towards violated interests – but an emotional, embodied experience (Berggren 2014, 241). As Filipa Melo Lopes puts it, the problem is not only "how men see women", but also as "how they relate to themselves and to

the world.” (Lopes 2023, 148). The critical approach to tackling men’s feelings is to see the formation of their responses to feminism as an experiential process that is related to men’s own subjectivity. Because masculinity is also lived, which functions in “the dissembling, unmaking or disruption of those configurations of practice we call masculinities” (Connell 2013, 86). If we do not set out as feminists to cure men of bad feelings, it will be nevertheless meaningful to recognise the affective embodied dimensions of men’s subjectivity, not least because it challenges the prevalent division between feminists as emotional and irrational and men, including anti-feminist men, as logical and reasonable. In other words, by taking men as embodied affective subjects in feminism, what we need to focus on is not merely what is going on with their feelings toward feminism, but also how they feel about themselves and the shared world.

In line with my approach to feminist women’s feelings in Chapter 4, I will therefore also take men’s feelings in feminism as a matter of orientation (Ahmed 2020; 2014). An affective approach to men’s feelings helps bring men’s embodied subjectivity in to my discussion as it needs to be brought back to critical masculinity studies. As some recent affective approaches to masculinities have shown, men’s affect reflects the intensity of men’s material embodiment that can interrupt and challenge existing gender norms (Reeser 2022; 2019), or affect can also become “release valve model” of masculinity that allows the release of some gender pressure to uphold masculinity as a normative model (Reeser 2022, 109). Acknowledging that feeling can have a particular role in men's experience with feminism enables a critical examination of how the arousal of certain feelings, rather than others, works in orienting men in relation to feminism.

Guilt: A Difficult Feeling in Men’s Movements?

Reading the history of Western men's movements in the late twentieth century has been a novel experience for me in conducting the background research for this analysis. Even in reading MMS scholars like Seidler, one surprise for me is how frequently guilt is raised as a core problem for pro-feminist men's movements. For example, this is how Seidler frames the role of men's feelings of guilt in response to feminism:

As men, especially middle-class men, we found it easier to intellectualise our emotions and feelings rather than share them more openly. It was easy to respond with guilt to the challenges of the women's movement, thinking that all we could do as men would be to reject our masculinity, for this was directly expressive of a relationship of power. This rejection appeared as a way of supporting the demands of the movement. It could endorse feelings of self-hatred and self-rejection that are never far from the surface within a Protestant culture. (Seidler 2009, 7)

Unlike other emotions, guilt seems to be given special attention in men's relationship with feminism. For Seidler, guilt is highlighted as an urgent problem to be acknowledged and dealt with. When the British magazine *Achilles Heel* was founded in the late 1970s, intending to focus on men's sexual politics, masculinity, and the intersections of feminism and socialism, Seidler announced it as a crucial step in transforming the guilty politics among pro-feminist men into affirmative actions. Reflecting on this, Seidler argues that the rigid and moralistic tendency can only foster men's self-rejection instead of exploring different ways of being a man (Seidler 1997). Similarly, for John Rowan, it was guilt rather than anything else that destroyed the anti-sexist men's movement in Britain in the last century. In one memory of the consequence of men's movements being publicly criticised, he concludes: "...because the experience of this conference virtually shattered the men's movement for three years. The guilt

was just too much to bear” (Rowan 2005, 61). This suggests that the movement failed because men *felt too bad*. Because of this, both Seidler and Rowan advocate that feminist movements need to be more inclusive, and encourage strategies that mobilise men as well as women. Otherwise, feminism ends up pushing men away.

While writing this chapter, I happened to read a Chinese online article, posted on a *WeChat* account called “His Voice”. This is an anti-feminist online organisation and part of the Chinese men’s movement in recent years. The article, released on 24 September 2024, was entitled “Chinese feminism is addicted to granting indulgences to Chinese men”. The entire article centres on denouncing feminism and arguing that men should not be held guilty by feminists. I read these paragraphs repeatedly, while thinking about the slogan they highlighted in red at the beginning of this article: “It’s Urgent To Make Men De-Accountable”. Here is a short extract from the article:

Under the step-by-step conspiracy of those feminist “sisters”, Chinese men have been collectively silenced and dominated. Men’s grievances and pains are unheard. Their rights and dignity are plundered and trampled.

The world is not black and white. But here, there is a simple and obvious division based on genitals: [feminists claim that] the clitoris is supreme, and the dick is inferior. Using this logic is a way of masking the strategy that entitles women to glory and condemns men as guilty.

Babies crying loudly in the delivery room cannot know that the difficulty of their lives depends on their genitals – that genitals decide whether they are guilty or not.

This text is filled with intense and agitated anger. There is rarely anything new about arguing that men are victimised by feminism in such anti-feminist statements. These arguments calling for the empowerment of men based on claims about their victimisation have appeared in many men's movements in the contemporary Chinese context. Men's movements in Hong Kong during the 1990s argued for social attention to a crisis amounting to discrimination against men (Tam et al. 2009). On the mainland, public debates and attention to a "boy crisis" are still prevalent today (Lin and Mac an Ghail 2019; Hu et al. 2023; Song 2021) as they are in Anglophone and European contexts.

Noticeably, in this short article, men's victimhood is argued through the repositioning of guilt. Commonly, guilt is a feeling associated with the person who committed a crime, not with victims. In this article, a transition happens through a double arousal of guilt. First, the sensing of guilt – the man reading realises that he is the one being charged as guilty. This needs to be evoked in order for it to be denied. Second, guilt is denied by suggesting that the accusation is unfair (based on bodily form and no actions or situations at all) and evil (assigned even to babies). Thus, guilt is re-directed towards the prosecutor, implying that feminists who made the false charge should be the ones feeling guilty. Consequently, in two steps, guilt is turned to a different object. What happens in this article can be summarised as a form of "blame switching" in Iris Marion Young's words (Young 2011, 100). Young uses this term to describe the phenomenon of people involved in structural injustice matters trying, in a defensive manner, to find who the real black sheep is. Young's feminist advocacy of the rejection of this logic can be read by people in different ways. For feminists who deeply understand that gender-based violence happens on a structural level, the "monster-hunting" model in the logic of behavioural guilt is problematic because it is never sufficient for addressing the everydayness of the issue, and instead, makes the violence appear to be abnormal

and occasional (Andreasen 2023). However, for profeminist men like Seidler and Rowan, such advocacy would probably sound like “blaming politics” needs to be abolished so that feminists can make men feel more comfortable to participate. Or, for activists from *His Voice* and many anti-feminist men in China, men are now victims of feminist blame.

Although the two cases of the British men’s movement and the Chinese *His Voice* come from different contexts with different attitudes to feminism, what connects them is a shared emphasis on feminist assertions of men’s guilt. I think the way guilt is used in these men’s groups constructs a specific version of the story of men’s relationship with feminism, and this construction is similar to what Clare Hemmings (2011) argues about feminist storytelling. In *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011), Hemmings talks about how the feminist movement problematically frames white women as the heroines of the story. As she indicates, Western feminist storytelling is fully occupied with affective narratives of progress, loss, and return – a political grammar that not only solidifies a certain white feminist story about the past but also constrains our opinions on the feminist future. Similarly, in the story of men’s relationship with feminism, regardless of men’s pro-feminist or anti-feminist stances, guilt has become a particular generic story. In this case, it is a legal drama that outlines two characters in tension: the feminist as the prosecutor, and the man as the defendant.

In the following sections, I argue that this guilt that centres on liability and faults is also the core feeling that connects all of my men interviewees’ responses to feminism. To clarify the multiple connotations of “guilt” in Chinese, the guilt which I am discussing here is less about “nei-jiu” (内疚), the Chinese word for a feeling caused by “a failure to practice positive duties” (Bedford and Hwang 2003, 136), and more about “you-zui” (有罪), which means feeling oneself being punished for practicing badness, regardless of whether one considers themselves deserving this punishment or not. Guilt appears in

my interviews in both collective and individual ways, as I will demonstrate. On the one hand, a man can be guilty about certain bad actions that he has already committed. In this logic of individual guilt, a man's responsibility lies with the knowledge that he has done something wrong, therefore bearing the consequence of needing to amend a fault in the past. On the other hand, a man's guilt is also seen as coming from being born as a man, using either essentialist or constructivist ways of understanding his gender. In other words, the guilt of a man in this sense comes from being part of a guilty community; it results from collective guilt. In both instances, guilt appears as a "backwards-looking" concept (Young 2011), meaning tracing back to what has happened in the past and finding out who should bear the responsibility of the fault. Together, individual and collective guilt orient my men interviewees to define their relationship with feminism in terms of prosecution.

Individual Guilt: "But I didn't do anything wrong!"

Ray: I became defensive at feminists expressing public opinions. It can instantly generate such huge power and lead the discussions in this direction. [...] My feeling at that time was a little bit vigilant. I was also scared. Just thinking, what if that kind of attack happened to me? Well, if I were the man on site [when that violence happened there], if I didn't stand out and help those women, would I be attacked [by feminists online) afterwards? Or what if I have some conflict or disagreements with women, would I also be called out on social media? These are my concerns.

My interviewee, Ray, was talking about his feelings about the Tangshan Incident in 2022 (see Gan 2022). This is an influential public assault case mentioned by many interviewees, both women and men. The incident happened in a BBQ restaurant in

Tangshan, where two young women were sexually harassed and then publicly beaten heavily by a group of local men. Aside from the shock and concern that such severe gender violence can happen in a busy city district, what raised heated public debate after the incident was the reaction of the crowd. When the violence happened in front of the gate to the restaurant, the CCTV camera captured the scene of women present who tried to protect the victims, while no men passing by attempted to intervene in the violence. The atrocity was not restrained even when it happened on the open street. After beating these women at the gate, the aggressors chased one victim to a dark alley outside of the camera's range.

In my earlier chapters, I mentioned that the interviewed feminist women brought up the Tangshan Incident with obvious disgust and, for example, in the case of Lora, conveyed a sense of everyday fear and desperation living in the unsafe, misogynistic world. In the narratives of my men interviewees, like Ray, a clear difference is their central concern with whether the men in the incident are guilty. The direction of the online discussions on the guilt of the men passersby was clearly influenced by popular discussions about the Chinese masculine crisis at the time (see Lim 2022). For Ray, the prominent way he imagined himself being involved in an atrocity like this is by being someone passing by as it happens, and therefore bearing no responsibility for the initial cause of the violence. He certainly does not think of himself as a potential target in a restaurant, but just as certainly not as having anything in common with the aggressors. Instead, he is more anxious about the possibility of feminists "attacking" him in public opinion for being in the vicinity. This, for him, is an absurd overreaction that can arbitrarily assign guilt to an innocent man who simply passed by an unfortunate scene.

Another interviewee, Kim, expressed a similar concern that feminist "attacks" on men are often too random and unpredictable. When I first asked him whether he ever thought of himself as being attacked by any feminists when using social media, he replied

sarcastically: “If you don’t use the Internet, maybe you won’t be attacked”. Then he added, whether a man stays silent or not, he would be attacked by feminists. Kim tried to explain this to me by recounting an experience he once had with a feminist friend when they were talking about the Tangshan Incident:

She made another impressive comment that really stuck in my mind. She said “it was your silence that led to the current situation”. Well, I was so confused at that moment! I was thinking that I am a man who is not in trouble over anything. I do not harm society, and I do not harm women. How come it was I who caused this situation? Yeah... that’s her opinion. Your silence, or the silence of the entire group of men, led to the group of women being persecuted. That’s her point. After so many years, I still cannot accept this opinion.

For Kim, his friend’s condemnation of his “silence” is read as a feminist charge, but an invalid one because the causal relationship between his action and the crime cannot be proven. Kim tolerated his feminist friend’s complaint because he was shocked by her intense emotional responses in that moment. She was understandably emotional, Kim explained, but he had done nothing wrong and was just trying to offer a more “complete” view in discussing a social problem. Yet, Kim complained in the end: “Why am I dragged into this matter? I am just an innocent audience.”

These men’s feelings of anxiety, defensiveness, dislike, and, sometimes, fear when mentioning their encounters with digital feminists all convey their concern over potentially being attacked or even set up by feminists. With this uncertainty comes an implication that, for them, digital feminist actions often do not follow the “rules” they are familiar with, and thus become too unpredictable. For Ray and Kim, men being dragged into feminist social debate are often innocent of causing any harm. Kim’s

interview shows how the outcome of this “uncertainty” is often to repeat the cliché of emotional women and rational men, an interpretation that conceals the legitimacy of feminist attempts to deal with structural gender violence. Describing feminists as too emotional in a negative way is often linked to phrases like “arbitrary attack”.

I consider this feeling of uncertainty – a sense that one can be charged or punished for doing something wrong that they may not have conducted with consciousness or intention – can become an underlying logic under men’s political responsibility in feminism. In this notion of guilt, action is positioned as the core determinant. The men passing by are deemed not guilty because they did not commit the crime. They did not do anything wrong. They just *did not do anything*. In the prevailing narratives that men should not be punished for what they did not do, this notion of guilt is so entangled with action that *inaction* becomes an equivalent of staying out of the entire picture, in a position where all guilt and punishment might be inapplicable.

The liability logic rooted in the premise of action is supported by some political philosophers who believe that guilt is a politically productive emotion, especially when it is compared with shame. This opinion relies on the psychoanalytical recognition of guilt as a more “mature” emotion compared to shame (Lewis et al. 2010), because past wrong actions are being identified and can be amended via future actions. For Martha Nussbaum (2009) too, the reparative function of guilt allows productive political actions instead of inhibiting them. She identifies shame as destructive because the negative intensity of shame disables the individual from moving. Lucy Delap’s historical study also shows that this was the well-adopted account in the 20th-century British men’s groups (Delap 2018). Delap argues that for anti-sexist men in British men’s profeminist groups, guilt was a more productive emotion than shame, because shame becomes infused into the crisis of a man’s existence, while guilt limits the wrongness to a man’s specific acts and therefore leaves the possibility of reparation.

Aside from only one self-identified feminist man (I will discuss his case in the end of this chapter), none of the other interviewed men in this project talked about or exhibited shame during the interviews. Neither did they talk about feeling ashamed for the on-site bystander men in the Tangshan Incident. Moreover, as Ray and Kim's narratives in this project show, if men are only answerable to feminist critiques via specific individual wrongdoings this can lead to this immediate rejection of any complicity at all. As indicated by Young (2011), this is because the liability model based on past actions is fundamentally ineffective in dealing with structural injustice. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Young recognises guilt as a liability model of political responsibility, which she argues is weak in itself and in explaining individual agents' responsibilities in questions of structural injustice. When determining whether someone is guilty, "...we must be able to show that they are causally connected to the harm in question and that they acted voluntarily and with sufficient knowledge of the consequences." (Young 2011, 98) However, such conviction is often impossible when the problem is structural and no single individual can be identified as a direct cause. We can never, therefore, convict the passersby men present at the crime scene, as guilty. But this does not mean that there is no responsibility. In arguing that we need a different conception of responsibility in dealing with structural injustice, Young, re-reading Arendt's works, proposes a social connection model of responsibility. In this model the responsibilities of the men passing by do not come from what they did wrong (or did not do right), but from the structural complicity; that is, when "they exercise their agency in ways that reinforce the unjust social structures in which they participate, regardless of their conscious intentions" (Aragon and Jaggar 2018, 449).

Using the social connection model, by feeling aligned with the non-guilty men passing by in the Tangshan Incident, Ray and Kim also bypass their responsibility in terms of structural gender injustice. The guilt of complicity always involves a with-ness – an

inter-personal relation with the criminals (Kutz 2000). As Charlotte Knowles concludes: “Complicity is a transitive verb, it must take an object” (Knowles 2021, 225). Complicity is therefore not an isolated individual matter but a tendency to be with the people who committed the crime. In claiming to simply pass by an unfortunate scene, the connection between this and the world of injustice is denied, as if one can also simply pass by the world one inhabits with the victims. In this way, the potential for individual guilt diverts Ray and Kim to *not feeling with* the victims or the feminist voices arguing for justice.

Collective Guilt: “I am a guilty man...Am I?”

A colonial administrator has no possibility of acting rightly towards the natives, nor a general towards his soldiers, the only solution is to be neither colonist nor military chief; but a man could not prevent himself from being a man. So there he is, culpable in spite of himself and labouring under the effects of a fault he did not himself commit. (Beauvoir 1989, 681)

A more interesting and contradicting account that appears among some of the men interviewees shows a curious relation in between these men’s self-identity and their gendered body. I open this section with this quote from Simone de Beauvoir to give a general picture of what collective guilt is like in the narratives of my men interviewees. In the conclusion of *The Second Sex* (1989), Beauvoir famously outlines the ontological dilemma posed for men by the situation of gender inequality, specifically the constructed social inferiority of women. This incisive description fits well with the responses to feminism from some of the men I interviewed for this project, who found themselves inevitably “guilty” after encountering and learning from feminist voices.

In short, for some of these men, collective guilt appears in the belief that they are guilty not because of their actions, but simply because they are (Chinese) men despite the fact that they cannot, in Beauvoir's terms, "prevent" themselves from being men. This collective guilt shares an underlying logic with the liability model. However, and distinct from individual guilt based on one's specific wrong actions, collective guilt appears when an individual believes that he is blamed by feminists because of his sex/gender, and thus he can never do rightly in the eyes of feminism. This is a guilt that he shares with other men that originates either from his biological sex at birth or is the result of the social construction of his gender. In either the essentialist or constructivist sense of being a man, collective guilt implies that an individual man's guilt not only comes from his belonging to the category of men. Therefore, he has limited capability to amend anything arising from it.

In the logic of collective guilt, the rationale for men's guilt is sex/gender. I did not encounter any interviewees who expressed men's victimhood in the explicit anti-feminist way of *His Voice*. Instead, what was prominent across my interviews with men was a reference to this theme of collective guilt. While individual guilt makes some men interviewees justify their inaction and deny their structural responsibilities, collective guilt also appeared in my interviews with pro-feminist men, expressed as a tendency to feel guilty for *what they did not do*. These interviewees assume their responsibilities within the sphere of structural gender injustice but explain this responsibility by reference to guilt. In other words, they tend to accept that they have responsibilities because they are born as men, and thus share the fault arising from the acts and attitudes of other men. While this collective guilt can make them more consciously aware of the privileged gender position they possess as men, this same logic also inhibits their actions by drawing a clear boundary with the feminist world, which is presumed to be only accessible to feminists who are women.

Two specific cases, Henry and Dennis, show how collective guilt appears in pro-feminist men interviewees. It should be recalled here that a large portion of my pro-feminist men interviewees are well-educated, middle-class men, some with overseas educational experience in various subjects under the social science and humanities, even including some with educational experience in gender studies. Among these pro-feminist men interviewees, a few revealed themselves as belonging sexual minorities. Thus, these interviewees do have knowledge/understanding of structural social inequality and might be anticipated to have a more open attitude towards feminist movements. Their narratives may not be representative of “Chinese men” or any subset of Chinese men due to the sample size and this tendency in the sample recruited, but their responses are meaningful in the way they show how men with such knowledge can potentially develop or deny their sense of responsibility when facing feminist criticism on men.

Henry revealed to me at the start of his interview that he has a higher educational background in German political philosophy, which makes his acknowledgement of men’s guilt a particularly interesting case. When I asked him about his thoughts on men’s relationship with feminism, Henry referred to German citizens’ guilt and responsibility in World War II to explain his understanding of men’s responsibilities in gender injustice:

I think everyone lives in a structurally injustice society, including people who are trying to eliminate this injustice but, as long as he is enjoying a certain degree of privilege, he bears a responsibility for the injustice. Men also have a responsibility for gender injustice. All men, including me, and others who are trying to deal with gender injustice, have this responsibility. [...] This is my opinion.

As a man, I think this is a sort of culpability, a guilt, an original sin. This is an original sin that you cannot get rid of. I am not religious, by the way. But this is some sort of original sin that you always carry with you.

The Mandarin word for responsibility (责任) that Henry used throughout the interview carries both meanings of responsibility and liability, and therefore creates an ambiguity. From the context of his narrative, however, Henry's understanding of responsibility is closer to liability, as he traces the source of this responsibility to the consequence of enjoying male privileges. In his explanation, a man must compensate for his privileged conditions, but these compensations would never be enough.

Likewise, Dennis, who also has a social science higher education background, explained to me that being a man means making individual compensation for structural gender injustice. He started by introducing me to the idea that men are at the bottom of the feminist hierarchical chain. To explain, Dennis told me that he once lost an opportunity to speak on a gender related topic at a conference because the organisers expected the speakers to be female:

This is totally understandable. [...] Men have been enjoying their speaking rights for a long time, so a lot of feminists don't want to hear men's voices on this topic. [They think] Because this is a female topic, they want a woman to speak about it. I actually agree with this opinion. Yes, there are too many spots where men can speak. However, even though he might come here to support feminism, or even if what he wants to say is the exact same thing a woman would say, the conference would still prefer to let a woman say it. BUT. Although I do agree, I still think men, or male

feminists, are at the bottom in the circle of feminists. [...] I think this creates some small unfairness within the sphere of feminism. But put this in contrast with the entire unfairness of this society, and this is fair. I understand.

Here, it might appear that the attitude of pro-feminist men like Henry and Dennis is a dramatic contrast to the anti-feminist men's movement activists from *His Voice*. They understand and support the legitimacy of feminism and are willing to accept their personal accountability based on a general benefit accruing to men in a structurally unjust gender system. But for both anti-feminist *His Voice* and these pro-feminist men, an individual man's responsibility is a consequence of his (unchosen) membership of the category of men. For this, he bears some guilt for other members' faults. The difference is that Henry and Dennis accept that they need to compensate for this (even though it is an unpleasant experience and sounds more like a punishment), while *His Voice* activists refuse to pay.

But there is a vagueness on both sides about how the guilty identity – the membership of the guilty community – is created and shared. While in the earlier article from *His Voice*, a man belongs to the category of men as a result of his biological sex at birth, Henry and Dennis's understanding has a gender constructivist element, recognising the cultural and historical constitution of men's gender. However, at the same time, they also retain an implication that gender is something that cannot be changed, which makes their narrative sound more similar to a bio-deterministic position by which a man cannot prevent himself from being a man. While Henry described this as a sort of men's "original sin", Dennis expressed an understanding of the social construction of the gender of men. He explained that since he is already shaped by culture as a man, he is incapable of getting rid of this culture that is already part of him, even though he is consciously aware that some of these cultural factors are toxic and problematic. Thus,

collective guilt comes from the fact that Dennis has already been constructed as a man in the normative way and cannot undo what has been done:

For example, when I am using my *Xiao Hong Shu* account, the algorithm always promotes a lot of beautiful women's pictures to my page. I still click "like" for beautiful women. And the big data knows. [...] I have been raised up by my parents and the society as a man. In this situation, it is impossible for me to totally get rid of the construction of the male gender in this society. They have constructed my aesthetics. I am clearly aware of how the aesthetics of "pale, young, slim" is problematic, how this becomes like this, and what kind of gendered social structure supports this aesthetic. But my aesthetic is indeed like this already.

The two components of collective guilt – liability and community – thus together constitute a bleak picture for men bearing their unchosen guilt. Again, this collective guilt rationalises that men have no agency in relation to feminism, because the implied fate of guilt has been "forced" onto them. But, as Hannah Arendt famously argues, "there is no such thing as collective guilt or collective innocence" (Arendt 2009, 29). Similarly to individual guilt, the declaration of collective guilt also constitutes a form of complicity in two ways. First, a man claiming to be guilty of acts that he did not commit involves a compassion for people who committed the crime (Young 2011; Arendt 2006; 2009). Arendt sees this expression of collective guilt as a "declaration of solidarity with the wrongdoers" (Arendt 2009, 148). In other words, collective guilt involves identifying with a problematic object and declaring that you will share its culpability. In this way, such men's relationship with feminism is first mediated through a prior identification with the guilty. By doing this, the individual who claims the collective guilt at the same time disavows the possibility that he may have equal weight

or more significant connections with others – for example, women – in a shared world of connections.

Second, in claiming collective guilt, one also shows a form of “personal complicity”, which is defined by Charlotte Knowles as individuals exerting their agency to deny their ability to act in structural problems by explaining the situations as given and doomed (Knowles 2021). Different from the legalistic sense of complicity that relies on an individual’s intention to commit the crime, Knowles explains this personal complicity as apparent in individuals actively *turning away from their freedom*. By doing so, such an agent becomes “both the perpetrator and the victim of complicity” (228). In the cases of Henry and Dennis, this personal complicity is manifested through their unceasing self-reinforcement of their unchosen guilt of being born/constructed as men. This has become a circulating investment in their belongingness to the male community, which is both taken as the consequence and the reason for their inability to act. Giving up their agency to make changes, to do something other than become a problematic guilty object, consolidates men’s passive position in relation to feminism, making the group of men the forever “other” who alienate women’s everyday experiences in the world of gender injustice.

Turning to Guilt, and Becoming Men

So far, in my analysis of guilt as understood by the interviewed men, I have shown how both individual and collective guilt are used to create a problematic distance between men and feminism. Both types of guilt can evolve into justifications for men’s inaction. By “inaction,” I mean not only the absence of specific political actions supporting feminism but also the renunciation of men’s individual agency in feminism, leaving no desire or possibility for individual men to transcend existing gender power structures,

regardless of their agreement with feminist principles. Within this framework of guilt, men's role in feminism appears predetermined: they merely sit and wait for punishment (while secretly hoping it never finds them). Here, for now, we can say that guilt might be the worst reaction in men's response to feminism, as it often fosters men's sense of victimhood and justifies their inaction. But for pro-feminist men, guilt may also seem to be the best imaginable response for them to connect to feminism. Guilt stays paradoxical.

Showing these problematic sides of guilt may sound harsh in comparison with my earlier discussion of feminist disgust. I need to clarify here that I do not intend to argue that these men should try to feel differently, or that their guilt is nothing but shallow and trivial. Instead, I think the complexity of guilt and its intensity exactly reveals a puzzle faced by these interviewed men in living with the feminist world: aside from claiming themselves guilty, they do not know what else they can do to respond to feminism. This tendency of turning to guilt when men face feminist criticism is also observed in other contexts. Aside from the materials I read from the late last century's men's profeminist movements, recent studies in the English contexts have also indicated the pervasive role of guilt in men's responses to feminism, regardless of their intentions of profeminist or antifeminist (Carian 2024; Pleasants 2011). Emily Carian's observations on men involved in gender activism indicate that these men's motivation for participation stems from the "desire to differentiate themselves from the 'bad': from privilege, oppression, and guilt" (2024, 2). In another study of men's participation in feminist classes, Robert Pleasants (2011) highlights the central roles of guilt among men taking feminist classes as a defensive reaction towards feminism. Pleasants summarises this guilt as "a discourse of guilt" that often similarly comes from "a personal investment in their male identities and their desire to see themselves – and for others to see them – as good people" (246). Therefore, Pleasants observes that even

though some men try to study and learn from feminism, the guilt may turn into hostility towards “ideas (and/or people) that have caused them to feel guilty” (235).

Why is it guilt that is being so pervasively adopted by men in response to feminism, even though guilt is paradoxical and difficult to feel/handle? In this section, I try to answer this question by thinking about the socio-cultural situations that enable this guilt to arise. I interpret this trajectory of guilt in my men interviewees’ narratives as a “turning” to guilt (Ahmed 2020) that happens on the level of men’s embodied subjectivity, as neither a free will choice nor a passive allocation. Here, I want to use Judith Butler’s account of subjectivation to illustrate that what makes my interviewees’ guilt so ambivalent is the availability of “being not guilty” in the declaration of one’s guilt. This availability allows the inclination towards one world (of innocence, normativity, and stability) over the other world (of guilt, feminism, and creativity).

For Silvan Tomkins, guilt as an emotion is a deviant form of shame, but the two share a similar affective mechanism (Tomkins 1963, 728). What differentiates guilt from shame is its close association with moral transgression, in which the sense of violating a moral norm is “a response of the self to the self’s immorality” (Tomkins 1963, 746). In other words, guilt involves moral judgments about, first, knowing the moral norms and, second, seeing oneself as violating a norm. This entanglement with morality places guilt in a closer relationship with dominant cultural norms and social systems.

For Judith Butler (1997), feeling guilty is explained as a matter of subjection, as “the means by which a subject becomes an object for itself” (22). Using Althusser’s theory of interpellation, Butler explains that the subject’s impulse to identify as guilty involves the human conscience, revealing the individual’s physical dimension when being hailed. This subjection involves the self-internalisation of power, not as passive submission under fear of punishment, but as active self-violence. In other words, the subject

actively transforms itself into a guilty object, even though responding to this hail leads to submission, self-restraint, and punishment. Butler explains this attachment as a desire to be recognised, which is meaningful for an individual because it signifies their legitimate position in an established society: “within subjection the price of existence is subordination. [...] Subjection exploits the desire for existence, where existence is always conferred from elsewhere” (Butler 1997, 20). Being the guilty object, therefore, promises identity and existence within a system of law that functions not only juridically but also through one’s sense of normativity. In this constructive view of subjectivity, it is through the circuit of bad conscience – constantly turning back to itself as guilty – that subjectivity is produced.

Following Butler, if men’s turning to guilt can be explained as affirming their existence when encountering feminism, it means that what makes men guilty is not feminism, but the “law” of the existing dominant gender power system. From this perspective, we can read men’s own claims that “men are guilty” as a speech act – a performative utterance that affirms their existence within a stable system of normativity. This performativity of guilt has concrete effects: through self-interpellation as guilty objects, men gain the right to defend their innocence within legitimated logics of guilt:

“Submission” to the rules of the dominant ideology might then be understood as a submission to the necessity to prove innocence in the face of accusation, a submission to the demand for proof, an execution of that proof, and acquisition of the status of the subject in and through compliance with the terms of the interrogative law. To become a “subject” is thus to have been presumed guilty, then tried and declared innocent. Because this declaration is not a single act but a status incessantly reproduced, to become a “subject” is to

be continuously in the process of acquitting oneself of the accusation of guilt. (Butler 1997, 118)

By presuming his guilty status, a man acquires a legitimate position, which allows him to confront feminist propositions that aim to violate and challenge this “law” as illegitimate. As the majority of Chinese digital feminist actions concentrate on challenging cultural misogyny and everyday sexism – issues supported neither by the legal system nor gendered social norms, and which are notoriously difficult for institutions to deal with (Wrisley 2023) – these feminist propositions can hardly constitute a “law” in either constitutional terms or at the level of socially endorsed moral norms. This means that they can always be interrupted, questioned, and refuted if one is more inclined towards existing dominant frameworks of cultural norms and legal institutions.

This explains why many of the self-proclaimed profeminist men I interviewed constantly returned to the absurdity or irrationality of Chinese digital feminism, while claiming that they were simply trying to be objective and comprehensive. Their inclination towards guilt suggests that it is difficult for many of these men to imagine themselves connecting with feminism in alternative ways. Kim, for example, got confused during our interview when I asked him about his understanding of men’s responsibility. He first shared with me his support for some of the feminist propositions that encourage men to do more housework and childcare in a family division of labour. But when I asked him about single men, he was confused:

If he is single...Well, I think a single man can just live his life whatever way he wants to, can’t he? There’s nothing we need to require him to do, right? Because he is single, he does not have

responsibilities. Then isn't it like he can just do whatever he wants to do? [...] Does he need to be responsible for anything?

Kim's understanding drags men's responsibility to only the heterosexual domestic field, so that men's relationship with feminism can only be framed within existing gender normativity. Another interviewee, Jack, held a similar stance. During our conversation, his narratives on men's role in feminism kept circulating back to issues of bride price, men paying bills for women during dating, and being "gentle" and tolerance of girlfriends' wilful requests. Meanwhile, when I asked these interviewed men about their thoughts on profeminist men, what is noticeable is that many other interviewees also explicitly or implicitly told me that they think men who would sincerely support feminism are the "abnormals" who are not cis or straight men. Kim shared with me a conjecture that those "true" (pro)feminist men likely had "gender identity disorders" or "abnormal sexuality". Erick also said that based on his own observations, there are no straight cis men around him who would say they support feminism. So, he inferred that the authentic profeminist men are more likely to be from LGBT communities. In addition, many men interviewees' understanding of self-proclaimed feminist men was clearly based on how much benefit these men would personally gain to enhance their masculine positions. It would become understandable for some of them if the men who claimed to support feminism are actually benefiting from such actions – even though it is still shameful to do so. For example, Gary introduced me to the concept of "turtle men" (龟男), which is a popular online slang used by *Hupu* users to refer to those men who are even worse than the "simps".³⁴ When I asked Gary whether he had ever known any profeminist men, Gary replied no, and explained that those profeminist men would be despised by *Hupu* users for losing their male dignity to cater to women's pleasure while gaining no good from women in return. "I cannot guarantee that all feminist men

³⁴ *Hupu* (虎扑) is a Chinese sports platform with a forum section that allows non-sport-related daily communications. The majority of *Hupu* users are male.

are like this, but at least a good portion of them have this intention,” he said. Many other interviewees, such as Michael, Kim, and Ray, also assumed that men claim to be feminists because they want to make money, benefit from public attention on social media, or attract women’s attention and favour. In these narratives, there are no pathways for a man to genuinely connect with feminism unless he is not a “normal man”.

These men’s relationship with feminism must be mediated by the existing heterosexual gender norms, so that a paradox emerges as they must first become or identify as a “man” that occupies a privileged position in hetero-patriarchal gender norms, and then must deny his privilege to justify that they are good man. This process suggests that underlying guilt is a driving force in becoming “men” – meaning in the process of actively recognising, identifying and occupying the subject position of “men” in hetero-patriarchal Chinese society.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) and *Queer Phenomenology* (2020), Ahmed discusses how feelings orient the body to move in certain directions, shaping both our sense of inhabitation and the objects we encounter. Using Ahmed’s method, men’s turning to guilt can be explained as an orientation. This Ahmed’s term for what helps us navigate by creating a “home feeling,” transforming strange, unfamiliar spaces, where we feel lost, into familiar places where we know how to move. Thus, the “laws” of heterosexual gender normativity functions as what Ahmed calls a “homing device” (Ahmed 2020, 15), guiding my men interviewees toward familiar feeling patterns. Guilt emerges when men encounter the unfamiliar territory of feminist challenges. Through this turning back, these men regain their sense of familiarity. Butler explained such pattern of subjects seeking familiarity and certainty in rules using a psychoanalytic approach drawing on Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud (Butler 1997). For Sara Ahmed (2015; 2020) and Laurent Berlant (2011), such attachment centres on the

“magic of arrival” (Ahmed 2020, 22), which is mobilised through affective promises of happiness and fulfilment when following particular social investments. Unlike strategic explanations that rely on men’s economic rationality, feminist affective studies emphasise investment as a process of “happening” (Ahmed 2010, 30) and “becoming” (Ahmed 2020, 17). This process reveals how subjects become attached to the promise of arrival along their chosen path, even when its realisation is impossible and toxic (Berlant et al. 2022). Guilt is thus an affective device that helps further orient my interviewees to the stable subject position. This does not mean it is a consciously planned device, as men as embodied subjects are also bodies in situations, “sticky” subjects of impressions (Ahmed 2020; Berggren 2014) and of enfolded histories, discourses, and power relations as constituted through their lived experiences. Turning to guilt is a familiar direction because it is also an experientially reinforced direction, whereas imagining not turning to guilt is unfamiliar and strange. In the end, guilt attaches these interviewed men to the familiar world where their gendered subject position can be found and imagined and where it is one that is innately valorised because they are men in a patriarchal world.

If Not Turning to Guilt...

So, is guilt the *only* possible pathway for men to turn to feminism? Are there any alternative ways? After all, as noted by Ahmed, the world may acquire new shapes for a subject depending on “which way we turn” (Ahmed 2020, 7). This means that for men to turn to feminism, they could be accompanied by feeling differently towards the world and themselves. For this point, my interviewee Ted’s narratives may help shed some light on another possibility. Among the 16 men I interviewed in this project, Ted is the only man who explicitly supports Chinese digital feminism while identifying himself as a feminist. Ted introduced himself to me by saying that he used to be a “stupid little

guo-nan” before he encountered feminism from his high school teacher and social media experiences in the late 2010s. During our conversations, what was prominent to me was that his narratives are largely similar to other feminist women I interviewed in this project: coincidentally or not, Ted is also the only man who heavily relies on the expression of embodied disgust in his descriptions of *guo-nan*. This is how Ted talked about *guo-nan* in his interview:

A lot of men, like those *guo-nan*, you know, they frequently get pissed off by feminists’ criticisms of men. They are really unfriendly to women. I feel very uncomfortable when seeing these people. And they evoke a sense of revolt in my heart, so that I am pushed to learn more about feminism! [...] You know, a lot of these men’s online speeches are almost anti-humanity. It sounds fascist to me. Who would ever feel comfortable when reading these things? [...] They are really disgusting. Reading those things makes my whole body tremble. I was just thinking, is that something that a human can really say?

In describing his process of transformation, Ted expressed a feeling of shame, which was also distinctive among the men interviewees. With this shame and constant critical reflection of his own *guo-nan-ness*, Ted represented his transformation as a never-ending process in which he cannot settle himself down to a stable position:

I often reflect on myself during conversations (with other feminists). Sometimes, just all in a sudden, I would realise that some sort of *guo-nan-ness* is with me again, influencing my thoughts and opinions. At these moments, I would start to critically reflect on myself. [...] For example, I feel so ashamed in talking

about this now... [He then shared an experience of being questioned by a feminist friend when talking about a sexual assault incident spread on social media.] She said how could you think like that? I felt very shameful. And then I thought about why I could think in that way. Then I started to reflect on myself, especially on my instant or unconscious responses.

Unlike what has been suggested by Nussbaum (2009) and the men's movements members in Delap's research (2018), this shame did not destroy Ted or compel him to escape from feminism. What Ted did instead is an attempt to separate himself from "men", which I would describe as a process of "not becoming men". John Stoltenberg, a profeminist male writer in the late 20th century radical feminist surge in the U.S., once coined the similar term, "refusing to be a man" (Stoltenberg 1999). By this, Stoltenberg refers to not a rejection of male genitals, but a refusal of making men constantly identify with the dominant oppressors' roles: "I mean the same thing as I would mean by 'refusing to be a white in a racist society' (x). If the "men" in Stoltenberg's account could be understood as the affective referent of how "men" has been used by the feminist women I discussed in the Chapter 4, then this phrase would make a lot of sense, as it can be translated simply as saying men *can* also refuse misogyny and male-dominant social structure. Kalle Berggren's interpretation of Stoltenberg importantly clarifies that this refusal to be a man "is not a one-time decision, but an iterative process bound to failure" (Berggren 2014, 238). In this way, a male body that refuses to become a man is in a similar situation to the feminist women I interviewed in this project. They are both bound by the "fate" of a gender that they want to recoil from. The efforts to not become men or women may constantly fail, but they share a similar desire for departure.

In Ted's narratives, this refusal was even exhibited by his acknowledgement of some feminist women's separatist tendencies. Given that he describes men as pervasively disgusting and annoying, Ted told me that he would understand those women who advocate for gender separatism. "In the past, I didn't realise how bad men can be. But now, I think if I were a woman, I totally understand if they ask men to forever disappear from their lives." He explained that he used to think that separatism and the political lesbian position were too radical. But after knowing more about feminism, Ted now thinks many of these theories also make sense. "To be honest, sometimes I would also think that those *guo-nan* would better go build a country of their own and don't bother *us* anymore," he complained.

I curiously asked about Ted's relationship with other men in his life. As a feminist man, Ted has both men and women friends around him, but he admitted that most of his feminist conversations happened with his women feminist friends. Like my feminist women interviewees, his experience of talking about feminism with other men was similarly unpleasant and difficult. Therefore, even though Ted himself experienced an "awakening" of feminist consciousness, he also holds a pessimistic attitude towards men being changed to support feminism. However, compared to many of the feminist women I interviewed in this project, Ted's responses towards misogynistic speech amongst his interactions with men seem to be more aggressive. Ted did not often hide his hostility and anger toward men when they had unpleasant interactions. While this can be considered a matter of personality, it may also suggest that the affective pathway for Ted could be slightly different from my feminist women interviewees. For example, there was no mention of safety concerns, the sense of fear, or experiences of being ignored. In Ted's sense, the outcomes of his unpleasant communications with men ranged from "embarrassment", "disagreements and dissents", and "being distanced by some of them". These confrontations also do not stem from his own experience of being disrespected or treated as a sexual object. Instead, during quarrels and unpleasant

conversations with other men, Ted mobilised his belief in the feminist vision and his affective connections with his women friends and feminists:

I believe I own the truth. So if that guy does not believe in me, then I would feel sorry for him. Or I would think he is pathetic. [...] I sometimes reflect on myself and think, do I need to be so serious about it in my life? But when someone appears with those [misogynistic] statements in front of you, it's impossible to hold yourself and present that you agree with them.

In the end, Ted also reflected on his own position in the hegemonic masculinity hierarchy after learning this concept from a gender studies class.

In my case, I think maybe I stepped on the way of feminism because I am not an “alpha man” in this society? How should I put this? I do not have a masculine body figure. I am a bit fat. [...] So I kind of deviated from that ideal alpha man image in this society. Because my observation is that a lot of heterosexual cis men in my life who have good appearances with a lot of money seldom have the motivation to change themselves.

Ted still identifies as a heterosexual cis man. While this is a very limited sample of one amongst my cohort of interviewees, his case sheds light on possibilities for men to connect with feminism without turning to a guilt of “one cannot prevent oneself from being a man”. In such an alternative pathway, being a man is neither a source of guilt nor a doomed destiny. Rather, it can be contested, critically negotiated, and resisted without fragmenting oneself completely. From this perspective, feminist men's affective connections with feminism and their gender positions deserve further

investigation in future studies, so that “not becoming men” may transform from a source of terrifying insecurity and chaos into an option that inspires imagination and creativity, leading to an alternative feminist future for all of us.

Conclusion

I have encountered many Chinese men who are swinging on the edge of Chinese digital feminism. Some of them are my friends or my students, and have talked with me about their confusion over feminism and gender in China and their struggle with how to respond to or participate in it. Therefore, I have tried to emphasise that I do not question the authenticity of the bad feelings expressed by my interviewees who are men, even when I describe them as embodying guilt in their affective relations to feminism. Of course, it must feel bad when you feel you are excluded, suspected, questioned, and even despised. This is especially the case for those men when you understand themselves as having sympathy or curiosity towards feminism as something they would want to support and suppose to be right.

In conclusion, I want to clarify again that the purpose of my analysis of men’s guilt in this chapter is not to advance a doctrine that men *should not* feel guilty by better controlling or managing their own feelings through efforts of personal will. By indicating that guilt keeps orienting men to “becoming men” in the existing gender order system, I want to highlight that affect can be an important aspect of what sustains the binary gender normativity that continues to ground men’s dominance and hegemony. Adhering to the existing system does not only benefits men materially, but also psychologically, to help minimise their bad feelings and comfort them. In men’s guilt, the availability of “innocence” legitimised by the existing gender order offers a temptation that, as long as one submits or inclines towards the order, the bad feelings

in facing feminist questions could be reduced or eliminated, through the declaration/remission of guilt. Thus, this invitation to feel better can further facilitate men's affective attachment to "becoming men", so that turning to guilt can also be explained as a form of cruel optimism in Lauren Berlant's term (Berlant 2011). That is, men are invited to identify themselves as guilty as a way of releasing their affective burden in facing feminist criticisms, even though turning to this guilt also means risking evoking other bad feelings, such as anger and a sense of being wronged and victimised, and an actual sense of guilt for being a man.

In this way, the "patriarchal dividend" articulated by Connell (Connell 2013, 25) needs to exceed its literal implications of material benefit and extend to the affective level of those who have access to "feel better". By inclining towards the existing patriarchal gender system, men could make themselves feel better, while this option is not available to feminists. In the broader sense, the privileged have the availability the feel better when facing critiques and questions, as long as they can justify the existing unequal system that continues their privilege; yet this availability is not open to the subordinated and marginalised groups who cannot survive if not defying this system. Sara Ahmed once asked the important question of *how we get to feel better in some way, but not in other ways*. As Ahmed puts it, "if happiness involves an end-orientation intentionality, then happiness is already associated with somethings more than others." (Ahmed 2010a, 40) This association arises because "certain objects are attributed as the cause of happiness, which means they already circulate as social good before we 'happen' upon them." (41) If the promise of happiness in Ahmed's theorisation functions in sustaining a normativity that often solidifies structural injustice, the availability of eliminating bad feelings does the same thing. In thinking about the disgust of my women interviewees and the guilt articulated by the men, I want to conclude that this elimination of bad feelings is very unevenly available, and the fact that this is so much less available to the feminist women should be seen as the affective cost of their deviation. This affective

cost too often falls on individual feminists, who are expected to not only manage their own feelings but also to make others (especially men) feel comfortable. In a post-socialist Chinese context where systematic support, including in feminist networks, are often difficult to find, this affective cost leads to an affective impoverishment that not only kills joy but also erodes hope and other possibilities. This means that we must be serious about bad, deviant, monstrous, and ugly feelings, without reducing them to merely psychological or individual matters. Instead, I appeal for more attention to and more careful explorations of ugly feelings and the affective cost of deviation, by close examinations of how they persist and how overcoming them is promised.

Conclusion

After hearing about my thesis topic, in a cross-hemisphere online chat about recent gender topics in China, a friend once asked me, “Did you really talk about feminism with men? I can’t imagine how you managed to do that.” Being friends, knowing each other for a decade, we both came to know Chinese digital feminisms at a similar age after we graduated from high school. A few days after this conversation, she sent me a link to a recently released Chinese podcast, saying it might be of my interest to my research. I clicked in. The title of the podcast was “After talking to three men about feminism, I threw up”.

During the writing of this thesis, I received many similar comments from my feminist friends in China. I must admit that, personally, writing this thesis has been a very dreadful experience. To put it another way, this is a thesis composed by an extraordinary synergy of ugly affects of my own: shame, regret, disgust, anger, sorrow, despair, and the ghost of endless self-reflection and self-doubt. My difficulties arose not only from the need to carefully navigate various interviews, comments, and opinions with which I do not always concur, but also in confronting my own struggles as a feminist woman raised in China. Writing this thesis meant exactly grappling with many things I wished to recoil from. However, it is also this personal pain that encourages and sustains me in pursuing this project, as I gradually realise its significance for those who are experiencing similar confusion and pain in their lives within Chinese digital feminism. It is never merely a pain of my own.

One early inspiration for this thesis came from my reading of Arlie Russell Hochschild’s book *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016). This is a book coming out of Hochschild’s empirical ethnographic research on the right-wing Tea Party supporters in Louisiana, who also

supported Donald Trump's 2016 presidential election. Even though at that time I was unaware of Hochschild's deep connections with emotion and affect studies in the field, I was fascinated by Hochschild's way of approaching the supporters of the opposing party, by exploring their everyday lived *feelings* against the background of increasingly polarising political ideologies. In various aspects, the contemporary Chinese political environment is hugely different from the United States, but the way this book enabled an empathetic reading of people we do not agree with still inspired me when approaching the controversies of the so-called gender antagonism in Chinese digital feminism. Hochschild showed me a possibility that we do not have to make a singular choice between rigid identity politics and regressive conciliation. It is this deep caring for living individuals in the shared world that gives me the courage to turn to ugliness – the ugly sides of Chinese digital feminism and the ugly men. This ugliness that is fearful to face, but is also deeply entangled with many people's lives, and the everyday politics we are living together. When the whole world is sailing into the sad escalations of conflicts, divisions, and violence in 2025, I believe this deep caring is helpful, if not essential, to navigate our way out of the chaos, or at least bring hope and comfort to the lost ones.

By adopting an embodied approach and focusing on affect, I have also tried to reconsider the sometimes overly simplistic opposition between the individual and the structural in feminist studies, particularly regarding significant critiques of capitalism and neoliberal individualisations in popular feminisms in China and other regions. Some may read this thesis as presenting an excessively individualised perspective – indeed, this is not a thesis focused on capitalism, neoliberalism, democracy, or social structures in contemporary China, although I do recognise that these significant forces shape the landscape of Chinese digital feminism. As I have indicated throughout this thesis, these factors influence and have enabled Chinese digital feminism to develop with certain discernible features, such as a reliance on personal effort and everyday

sensibility, which may not be ideal and could even hinder the imagination of collective feminist actions. However, my emphasis on individuals and their embodied emotions in Chinese digital feminism stems from a fundamental belief in the humanities: it is the living individuals, not merely capitalism or social structures, who constitute our socio-political existence. This perspective is rooted not only in the important feminist tradition of ‘the personal is political’ but also in the understanding that individuals and structures are inextricably linked. As expressed by Ann Cvetkovich: “Saying that capitalism (or colonialism or racism) is the problem does not help me get up in the morning.” (Cvetkovich 2012, 15) The attempt to simply separate individuals from structural issues may often lead to dangerous justifications – as noted in the accounts of some men interviewees discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 – that excuse inaction and a lack of responsibility regarding the structural injustices we collectively face.

Overall, this thesis clarifies several common confusions or myths surrounding the “men” question in Chinese digital feminism. Briefly, the misandry – or feminist *yan-nan* – characterising Chinese digital feminism does not equate to any of the following: a simple reversal of misogyny; hatred towards men; or anti-men feminism / separatist feminism / gender essentialist feminism. My interviews with young Chinese feminist women holding diverse positions illustrate that feminist *yan-nan* is an ordinary *feeling*, stemming from the feminist subject’s affective refusal to live with misogyny. The complexity of feminist *yan-nan* helps to delineate the dilemmas and important characteristics of Chinese digital feminism in post-socialist China. A close investigation of this ugly feeling serves as a resource for us to envision the possibilities of a feminist future and, potentially, emancipation from the heteronormative gender binary system. In comparing feminist women’s disgust with men’s guilt, one notable and unexpected tension that emerged from my analysis is feminist women’s resistance to “become women” and the men’s interviewees’ attachment to “become men”. These affective tensions may have been overshadowed and obscured by the seemingly dichotomous

expressions of gender in feminist politics, yet they can also become potential conjunctions of feminist politics and queer imaginations.

In many ways, what is happening in Chinese digital feminism and what is happening with its “men” question, as mapped in this thesis, also involves concerns shared by many other feminisms outside China. While the challenges brought by the authoritarian political environment and the history of local feminist struggles are specific to Chinese digital feminism, I have become aware that many of the urgent Chinese digital feminist debates, such as consciousness-raising and masculinity politics, resonate with Anglophone discussions and feminist theories and movements, both contemporary and from last century. While some of these topics may even seem “unfashionable” in current English feminist studies, these social phenomenon and meanings are new and challenging to Chinese digital feminists in the 2020s, especially when we consider that these classic feminist topics are emerging and spreading in an environment of post-socialism, neoliberalism, popular feminism and social media. At the same time, the feminist sensibility and the “men” question discussed in this thesis may also resonate with other young generations of feminists around the world. These complex entanglements always remind us that feminism is not linear progressive history (Springer 2002b; Hemmings 2011). In these contexts, how does massive consciousness-raising digital feminism in China both parallel and diverge from the Western feminisms of the past century? What experiences and knowledge can we learn from the past and from each other? How is it possible for Chinese digital feminism to unlock a feminist future of creativity and hope, or in Rosi Braidotti’s terms, a future of “active processes of becoming” (Braidotti 2009, 5)? More than ever these questions require urgent transnational feminist dialogues engaged with both theories and experiences. I hope this thesis has made a contribution to this end.

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Appendix 1

The Sample of the Online Recruitment Survey:

1. Which of the following statement could best represent your relationship with feminism? (Multi-selections allowed)

- a. I am a radical feminist. (go to question 2)
- b. I am a feminist. (go to question 2)
- c. I support gender equality. (go to question 2)
- d. I am not interested in feminism. (go to question 3)
- e. I oppose feminism. (go to question 3)
- f. I hate feminism. (go to question 3)
- g. Not sure. (go to question 3)

2. How much do you agree with each of the following statements, regarding feminism's relationship with men? (Rate from -5 to 5. -5 for disagreement, 5 for agreement)

- a. I think feminists should educate and guide men to become feminists.
- b. I think feminists should only unite with pro-feminist men.
- c. I think feminists should not unite with men.
- d. I think feminists should not be interested in considering uniting with men at all.

3. Have you ever heard of the term "guo-nan"?

- a. Yes. (go to question 4)
- b. No. (go to question 5)

4. What is your opinion of the term "guo-nan"? (Rate from -5 to 5. -5 for disagreement, 5 for agreement)

- a. I think "guo-nan" describes some existing traits of men.
- b. I think "guo-nan" fabricates some traits of men that do not actually exist.
- c. I think "guo-nan" can be used to refer to the group of men or some groups of men.
- d. I think "guo-nan" is a deliberate smear of men.
- e. I think keeping using "guo-nan" is appropriate.

5. What social media platforms do you usually use to browse or participate in feminist-related contents? (Multi-selections allowed)

- a. WeChat or QQ group or private chat.
- b. Weibo.
- c. Douban.
- d. Xiaohongshu.
- e. Bilibili.
- f. Douyin.
- g. Zhihu
- h. Hupu.

- i. Tieba.
- j. Others (Please indicate below).

6. What is your gender?

- a. Man.
- b. Woman.
- c. Others.

7. Are you interested in participating an online one-to-one interview for this project?

- a. Yes (Please leave your preferred contact method).
- b. No.

Appendix 2

The List of All Interviewees (all gender) Demography:

Name (Alias)	Gender	Age Range	Current Residency	Education
Lisa	Woman	18-25	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Bachelor's Degree
Kelly	Woman	18-25	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Bachelor's Degree
Carol	Woman	18-25	Outside Mainland China	Master's Degree
Lora	Woman	18-25	Other Urban Regions	Master's Degree
Margie	Woman	18-25	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Bachelor's Degree
Ella	Woman	18-25	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Bachelor's Degree
Lydia	Woman	18-25	Outside Mainland China	Doctoral Degree and Above
Jessica	Woman	18-25	Outside Mainland China	Master's Degree
Rose	Woman	18-25	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Master's Degree
Donna	Woman	18-25	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Master's Degree
Madeline	Woman	18-25	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Master's Degree
Joanna	Woman	26-30	Outside Mainland China	Master's Degree
Ashley	Woman	18-25	Outside Mainland China	Master's Degree
Kristy	Woman	18-25	Outside Mainland China	Master's Degree
Kevin	Man	18-25	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Bachelor's Degree
Ted	Man	18-25	Outside Mainland China	Master's Degree
Jeff	Man	26-30	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Master's Degree
Ray	Man	18-25	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Master's Degree
Erick	Man	18-25	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Bachelor's Degree
Levi	Man	18-25	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Master's Degree
Gary	Man	26-30	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Master's Degree
Andrew	Man	31-40	Outside Mainland China	Doctoral Degree and Above
Matthew	Man	26-30	Village/Town Regions	Master's Degree
Calvin	Man	26-30	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Bachelor's Degree
Jack	Man	26-30	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Master's Degree
Dennis	Man	26-30	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Doctoral Degree and Above
Alex	Man	18-25	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Other
Michael	Man	26-30	(New) Tier 1 Cities	Master's Degree
Kim	Man	18-25	Other Urban Regions	Bachelor's Degree
Henry	Man	18-25	Outside Mainland China	Master's Degree

Total: 30

Appendix 3

An Overview of the Interviewed Men’s Attitudes Toward Feminism:

Name (Alias)	Attitude to Feminism (As Indicated by the Survey)	Attitude to Feminism (As Shown in Interviews) ³⁵			
		Self- identify as Feminist	Chinese Digital Feminism	Yan-nan (Misandry)	Gender Equality
Anti-feminist (7)					
Ray	Self-identified Feminist	No	No	No	Yes
Kim	Anti-feminist + Support Gender Equality	No	No	No	Yes
Calvin	Support Gender Equality	No	No	No	Yes
Andrew	Support Gender Equality	No	No	No	Yes
Gary	Support Gender Equality	No	No	No	Yes
Erick	Support Gender Equality	No	No	No	Yes
Jack	Support Gender Equality	No	No	No	Yes
In-between (7)					
Michael	Anti-feminist	No	Uncertain	Uncertain	Yes
Kevin	Self-identified Feminist	Uncertain	No	No	Yes
Henry	Not Sure	Uncertain	No	Uncertain	Yes
Alex	Self-identified Feminist + Support Gender Equality	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Yes
Matthew	Support Gender Equality	Uncertain	No	No	Yes
Dennis	Self-identified Feminist + Support Gender Equality	Yes	No	Uncertain	Yes
Jeff	Self-identified Feminist	Yes	Uncertain	Uncertain	Yes
Pro-feminist (2)					
Levi	Support Gender Equality	Uncertain	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ted	Self-identified Feminist	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Total: 16

³⁵ “Uncertain” means that the interviewee did not entirely agree/disagree, but showed some ambivalence in between during their interviews.