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Affectively Contesting Digital Feminism:

The "Average yet Confident Men" Controversy in 2020s China

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the dynamics of digital feminism in 2020s China through a qualitative case study of the Yang Li controversy, focusing on her widely circulated phrase “average yet confident men” (普信男). It examines how Yang Li’s comedy is interpreted, defended, criticized, and politicized across three Chinese social media platforms: Weibo, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu. Drawing on popular feminism, networked misogyny, platformization, affective-discursive practice, and made-in-China feminism(s), the study situates the controversy within broader socio-economic contexts. It combines framing analysis, critical discourse analysis, and affective-discursive analysis, based on 230 publicly available posts and comments coded through NVivo. The findings show that supporters frame Yang Li as an advocate for women, reading her comedy as feminist recognition, counter-speech, and critique of patriarchal privilege. Opponents delegitimize her through misandry accusation, gender antagonism, profit-seeking manipulation, and patriotic backlash. Ambivalent users reflect on comedy boundaries, platform amplification, and gender polarization. Overall, the thesis argues that digital feminism in China gains visibility through popular culture and affective circulation. This visibility also makes feminist expression vulnerable to anti-gender labeling and reframing. Critiques of patriarchal privilege are recast as gender antagonism, commercial opportunism, or social threat, obscuring the structural asymmetries behind women’s everyday struggles.

Keywords: Digital feminism; Everyday feminism; Popular feminism; Networked misogyny; Platformization; Yang Li; Stand-up comedy

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Gender inequality remains a persistent and contested issue in contemporary Chinese society. Although the socialist period promoted women's participation in labor and public life under the slogan that "women hold up half the sky," gender equality was largely framed as part of a broader state modernization project (Evans, 2008; Wang, 2016; Zheng, 2005). While this state-led model brought significant improvements in women's education and employment, it also subordinated gender concerns to national development goals and left limited space for independent feminist organizing. In the post-reform era, marketization, neoliberal restructuring, and social stratification have reshaped gender relations in complex ways (Liu, 2007; Rofel, 2007; Yang, Zhao & Pang, 2025). Rather than progressing linearly toward gender equality, the transition from state socialism to a market-oriented economy has involved the reconfiguration and resurgence of patriarchal norms within new socio-economic conditions, including renewed expectations surrounding care work, marriage, reproduction, and women's roles within both family and labor markets (Jacka, 1997; Rofel, 2007; Santos & Harrell, 2016; Yan, 2021).

Against this structural background, digital media has become an important arena in which gender debates are articulated and contested. Social media platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu have enabled new forms of feminist visibility by facilitating online campaigns, personal storytelling, and collective discussions around gender inequality, including those associated with the #MeToo movement in China (Ling & Liao, 2020; Yin & Sun, 2021). However, these platforms have also facilitated the rapid circulation of misogynistic and anti-feminist discourse. Feminism is frequently framed in online debates as extremist, socially disruptive, or morally threatening, reflecting broader symbolic struggles over gender legitimacy in Chinese public discourse (Huang, 2023; Liu, 2024).

Within this platform-mediated cultural landscape, the controversy surrounding the comedian Yang Li offers an interesting case for examining digital feminism in 2020s China. During a performance on the popular show Rock & Roast in 2020, Yang Li

delivered a punchline questioning why some men appear "so average yet so confident." While the punchline resonated strongly with many female audiences, it quickly provoked intense backlash from male netizens across Chinese social media platforms. The phrase subsequently evolved into a viral cultural trope and became the focus of heated online debates concerning feminism, gender relations, and male identity. As a form of popular entertainment, stand-up comedy combines humor, personal storytelling, and social commentary, making it an important site for negotiating gender norms. The Yang Li controversy therefore provides a useful entry point for analyzing how feminist expression, misogynistic backlash, and platformed public discourses interact in contemporary China.

Existing scholarship has increasingly examined the Yang Li controversy as a significant case for understanding digital feminism in 2020s China. Studies have examined feminist stand-up as a digital affective space for gendered meaning-making and feminist expression (Li & Guo, 2025; Meng & Literat, 2024), the rise of platform-mediated misogyny (Liao, 2024), and the structural limitations of Chinese digital feminism (Li, 2022). Other studies have discussed how online gender conflicts reflect a self-cognition crisis among male netizens caused by misunderstandings of feminism and gender equality (Hu et al., 2021), or how gender issues are commodified and entertainmentized through the interplay between neoliberalism, market forces, capital, and social convention (Wang & Zhao, 2025). However, fewer studies have integrated these strands to analyze how a single stand-up comedy controversy reveals deeper tensions between feminist awakening, patriarchal retrenchment, and digital governance in contemporary China. This study therefore zooms in on the Yang Li controversy as an analytical case to understand the relational dynamics of digital feminism, focusing on how different publics construct meaning, express emotions, and reproduce or critique ideological positions.

1.2 Research Aims and Questions

This thesis aims to explore new dimensions of digital feminism in 2020s China. Specifically, it analyzes Yang Li's controversies of "average yet confident men" through which to understand how feminist expression becomes interpreted, defended, criticized, and politicized in digital spaces and what socio-political changes emerge from the contestation.

The thesis is guided by the following main research question:
In what ways does the Yang Li case reflect the dynamics of digital feminism in 2020s China?
To answer this question, the thesis asks three sub-questions:
1) What are the responses of Yang Li's supporters and opponents to her statements?
2) What strategies are used by both sides reacting to Yang Li's statements?
3) What characteristics of digital feminism are represented by Yang Li's case?

Methodologically, the thesis adopts a discourse analysis approach combining framing analysis, critical discourse analysis, and affective-discursive analysis. This approach makes it possible to examine how meanings, emotions, and power relations are constructed and contested in digital interactions (Entman, 1993; Fairclough, 1985; Wetherell, 2012). Rather than treating online gender conflicts as isolated individual expressions, this thesis approaches them as structured discursive practices within a platformized media environment embedded in an interplay of authoritarianism, patriarchy and neoliberalism (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024).

1.3 Disposition

The thesis is organized into six chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 reviews the key concepts of popular feminism, intersected misogyny, platformization, and made-in-China feminism(s), while situating them within the historical and socio-political contexts of gender politics in contemporary China. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework of Affective-Platformed Feminist Contestation. Chapter 4 reports the research design, process, and reflection. Chapter 5 presents the empirical analysis of supporters', opponents', and ambivalent side' responses to Yang Li's statements, showing how the controversy is framed through feminist recognition, misogynistic attacks, and reflections on platformed gender polarization. Chapter 6 argues that the Yang Li controversy reveals the conditional visibility of digital feminism in 2020s China, where feminist expression gains public force through popular culture and affective circulation but is also vulnerable to decontextualization, commercialization, and anti-gender backlash. The thesis concludes by highlighting Yang Li's case as a revealing example of how digital feminism in China becomes visible, contested, and disciplined within platformed publics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the key scholarship relevant to this thesis and situates the Yang Li controversy within broader debates on digital feminism, everyday feminism, misogyny, platform governance, and gender politics in contemporary China. The chapter is organized around six parts. It begins by clarifying several key terms used throughout the thesis. It then situates contemporary gender politics within a broader patriarchal-authoritarian-neoliberal configuration in China. The following sections review popular feminism, intersected misogyny, and the platformization of misogyny in China's state-market nexus. Finally, the chapter discusses made-in-China feminism(s) in order to locate contemporary digital feminist contestation within longer historical and transnational trajectories.

2.1 Terminology

Before reviewing the core debates, it is necessary to clarify how several key terms are used in this thesis. These terms are not treated as fixed or universal categories, but as analytical concepts whose meanings are shaped by the social, historical, and political contexts in which they are used.

First, gender refers not simply to biological difference, but to socially produced norms, roles, expectations, and power relations that organize and destabilize how women and men, femininity and masculinity are understood and evaluated (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In this thesis, gender is therefore used as an analytical lens for examining how public speech, humor, emotional expression, and online participation are differently evaluated through socially constructed expectations of femininity and masculinity and how these evaluations are constantly critiqued and destabilized.

Second, following bell hooks' definition of feminism as a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression, feminism refers broadly to critiques of gender inequality and to discourses, practices, and forms of collective or semi-collective expression that challenge patriarchal power relations (2000). However, feminism in the Chinese context cannot be treated as a straightforward equivalent of liberal Western feminism; it is internally differentiated, historically situated, and politically contested (Barlow, 2004; Wu & Dong, 2019; Zheng & Zhang, 2010). This contestation is

especially visible in the politics of naming: compared with its general academic usage in English, the meaning of "feminism" (nüquanzhuyi) in Chinese popular discourse is more complicated, since "quan" can be interpreted either as "rights" or, in anti-feminist discourse, as "privileges" (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 472). Online labels such as "feminist whores" (nüquan biao), "feminist cancer" (nüquan ai) and "Chinese homegrown feminism" (tianyuan nüquan) therefore actively recast feminism as rancorous and anti-social (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 472; Wu & Dong, 2026). Rather than simply functioning as insults, these labels work discursively to collapse diverse women's agitations into a stigmatized and undifferentiated image of "feminism," obscuring the gendered and classed grievances from which such claims emerge (Wu & Dong, 2019, pp. 485-486). This thesis therefore uses feminism not as a fixed category, but as a historically situated and contested field of gender critique that includes both explicit feminist claims and more indirect forms of resistance circulating through popular and digital culture.

Third, misogyny is understood not simply as individual hatred toward women, but as a broader social and discursive logic. Following Manne (2017), misogyny works by policing and punishing women who challenge patriarchal norms and expectations. It works on the ideological level and as moral governance of women and the society. In digital contexts, misogyny may appear through harassment, ridicule, moral denunciation, delegitimization and the use of stigmatizing labels to portray feminists as perverted, selfish or socially disruptive (Huang, 2023; Jane, 2014, 2016).

Fourth, patriarchy refers to a social structure in which masculine authority, male privilege, gendered divisions of labor as well subjugation and exploitation of women are normalized across everyday practices and public discourse (Walby, 1990). In the Chinese context, patriarchy is not understood as a static tradition, but as something repeatedly reconfigured through socialist state feminism, deepening authoritarianism, post-reform marketization, and contemporary digitalization.

Finally, neoliberalism in China is used here to describe the market-oriented reforms, consumerist values, and forms of individual self-responsibilization that have reshaped social life since the reform era. However, it operates alongside authoritarian governance and persistent patriarchal expectations (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024; Rofel, 2007; Yan, 2010). This produces a context where gender inequality becomes a key site through

which wider class tensions and neoliberal anxieties are articulated, displaced, and intertwined, particularly around family obligation, marriage markets, employment competition, and personal success or failure. (Fincher, 2014; Wu & Dong, 2019).

2.2 Patriarchal-authoritarian-neoliberal Configuration

To understand digital feminist contestation in contemporary China, it is necessary to first situate it within the broader social structure that shapes women's expression and everyday life. While the resilience of female activism in negotiating censorship and repression may undermine the regulatory ambitions of patri-authoritarian regime (Li & Eklund, 2026; Zeng, 2020; Zhang & Zhang, 2024), studies in this field also show that feminist claims are often constrained by repressive political environment, failing to achieve sustained structural critique (Chen & Wang, 2020; Wang & Tavmen, 2025). To put it further, Xu and Liu (2025)'s analysis of Chinese female stand-up comedy suggests that this redirection implies a platform and governance-conditioned mode of public articulation that actively reorganizes feminist speech into an intimate, affect-laden, and marketable form. In this sense, digital feminism in post-2020's China is shaped by an intertwined configuration of patriarchal norms, authoritarian governance, and neoliberal political economy. This broader configuration structures both the opportunities and the limits of feminist expression.

As mentioned in the beginning of the first section, the Maoist legacy is therefore best understood not simply as a period of gender progress, but as a state-mediated and class-coded project of women's liberation. Women were mobilized into public production and granted formal legal and economic rights, yet gender equality was largely defined through women's contribution to socialist construction rather than through women's autonomous political subjectivity (Wang, 2016; Zheng, 2005). As Wu and Dong (2019) emphasize, the state's control over "women's work" restricted open discussion of gender, while women's specific disadvantages were often subsumed to class-coded struggles. This produced a paradoxical legacy: patriarchal family relations and gender hierarchies were challenged in certain institutional domains, but independent feminist organizing and a vocabulary for autonomous women's movements remained limited (Barlow, 2004; Manning, 2006a, 2006b; Wu & Dong, 2019). In this sense, Maoist state

feminism weakened some older patriarchal arrangements while also embedding gender equality within a highly centralized and politically regulated framework.

After the economic reforms, patriarchy was not simply restored as tradition; it was reorganized through the combined forces of marketization, family privatization, and authoritarian governance. The retreat of socialist welfare and the separation of public and private spheres shifted many reproductive and care responsibilities back onto families, and in practice onto women (Liu, 2007). At the same time, the marketization of sexuality, marriage and housing intensified the social pressure on women to secure respectability and economic stability through heterosexual marriage, and traditional femininity (Fincher, 2014; Rofel, 2007; Wu & Dong, 2019). This reconfiguration was further reinforced by state-endorsed family values and population governance, which linked women's reproductive and domestic roles to social stability and national development (Mcfarland, 2022; Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005).

More recent scholarship further suggests that the limits of feminist expression in China are produced by the institutional and discursive conditions under which women's interests become recognizable. Jiang and Zhou (2022) show that the representation of women's interests in authoritarian governance depends on state-mediated alliances and remains politically bounded, especially when claims are perceived as sensitive or insufficiently aligned with official priorities. Zhou (2023) similarly conceptualizes China's gender governance as a form of illiberal state feminism, in which formal commitments to gender equality coexist with party-state control over the meanings, institutions, and acceptable boundaries of women's interests. In the digital sphere, this boundedness is corroborated by what Liao (2025) calls an "increasingly digitalized, commercialized, and controlled media ecosystem" (p.86), where feminism may gain visibility as popular content while remaining difficult to sustain as autonomous politics. This suggests that contemporary Chinese gender politics is not only a struggle over rights or resources, but also a struggle over the conditions under which feminist claims can become institutionally legible, publicly visible, and politically permissible.

Thus, post-reform patriarchy operates less as a simple return to the past than as a state-market-family nexus: neoliberal competition individualizes social risk, authoritarian

governance limits structural feminist critique, and patriarchal norms translate these pressures into expectations of feminine duty, marital respectability, and reproductive responsibility. This broader configuration provides the structural context for the digital struggles examined in this thesis.

2.3 Popular Feminism

The concept of popular feminism has been developed to capture the increasing visibility of feminist ideas within mainstream and popular media cultures. Banet-Weiser (2018) defines popular feminism as a form of feminism that circulates through commercial media, celebrity culture, and digital platforms, often emphasizing empowerment, confidence, and individual expression. Unlike earlier forms of feminist activism rooted in collective organizing or institutional politics, popular feminism is closely intertwined with digital and popular media logics of visibility, circulation, and branding (Favaro & Gill, 2018). Feminist claims are articulated through cultural texts, personal narratives, and everyday expressions rather than through formal political channels.

Scholars have noted that this increased visibility has ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, popular feminism enables broader public engagement with gender inequality and allows feminist ideas to reach audiences beyond activist circles (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007). On the other hand, the incorporation of feminism into popular culture often entails processes of depoliticization, pro-entertainment, and commercialization. McRobbie (2008) argues that postfeminist media culture frequently reframes feminist critique in individualistic terms, emphasizing personal choice and self-improvement while obscuring structural inequalities, thus making it attached to neoliberal movements. As a result, feminist discourse becomes both more visible and more vulnerable to distortion and backlash.

This ambivalence is particularly relevant in the context of digital media, where feminist expression often takes the form of short, affective, and contagious statements that circulate rapidly across platforms. Feminist claims embedded in humor, entertainment, or personal storytelling – such as those made by female stand-up comedians – can resonate widely while simultaneously being stripped of their political context (Xu & Liu, 2025). As Banet-Weiser (2018) emphasizes, popular feminism is not inherently

radical or conservative; rather, it is a site of struggle where the meanings of feminism are continuously negotiated. This dynamic is also evident in the Chinese context. For example, Wu (2024) discusses "imagined feminism" in Chinese TV presentation and media culture, showing that feminism in popular media is often simultaneously visible, mediated, and constrained. Rather than appearing as a stable political project, feminism is reworked into consumable and culturally legible forms, which can expand its audience while also weakening its structural and oppositional force. Once feminist critique circulates as a joke, slogan, clip, or personal complaint, it can become detached from its structural critique and reinterpreted as mere grievance, entertainment provocation, or "male-bashing" (Brantner, Lobinger & Stehling, 2020; McRobbie, 2004). This insight is directly relevant to Yang Li's case, which did not appear in a conventional activist setting but in a highly mediated entertainment format.

Research on stand-up comedy further shows that feminist expression in popular culture may take on an affective, relatable, and everyday form. Li and Guo (2025) conceptualize online feminist stand-up comedy as an emerging affective-discursive intervention on gender in China, while Xu and Liu (2025) argue that female stand-up comedians often articulate discontent through what they call the "female complaint," a mode of voicing everyday gender frustration that is soft, safe, and marketable. These study help explain why Yang Li's performance could resonate so widely with female audiences: her humor drew on ordinary, recognizable gendered experiences and translated feminist critique into a popular cultural idiom. In this sense, Yang Li's comedy can also be understood through the lens of everyday feminism, where feminist politics is not limited to formal activism but emerges through ordinary practices of recognition, sharing, affective identification, and the naming of everyday sexism (Schuster, 2017). In digital contexts, everyday feminism often operates through small acts of narration, reposting, commenting, joking, and naming sexism, allowing users who may not engage in organized activism to participate in feminist meaning-making through low-threshold but affectively significant practices (Caldeira, 2025; Kanai, 2020; Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019).

2.4 Intersected Misogyny

However, the heightened visibility of feminist discourse in popular and digital media has been accompanied by what many scholars describe as a resurgence of gendered

backlash. To make it more complicated, misogyny in digital China is not isolated: it intersects with class tensions, nationalist discourse, platform culture, masculinity anxiety, and moral regulation.

To elaborate further on how feminism in China has been suppressed and the reason behind it, empirical studies of online gender conflicts in China show that misogynistic and anti-feminist discourse draws on a relatively stable repertoire of recognizable accusations: women and feminists are portrayed as selfish, irresponsible, emotionally excessive, or socially divisive (Huang, 2023; Nakahara & Cai, 2025; Wang & Chang, 2023; Yang, Guo & Arteel, 2023). This repertoire often works through discursive strategies that demonize feminism and simultaneously render anti-feminism publicly reasonable. Huang (2023)'s study of Weibo, for instance, identifies how anti-feminist discourse is organized around strategies such as casting feminists as deviant women, accusing them of betraying the nation, and labeling them as "fake feminists"
—moves that shift attention away from structural gender inequality and toward moralized antagonism between "feminists" and "ordinary people." In this sense, misogynistic tropes are not merely expressive; they are boundary-making devices that police who is entitled to speak about gender and on what terms.

A second layer concerns how these tropes are sustained through stigmatizing labels and "category work" that transform feminist critique into a suspect identity. Hu et al. (2021)'s mixed sentiment-discourse study of the "Yang Li Event" shows that male netizens' rhetoric frequently constructs feminists as "radical" or "pseudo-" feminists, thereby reframing women's critique as ideological extremism and misrecognizing gender inequality as already resolved. What is analytically important here is that such labels do double work: they delegitimize feminist claims while simultaneously re-centering men as aggrieved subjects whose anger appears justified. This logic also resonates with Liu (2024), who shows that feminists in Chinese cyberspace are often misidentified as traitors, illustrating how anti-feminism is entwined with nationalism, disinformation, and accusations of political disloyalty.
Third, the "male self-cognitive crisis" account becomes more useful when connected to scholarship on contemporary Chinese masculinities and status insecurity. Beyond individual psychology, studies of postsocialist masculinity highlight how men's sense of entitlement and "successful masculinity" is increasingly being undermined by

marketized benchmarks such as housing, bride price, consumption, and career attainment, producing anxiety among young men facing intensified competition and economic pressure (Song & Hird, 2013). These pressures can make feminist critique feel like an additional status threat: not because feminism causes men's disadvantage, but because it disrupts long-standing gendered expectations about authority, recognition, and entitlement. Hu et al. (2021) echo this point by linking male backlash to perceived humiliation and to pressures around material life, which are then converted into claims about discourse rights and public opinion. From this perspective, "masculinity crisis" is less a neutral diagnosis than a discourse that translates structural-economic strain into gendered resentment, often by depicting women's empowerment as overreach (Fufu, 2020).

Importantly, anti-feminist discourse is not only produced by men. Wang and Chang (2023) show that some women's disapproval of digital feminism can be articulated through frames such as feminism undermining women's solidarity, feminism as a "trendy business," or feminism as a new disciplinary norm. This complicates any simplistic binary of "men's backlash versus women's resistance" and instead suggests that misogynistic tropes gain traction partly because they can be rearticulated as moral critique, consumer critique, or anti-extremism, thereby widening their appeal and normalizing hostility while appearing non-misogynistic.

A key contribution of recent scholarship lies in its attention to the affective dimensions of misogyny and backlash. Rather than focusing exclusively on ideological or discursive content, researchers increasingly emphasize how emotions such as anger, resentment, humiliation, and outrage circulate within digital networks. Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) highlight how networked misogyny is sustained through affective economies, in which emotionally charged content is amplified through sharing, commenting, and algorithmic promotion. Ahmed's (2014) analysis of the cultural politics of emotion demonstrates how emotions become attached to bodies and identities, producing boundaries between "us" and "them," while Wetherell (2012) emphasizes the inseparability of meaning and feeling in affective-discursive practices. These insights are particularly relevant for understanding the "average yet confident men" controversy that unfold through popular culture, including feminist humor and satire.

Research on female stand-up comedians shows that women's articulation of gendered experiences is frequently reframed as personal attack, misandry, or moral provocation, particularly when it challenges masculine norms (Sun, 2022; Xu & Liu, 2025). But an important question remains: why did so many men feel offended and relate Yang Li's trope of "ordinary yet confident men" to masculine decline? One explanation is the prevailing social expectations that encourage men to project confidence, and even arrogance, while requiring women to perform humility (Rosette, Mueller & Lebel, 2015). Such gendered stereotypes are ultimately detrimental to both sexes: women who display confidence are often sanctioned, whereas men are expected to embody unwavering strength and self-assurance, with any expression of vulnerability or uncertainty interpreted as incompetence. As a result, the rapid circulation of feminist discussion in digital spaces intensifies affective polarization, making gender debates increasingly confrontational and emotionally charged.

2.5 Platformization of Misogyny

Recent scholarship on digital media increasingly emphasizes that online discourse is shaped not only by user practices but also by the political economy and governance structures of platforms. In studies of gender politics, this perspective has given rise to the concept of the platformization of misogyny, which highlights how misogynistic discourse is amplified, normalized, and rendered profitable within commercialized and algorithmically driven media environments (Liao, 2024). In the Chinese context, these dynamics are further conditioned by the intertwining of market logics and authoritarian governance, producing a distinctive state-market nexus that structures the circulation of feminist and anti-feminist discourse.

The concept of platformization refers to the growing influence of digital platforms in organizing social interaction, cultural production, and public discourse. Poell, Nieborg and Van Dijck (2019) argue that platforms are not neutral intermediaries but infrastructural systems that shape visibility, connectivity, and participation through algorithmic design, datafication, and monetization. Similarly, Gillespie (2018) notes that platforms present themselves as neutral hosts while actively moderating, ranking, and shaping public discourse. Within this framework, misogyny can be understood as particularly platform-compatible. Gendered hostility often circulates through humor, irony, memes, and outrage – forms that are highly shareable and algorithmically

rewarded. Research on digital misogyny demonstrates that such content benefits from platform logics that favor affective intensity and rapid circulation, contributing to its normalization within online publics (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016).

While platformization is a global phenomenon, its operation in China must be situated within a specific political and regulatory environment. Chinese digital platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Bilibili operate under a dual logic: they are profit-oriented commercial enterprises while simultaneously functioning within a tightly regulated information environment shaped by state priorities (Liao, 2024). Peng (2020) describes China's digital public sphere as characterized by selective openness, in which certain forms of expression are tolerated or encouraged while others are restricted or censored. Overt challenges to state authority are more likely to be curtailed, whereas cultural and moral disputes – particularly those framed as social or interpersonal issues – often occupy a regulatory grey zone (King, Pan & Roberts, 2013; MacKinnon, 2011). This asymmetrical governance creates conditions under which gendered antagonism can flourish, as misogynistic discourse is frequently framed as opinion, humor, or moral critique rather than political speech.

Importantly, Liao (2024) theorizes China's digital gender politics through the lens of a state-market nexus, in which platform commercialization and regulatory governance are mutually reinforcing. Platforms seek engagement and profitability, while state regulation prioritizes political stability and ideological conformity over substantive interventions into structural gender inequality. As a result, feminist claims or politically sensitive forms of participatory expression are often constrained, depoliticized, or selectively muted, whereas misogynistic discourse can circulate with the appearance of common sense or cultural legitimacy (Yin & Xie, 2024; Zheng, 2015).

Importantly, the dynamics of "muted misogyny" identified by Yang, Zhao, and Pang (2025) further clarify how gendered harm can be intensified without always becoming verbally blatant. Drawing from muted group theory, they argue that misogyny can operate through discursive absence, superficiality, and risk-avoidant narratives in contexts where sustained structural critique is politically sensitive. This insight is useful for the present thesis because it suggests that the platformization of misogyny is not only about amplification of explicit anti-feminist speech; it is also about the broader

communicative environment that makes feminist critique conditionally audible and structurally weak.

2.6 Made-in-China Feminism(s)

To theorize contemporary digital feminist contention in China, it is necessary to situate present online struggles within longer historical trajectories in which feminist agendas have repeatedly been articulated through shifting political economies and media environments.

Rooted in two feminism strands – Entrepreneurial C-fem and Non-cooperative C-fem – in contemporary China, Wu and Dong (2019) argue that made-in-China feminism(s) should be understood not as an undifferentiated ideological formation, nor as a simple local adaptation of Western feminism, but as a contested field produced through postsocialist transformation, class friction, and gender discontent. Their analysis is especially pertinent because it foregrounds the fact that contemporary feminist antagonisms in China are inseparable from broader social contradictions. Rather than treating online gender conflict as mere polarization, their framework highlights how accusations of "extremism," "privilege," or "misandry" reveal anxieties about precarious life conditions, such as housing, education, marriage markets, and employment inequality, which are structured by class and urban-rural divides (Wu & Dong, 2026). This shifts the interpretive focus from whether digital feminism is "too radical" toward what social contradictions are being displaced onto feminist subjects and feminist language.

Historically, one important trajectory is state feminism under socialist revolution and governance. As stated above, this legacy complicates any simple opposition between feminism and the state, as gender equality has historically been framed as a nation-building task, even as women's lived experiences remained shaped by patriarchal relations within family, workplace, and political representation (Johnson, 2009; Zheng, 2005). Put differently, the socialist period created a utopian vision of equality, yet one that was partial and self-contradictory, and later became vulnerable to retreat and re-traditionalization under market reforms (Evans, 2024).

A second trajectory is associated with NGO feminism and women's organizing in the reform era, especially in the 1990s and 2000s. Against the backdrop of marketization,

neoliberalism and rising inequalities, feminist advocacy increasingly took the form of professionalized projects such as legal aid, gender training, and anti-violence interventions, often operating in constrained political space and shaped by donor logics and state regulation (Milwertz, 2002; Wesoky, 2013). This NGO-related terrain generated practical achievements while also reconfiguring feminism as issue-specific advocacy and policy pragmatism, potentially narrowing the capacity to articulate structural critique in openly adversarial terms. In this sense, the reform-era feminist landscape cannot be reduced to either co-optation or resistance; it is better read as a field of negotiated action where feminist claims are advanced through selective alignment with state governance.

A third trajectory, central to this thesis, is grassroots and digital feminism. Recent research illustrates how young women use social media to make gendered harms visible, mobilize affect, and build interpretive communities, especially around high-profile events such as #MeToo and viral controversies (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024; Han, 2018; Ling & Liao, 2020; Yin & Sun, 2021). Yet digital feminism also inherits the earlier historical tension: feminist critique becomes publicly audible most readily when it can be framed as culturally resonant, morally correct, or politically non-threatening, rather than as systemic opposition (Peng, 2020). The result is a paradoxical continuity across these trajectories. From state-led equality under socialism, to NGO-based advocacy in the reform era, to contemporary platform-mediated feminist expression, feminist politics in China has repeatedly been articulated within shifting yet persistent constraints on what can be publicly said, how gender claims are legitimized, and through which media channels they are expressed.

The analytic value of made-in-China feminism(s) also lies in its resistance to reductive interpretations of Chinese feminism as either an authentic local formation or an imported Western ideology. In Ye's reading of the Feminist Five incident, Chinese feminist activism was made globally legible through a Cold War-oriented narrative of the repressive communist party-state versus oppressed yet heroic feminist resisters, a framing that enabled solidarity but also flattened the multiple positions, compromises, and historical conditions of Chinese feminist politics (2021). This critique resonates with Wu and Dong's (2026) warning against "discursive reductionism," in which feminist expressions are too quickly folded into broad explanations of neoliberal

transformation, rather than as practices situated within concrete political-economic formations. A made-in-China feminism(s) perspective is therefore critical as it sheds light on how feminist claims are produced, translated, constrained, and misrecognized within intertwined structures of postsocialist marketization, authoritarian governance, platform capitalism, and transnational knowledge production. This perspective is central to the present thesis, as the Yang Li controversy should not be reduced to an isolated case driven by unrelated factors such as imported feminism, online misandry, or marketized gender conflict; rather, it needs to be understood as a platformed cultural struggle over how feminist critique becomes publicly intelligible in contemporary China.

Furthermore, studies of feminist stand-up and short-video circulation show how comedic fragments become symbolic resources for ordinary users to interpret and circulate, generating shared vocabularies for naming everyday sexism while also exposing feminist expression to backlash and reputational discipline (Meng & Literat, 2024; Zhang & Zhou, 2023; Li & Guo, 2025). Crucially, this cultural lens expands the meaning of feminist politics beyond formal activism and allows us to see how humor, relatability, and everyday language become central to digital feminist contestation.

However, the circulation can also produce depoliticization. When feminist critique is anchored in personal resonance or individualized storytelling, it may become more publicly shareable but less able to sustain structural critique – particularly in a context where political contention is risky and platform governance shapes what becomes visible (Liao, 2024; Peng, 2020). This does not mean digital feminism is inauthentic; rather, it points to a structural dilemma. Feminists often reach wider audiences by translating power relations into culturally approachable narratives, but this translation can be reabsorbed into neoliberal self-empowerment or entertainment-oriented visibility, narrowing the horizon of collective critique (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Wu, 2024). In this sense, depoliticization is not only imposed by state censorship; it is also reproduced through commercially optimized attention economies in which simplified, affectively intense content outcompetes more poignant structural argumentation.

Overall, the literature on made-in-China feminism(s) is crucial because it contextualizes the Yang Li controversy in a longer and more complex history of

feminist articulation, contestation, and negotiation in China. It helps explain why a single stand-up punchline could become a flashpoint for broader struggles over gender, legitimacy, morality, nationalism, and public voice.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Deductive and Inductive Reasoning

The analytical logic of this thesis combines deductive and inductive reasoning. Deductively, the concepts outlined above provide theoretical grounding. They orient the analysis toward questions of visibility, backlash, platformed circulation, and affective positioning. Inductively, the empirical categories emerged through open coding and close engagement with the data. The first stage of coding stayed close to users' original comments and recurrent expressions, demonstrating how they organized the controversy and how platform vernacular condensed broader struggles over gender, legitimacy, and emotional injury.

The interaction between theory and data thus led to three main discursive positions: feminist supportive discourse, anti-feminist oppositional discourse, and ambivalent and reflexive discourse. This combined logic helps enrich the analysis: a purely theory-driven approach would risk flattening the diversity of online responses, while purely inductive approach would struggle to connect user discourse to larger structures of Chinese gender politics and platform governance. The framework presented below (Figure 1) therefore functions as a bridge between the literature review and the empirical analysis.

3.2 Application of the Framework

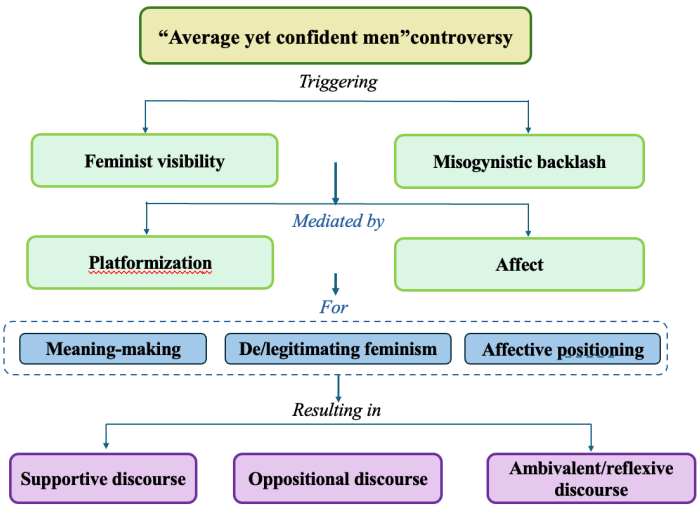

Figure 1: Affective-Platformed Feminist Contestation Framework

The operationalization of this framework (Figure 1) follows the direction from context, to controversy, to discursive positioning. The broader context is made-in-China feminism(s), which situates the Yang Li controversy within postsocialist Chinese gender politics. Within this context, popular feminism explains how a comedic phrase could become a form of feminist visibility. Misogynistic backlash then clarifies how this visibility was challenged and undermined through different discursive strategies. Based on platformization mechanism motivated by circulation and attention, affective-discursive practice further illustrates how emotions give these competing meanings their public force.

The theoretical framework then guides the empirical analysis through three analytical dimensions: meaning-making, feminist legitimacy, and affective positioning, which are interconnected. Meaning-making concerns how Yang Li's statement becomes interpretable in different ways. Feminist legitimacy concerns how these interpretations defend, question, or delegitimize feminist speech. Affective positioning concerns how emotions attach users to particular interpretations and make some positions feel reasonable, injured, or morally urgent. Together, these dimensions allow the analysis to examine supportive, oppositional, and ambivalent discourse from three relational analytical methods, which will be elaborated further in the next section.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This thesis adopts a qualitative, discourse-oriented research design to examine how the Yang Li controversy became a site for contesting digital feminism in 2020s China. Grounded in an interpretivist epistemological position, the research approaches online posts and comments as discursive practices through which users construct meanings, position themselves within gender debates, and negotiate the legitimacy of feminism in China's platform-mediated public sphere. According to Bryman (2016), the interpretivist strand assumes that social reality is not simply given, but is constructed through meanings, interactions, and symbolic practices. This perspective is particularly useful for analyzing online gender controversy as the meaning of Yang Li's comedy is not fixed. The punchline "average yet confident men" may be framed by supporters as feminist humor, by opponents as misandry, and by more ambivalent users as a problematic but revealing example of gendered comedy.

Methodologically, the thesis combines three qualitative analytical approaches: framing analysis (Entman, 1993), critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2023), and affective-discursive analysis (Wetherell, 2013). Framing analysis is used to identify how users define the controversy and evaluate Yang Li's statements. CDA is used to examine how these frames are embedded in wider relations of power, including gender hierarchy, platform governance, and anti-gender discourse. Affective-discursive analysis is used to explore how emotions such as anger, resentment, humiliation, solidarity, resonance, and moral outrage structure the debate. Together, these methods allow the study to analyze meaning, power, and affect as interrelated dimensions of digital feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019).

4.2 Data Sources and Platform Selection

The empirical material consists of publicly available user-generated contents collected from three Chinese social media platforms: Weibo, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu (Rednote). These platforms were selected because they are main Chinese social media platforms with popular participation and major arenas where the Yang Li controversy and related debates about feminism, masculinity, humor, and gender conflict circulated. They also

differ in terms of platform affordances, user cultures, and discursive styles, which makes them suitable for capturing a range of online responses and potential differences of behaviors and expressions among platforms.

Weibo serves as the primary data source. In the Yang Li case, Weibo was a central space where her remarks were reframed, defended, attacked, and politicized. As a hybrid platform combining microblogging, public commentary, reposting, trending topics, and celebrity-related discussion, the Weibo data include original posts, reposts with commentary and comment threads beneath posts connected to relevant keywords and topics.

Bilibili is included as a supplementary platform. Unlike Weibo, Bilibili is primarily organized around video content and comment sections. Compared with Weibo's shorter and more reactive format, Bilibili comments frequently include more extended argumentation and explicit reflections on comedy, feminism, and perceived male victimhood. Including Bilibili therefore allows the study to capture more elaborated oppositional responses as it functions as a male-majority user base with strong anti-feminist discourses

In contrast, as a female-dominated feminist support community, Xiaohongshu is also included as a supplementary platform. As a lifestyle-oriented platform with strong elements of personal storytelling, affective expression, and gendered self-narration, Xiaohongshu provides a different discursive environment with a more female-dominated user base and more supportive or reflective discussions of feminist experience. Posts and comments from Xiaohongshu are especially useful for analysing how Yang Li is constructed as a figure of feminist visibility, emotional recognition, and women's shared experience.

4.3 Data Collection Strategy

The data collection followed a purposive sampling strategy combined with maximum variation sampling. Purposive sampling is appropriate when the goal is to collect information-rich cases that directly relate to the research questions rather than to achieve statistical representativeness (Bryman, 2016). Maximum variation sampling further allows me to capture diverse positions in Yang Li's case, including supportive,

oppositional, and neutral responses.

Between late February and mid-March 2026, the search focused on online discussions related to Yang Li and the broader controversy surrounding the phrase “average yet confident men” (普信男, puxin nan). Keywords included: “Yang Li” (杨笠), “Yang Li average yet confident men” (杨笠 普信男), “Yang Li female boxing” (杨笠 女拳, a derogatory slang term for feminism), “Yang Li gender conflict” (杨笠 性别对立), and “Yang Li feminism” (杨笠 女权). These keywords were selected because they directly relate to the main controversy and to broader debates about feminism, gender conflict, and online backlash. Given the regulatory and platform-governed nature of Chinese social media, the data collected during this period is a result passing through layers of censorship, meaning that removed, hidden, or deprioritized posts could not be recorded.

Posts and comments were included when they met one or more of the following criteria. First, they explicitly discussed Yang Li, her stand-up comedy, or the phrase “average yet confident men”. Second, they engaged with gender norms, feminist claims, masculinity, misogyny, misandry, or gender conflict. Third, they contained interpretable discursive material, such as argumentation, emotional expression, humor, accusation, justification, or reflection. Content was excluded if it was purely promotional, unrelated to gender discourse, duplicated without meaningful commentary, or appeared to be generated by automated or spam accounts.

The final working dataset consists of 230 items of online discussions, including original posts, reposted comments, comment threads, and video comments. Figure 2 shows the

Platform	Material type	Current quantity
Weibo	original posts + comments+ reposted posts with additional commentary	35 posts, 135 comments
Bilibili	video comments	40 comments
Xiaohongshu	posts + comments	5 posts, 15 comments

Figure 2: Distribution of the collected data across the three platforms

distribution of the collected data across the three social media platforms. Each item was archived through textual records and screenshots in order to preserve its original context. For each item, I recorded the platform, content type, keyword used for search, publication date where available, link or screenshot, and a preliminary note on discursive orientation; all collected materials were compiled into a single Excel spreadsheet for organization and preliminary analysis.

4.4 Data Organization and NVivo Coding

After collection, the data were imported into NVivo for qualitative coding, which served to systematically store, organize, compare, and retrieve textual material. The coding process was iterative. In the first step, I conducted open coding to identify recurring themes, expressions, and argumentative patterns. This stage was data-driven and remained close to the original language of the posts and comments. For example, recurring expressions such as “对号入座” (taking it personally), “地图炮” (sweeping attack), “女拳” (a derogatory term for feminism), “破防” (emotional breakdown), “财富密码” (traffic/profit recipe) were noted as important discursive markers.

In the second stage, these initial codes were organized into broader NVivo nodes. Following Saldaña’s (2021) understanding of coding as a process of moving from raw data to analytic categories, the nodes in this study function as the first layer of analysis. They helped organize the dataset but do not constitute the final analytical interpretation by themselves. This distinction is important because the aim of the thesis is to interpret how these data inform broader discursive frames and affective formations.

The idea of “nodes” is also conceptually critical for this thesis. In studies of nodal governance, nodes are understood as relational points within a wider network of actors, institutions, and practices (Chen, 2024). Although this thesis does not apply nodal governance as its main theoretical framework, it borrows the idea that nodes are relational rather than isolated. Echoing this point, in this study, coding nodes represent recurring discursive positions that interact with one another. For example, accusations of misandry are often connected to claims about gender conflict, while feminist defenses of humor are often connected to critiques of patriarchal backlash. In this way,

the node structure reflects not only thematic categories but also relationships between competing interpretations.

More pertinently, feminist methodological literature stresses that qualitative data analysis should remain attentive to power, situated meanings, positionality, and silences in the data (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Peake and Koleth (2024) describe qualitative feminist analysis as a process of preparing, annotating, coding, grouping, and interpreting data in order to move from descriptive labels to broader meanings and insights. This particularly inform this thesis, inasmuch as online discussions of Yang Li do not only contain explicit arguments about feminism, but also reveal implicit assumptions about gender, masculinity, humor, legitimacy, and social order. Similarly, recent work on NVivo in feminist research describes the software as a flexible tool that can facilitate coding, memo-writing, annotation, and data exploration, while still requiring critical feminist reflection on how categories are created and used (Yousuf, 2024a; Yousuf, 2024b). In this sense, NVivo is used here as a practical tool for organizing nodes structure to conduct feminist discourse analysis.

Name	Files	References
Digital Feminism Debate around YangLi	1	531
Ambivalent and Reflexive Discourse	1	143
Conditional criticism of Yang Li's rhetoric	1	31
Contextualising comedy and performance	1	31
Distinguishing structural gender inequality from gender antagonism	1	20
Platform, market,and public controversy	1	33
Reflection on gender polarization	1	28
Anti-Feminist Oppositional Discourse	1	201
Accusations of misandry	1	36
Delegitimising feminist labels	1	51
Framing feminism as gender conflict	1	58
Moral and nationalist critique	1	23
Personal attacks and ridicule against feminist women	1	33
Feminist Supportive Discourse	1	187
Critique of anti-feminist backlash	1	54
Defence of feminist humour and satire	1	44
Exposing patriarchal privilege and everyday sexism	1	59
Solidarity with women and shared female experience	1	30

Figure 3: Nvivo nodes structure

Along the coding process, the debate developed into a broader struggle over how gendered speech should be interpreted: as feminist critique, as group-based insult, or as a performance that became distorted through platform circulation. Across the dataset, three main discursive positions emerged: Feminist Supportive Discourse, Anti-Feminist Oppositional Discourse, and Ambivalent and Reflexive Discourse (as shown

in Figure 3). The first category, Feminist Supportive Discourse, contains 187 coded references. It includes four secondary themes: Exposing patriarchal privilege and everyday sexism; Critique of anti-feminist backlash; Defense of feminist humor and satire; and Solidarity with women and shared female experience. These framings capture posts and comments that interpret Yang Li's comedy as a legitimate feminist critique, a form of women's shared recognition, or a counter-speech against long-standing gender inequality.

The second category, Anti-Feminist Oppositional Discourse, contains 201 coded references and is the largest first-level category in the coding structure. It includes five secondary codes: Accusations of misandry; Framing feminism as gender conflict; Delegitimizing feminist labels; Moral and nationalist critique; and Personal attacks and ridicule against feminist women. These codes capture comments that reject Yang Li's statements, portray feminism as excessive or socially harmful, or frame men as the injured subjects of feminist speech.

The third category, Ambivalent and Reflexive Discourse, contains 143 coded references. It includes five secondary codes: Conditional criticism of Yang Li's rhetoric; Contextualizing comedy and performance; Distinguishing structural gender inequality from gender antagonism; Platform, market, and public controversy; and Reflection on gender polarization. These nodes represent items that do not fit neatly into a supportive/oppositional binary, but instead reflect on comedy boundaries, platform circulation, public controversy, or the difficulty of discussing gender without reproducing polarization.

As shown in Figure 3, the full NVivo project contains 531 coded references under the overarching node "Digital Feminism Debate around Yang Li." It should be noted that these references do not equal the number of collected posts or comments, because many items were cross-coded when they contained more than one relevant discursive feature. For instance, a comment might criticize Yang Li's wording while also reflecting on how platform circulation transformed a comedy performance into a gender conflict. In such cases, the same item could be coded under both "conditional criticism of Yang Li's rhetoric" and "reflection on gender polarization." This approach preserves the complexity of online discourse and avoids forcing each comment into a single fixed

stance.

Furthermore, figure 4 below presents a visualization of the analytical nodes, in which the size of each block depends on how many coding references there are in this theme. For example, within Feminist Supportive Discourse, the treemap indicates that

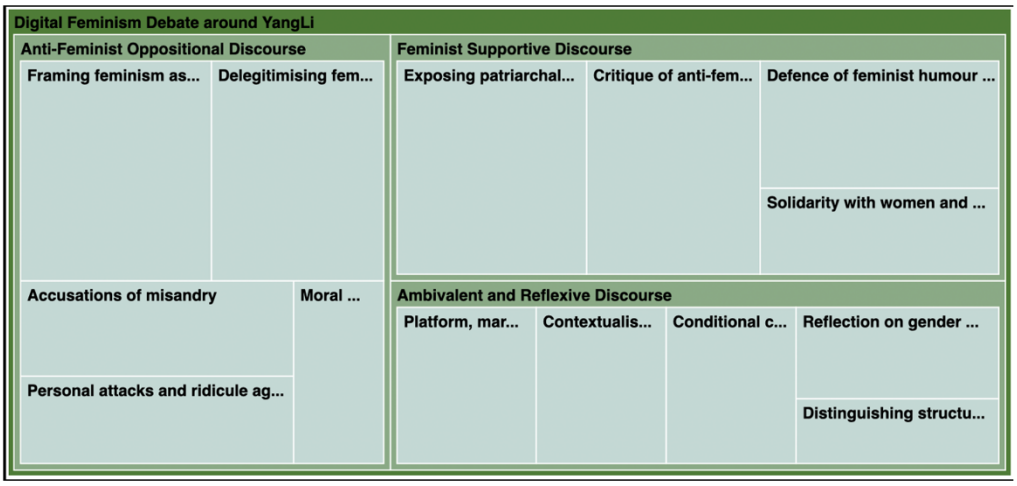

Figure 4: Visualization of the analytical themes

“exposing patriarchal privilege and everyday sexism” and “critique of anti-feminist backlash” are the most prominent third nodes in terms of coded references, followed by “defense of feminist humor and satire” and “solidarity with women and shared female experience” (refer to figure 3 for the full names of detailed nodes). In this way, the distribution helps show which aspects of supportive discourse became most analytically salient in the collected material. Therefore, the visualization here functions as a clear presentation of the coding process and shows how the empirical material was organized before deeper interpretation.

The relationship between coding and analysis is therefore layered. The first layer consists of descriptive and thematic nodes created in NVivo. The second layer identifies broader discursive frames, such as Yang Li speaking for women, Yang Li as misandrist attacker, or Yang Li triggering platformed controversy. The third layer interprets these frames through CDA and affective-discursive analysis, asking how language, power relations, and emotions shape the meaning of digital feminism.

4.5 Analytical Methods

4.5.1 Framing Analysis

Framing analysis is used to examine how different users define, interpret, and construct particular interpretations of Yang Li's statements. Entman (1993) defines framing as the selection and salience of certain aspects of reality in order to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation. This method is relevant for this thesis because the Yang Li controversy is fundamentally a struggle over interpretation: is her comedy a feminist critique, a personal insult, a joke, a commercial strategy, or an intended action for gender polarization?

In practical terms, framing analysis was applied after the first stage of coding. The NVivo nodes helped identify recurring interpretive patterns, which were then grouped into broader frames. Supportive users often framed Yang Li as articulating women's shared experiences and exposing patriarchal privilege, while oppositional users often framed her as attacking men, profiting from gender conflict, or promoting "extreme feminism." Also, ambivalent users frequently framed the controversy as platform amplification, or mutual polarization. These frames provide the main structure for the findings chapter later.

4.5.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

While framing analysis identifies interpretive patterns, it does not fully explain how these patterns are connected to power relations. Therefore, this study also employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to selectively examine how specific posts and comments condense wider ideological tensions. CDA comprehends discourse as both shaped by and productive of social power, inequality, and ideology (Fairclough, 2023; van Dijk, 1995). This is particularly pertinent to the Yang Li controversy as the debate is not only about whether a joke is funny; it is also about who has the authority to speak about gender, whose feelings are recognized as legitimate, and how feminist discourse is delegitimized in a platformed public sphere.

The analysis draws on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse. At the textual level, attention is paid to lexical choices, metaphors, evaluative language,

intensifiers, and argumentative strategies. For example, terms such as “女拳 (a derogatory term for feminism),” “极端女权 (extreme feminism),” “无差别攻击 (area of effect),” “分裂祖国 (undermine national unity),” and “被听见 (be heard)” are not neutral descriptors but carry ideological and emotional weight. At the level of discursive practice, the analysis considers how statements circulate across platforms through reposting, commenting, quotation, and decontextualization. At the level of social practice, the analysis relates these patterns to broader structures of gender inequality, platformized misogyny, state-market governance, and post-socialist gender antagonism in China.

4.5.3 Affective-Discursive Analysis

Following Wetherell (2012), affect is understood not as a purely internal or psychological state, but as a social practice that is performed, recognized, and organized through discourse. This perspective allows the analysis to focus on how emotions such as anger, resentment, humor, and moral outrage are embedded in language, interaction, and platformed communication. Papacharissi’s (2015) concept of affective publics further informs the analysis by highlighting how networked communication enables emotions to become connective forces that bind individuals into temporary publics. To illustrate this point, in the Yang Li case, for instance, supportive users often form affective publics through the sentiment of recognition, feminist awakening, and gratitude; while oppositional users form affective publics around resentment, masculine grievance, and moral outrage.

Empirically, affective-discursive analysis focuses on emotional cues such as sarcasm, ridicule, and emotionally charged labels. For example, expressions such as “破防 (emotionally triggered),” “急了(get agitated),” “被冒犯 (get offended),” “心疼 (sympathize with),” “终于被听见 (finally felt heard),” and “挑起对立 (provoke antagonism)” signal affective positioning. Analyzing these cues helps explain why the controversy became so polarizing and why Yang Li’s comedy functioned as both a source of feminist solace and a target of anti-feminist anger.

4.6 Ethical Considerations, Limitations and Reflexivity

This study relies on publicly available online content, but online users may not expect

their comments to be reproduced in academic research, particularly when the topic concerns feminism, anti-feminism, gender hostility, or politically sensitive discourse in China. Therefore, in the analysis part I anonymize all ordinary users by removing usernames, profile images, user IDs, and direct links. When quoting online content, I avoid including searchable combinations of text where possible. For highly sensitive or abusive comments, I quote only what is necessary for analysis or paraphrase the content to reduce the risk of amplifying harm.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. First, the dataset is based on purposive sampling rather than systematic scraping, so it cannot represent the overall distribution of public opinion about Yang Li's "average yet confident men" statement. Its purpose is to capture discursive richness and variation. Second, the dataset is shaped by platform visibility, algorithmic recommendation, search functions, deletion, moderation, and censorship. Posts that were removed, hidden, or deprioritized could not be systematically recovered. This is particularly important in the Chinese digital context, where platform governance and political sensitivity can influence which feminist or anti-feminist voices remain visible. Third, although Weibo, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu allow for platform variation, due to the limited space, this study does not provide a comprehensive comparison of all Chinese digital platforms. Finally, all online comments were originally in Chinese. As it is my native language, translations are my own. However, key Chinese terms are retained where their affective or cultural meanings are difficult to fully capture in English.

Finally, the analysis is interpretive and therefore requires reflexivity. My academic interest in gender politics and digital feminism may shape how I interpret the data. To reduce overly subjective interpretation, I included supportive, oppositional, and ambivalent materials, used cross-coding where necessary, and repeatedly returned to the original texts and platform contexts to verify judgement.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSES

5.1 Overview of the Coding

The NVivo coding results provide an overview of the main discursive positions that structured the Yang Li controversy in the collected material. Overall, the distribution suggests that the controversy cannot be understood as a simple division between support and opposition. While oppositional and supportive responses form the two most visible poles, the presence of ambivalent and reflexive comments shows that many users also negotiated the controversy through uncertainty and reflection. The following sections therefore examine how Yang Li's statement was framed, contested, and affectively positioned across these three discursive categories.

5.2 Supportive Discourse

This section analyzes how supportive users interpreted Yang Li's comedy as a site of feminist meaning-making. Across the dataset, support for Yang Li repeatedly framed her performance as making women's everyday frustrations heard, legitimizing feminist humor, and revealing the patriarchal defensiveness that emerges when women publicly challenge gender norms.

5.2.1 "She said what women could not say": Yang Li speaking for women

A central pattern in supportive discourse is the framing of Yang Li as a voice for women. In these comments, Yang Li is not mainly valued because she is "funny" in a narrow comedic sense, but because she is seen as articulating feelings that many women have long experienced but have been unable or unwilling to express publicly. This framing transforms her stand-up comedy from entertainment into a form of feminist recognition.

One supportive post describes Yang Li as "所有被压抑的女性的出口" ("an outlet for all suppressed women") and states that "不能说的东西变得能说了" ("things that could not be said became sayable"). These metaphors are analytically meaningful. The word "出口" ("outlet") constructs women's experiences as something accumulated, pressured, and blocked; Yang Li's comedy becomes the channel through which these suppressed emotions can flow into public space. Similarly, the phrase "became sayable" suggests that the controversy has exceeded the realm of joke, concerning the boundary

of permissible female speech. What Yang Li represents here is not simply an individual opinion, but the possibility of making gendered discomfort audible.

This meaning is also visible in another post from Xiaohongshu, where a user states that women are often treated as "第二性" ("the second sex"). The post explains that when women express opinions seriously, they may be accused of arguing; when they voice feelings, they may be called sensitive; when they appear slightly forceful, they are easily labelled negatively. The comment does not focus on one specific Yang Li joke. Instead, it uses Yang Li's words as an entry point to describe a wider pattern of gendered silencing. In this sense, Yang Li's significance lies in her insistence on expression: "就算不被重视，也照样要表达" ("even if one is not taken seriously, one should still express"). The focus shifts from whether Yang Li's joke was polite to whether women are allowed to speak from their own experiences without being immediately disciplined.

Digital feminism in China often operates through mediated visibility, where personal feelings and everyday experiences become public resources for targeting gender inequality (Xu and Liu, 2025; Yin and Sun, 2021; Ling and Liao, 2020). Unlike institutional feminism, which usually relies on organized advocacy or policy language, platform-mediated feminism frequently emerges through personal narratives, emotional resonance, and the circulation of short, memorable phrases (Clark 2016; Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019). Yang Li's "ordinary yet confident" punchline functions in this way: it condenses a recognizable gendered experience into a shareable comedic formula. Supportive users then extend this formula by connecting it to broader experiences of being interrupted, judged, dismissed, or mocked.

Also, the affective dimension of this discourse is equally important. Several comments express not only agreement but also gratitude, sadness, and emotional identification. One comment states that it was precisely because Yang Li's "这么温和的发言" ("such a mild statement") was treated as if she were "十恶不赦的罪人" ("an unforgivable criminal") that many women came to understand their real situation. Here, backlash itself becomes a pedagogical moment. The user suggests that Yang Li's importance lies not only in what she said, but in what the reaction to her revealed. The comment implies that women's awareness is intensified when they witness the disproportionate

punishment of a woman who speaks in a relatively mild form.

This affective process can be further understood through Wetherell's (2012) concept of affective-discursive practice, where emotion is not simply private feeling but socially organized through language and interaction. The supportive comments repeatedly attach emotions such as sadness, recognition, and solidarity to Yang Li as a figure. Similarly, Ahmed (2014) argues that emotions help form boundaries between subjects and collectives; in this case, shared recognition of Yang Li's treatment helps produce a sense of "we" among women who feel similarly silenced. One comment makes this explicit by stating that Yang Li's positive effect was to make many women realize that they had been oppressed and to help women become more united. The supportive discourse therefore constructs Yang Li as a node of affective feminist identification: through her, women recognize a shared condition of being dismissed and oppressed in a long time.

At the level of framing, Yang Li is therefore constructed as feminist visibility. At the level of critical discourse analysis, key metaphors build a collective feminist subject around shared silencing and expression. At the affective level, the comments are structured by shared emotion to foster female solidarity. The significance of this pattern is that the supportive strand interprets comedy as a medium through which everyday gender inequality becomes visible and emotionally communicable.

5.2.2 Humor as counter-speech: defending feminist satire and offensive comedy

A second pattern in supportive discourse is the defense of Yang Li's humor as feminist counter-speech. In this frame, her jokes are treated as ironic reversals of long-standing gendered humor. Supporters repeatedly argue that men have historically been allowed to joke about women's appearance, emotionality, driving, marriageability, and sexuality, while women's reverse critique is quickly condemned as "gender conflict." This framing shifts the question from whether Yang Li offended men to why male offence is given more public legitimacy than women's accumulated experiences of being mocked.

One comment from Bilibili makes this asymmetry explicit: “男演员可以毫不顾忌地大开侮辱性女性玩笑，而女人绝不能以牙还牙” (“male performers can freely make insulting jokes about women, while women are not allowed to fight back in the same way”). The phrase “以牙还牙” (“tooth for tooth”) is important because it frames Yang Li’s humor as a response to a pre-existing discursive inequality rather than an original act of hostility. Similarly, the immediately following comment under the same post asks readers to confront the sexist jokes embedded in traditional comic arts, drinking-table sexual jokes, and the everyday “男性的逼视和冒犯” (“men’s gaze and offence”). From this perspective, women’s laughter at Yang Li has developed into a limited form of self-protection and release within a culture where women are frequently positioned as objects of humor.

This finding resonates with scholarship on feminist humor and popular feminism. Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that while popular feminism circulates through media visibility and affective recognition, it becomes vulnerable to backlash when feminist claims enter popular culture. In the Chinese context, female stand-up comedy is especially ambivalent: it can open space for women’s gendered complaints, yet such complaints are often expected to remain soft, marketable, and non-threatening (Xu and Liu, 2025). Supporters in this dataset resist that expectation by defending Yang Li’s right to be sharp, ironic, and offensive.

Another comment further supports this reading by interpreting the “ordinary yet confident” joke as structured irony rather than a simple insult. The user suggests that Yang Li reverses a familiar heterosexual script – “he bullies you because he likes you” – and applies it back to men, thereby exposing the absurdity of a logic that often translates male disrespect into romantic interest. This reversal is powerfully substantiated by recent studies of Chinese women’s stand-up comedy. Zhang and Zhou (2023) argue that Chinese comediennes use satire to challenge a male-dominated comic discourse, while Meng and Literat (2024) show how the phrase “average yet confident men” became a platformed feminist resource through which users discussed everyday sexism. Li and Guo’s (2025) concept of online feminist stand-up comedy as an “affective-discursive intervention” further helps explain why the joke generated both recognition and backlash: it did not merely express an opinion, but reorganized the

emotional and discursive terms through which gendered evaluation could be publicly discussed.

5.2.3 Resisting misogynistic backlash: rejecting male anger and patriarchal privilege

A third major pattern is the interpretation of backlash itself as evidence of patriarchal defensiveness. In this frame, accusation from outraged male netizens that Yang Li created gender conflict proves that her comedy touched an existing gender hierarchy. Supporters therefore reverse the accusation commonly directed at Yang Li: the problem is not that she spoke too sharply, but that many men could not tolerate women "talking back."

One argumentative post from Weibo captures this logic directly. It argues that men's anger is less about the phrase "average yet confident" itself than about the fear that "你竟然敢还嘴" ("you actually dare to talk back"). The phrase "还嘴" is analytically symbolic as it positions women's speech as a response to a long-standing hierarchy in which men have been able to judge, joke, and define, while women are expected to endure silently. Here, Yang Li's offence lies beyond what she says, focusing more on her speaking position: a woman on a public stage using humor to evaluate men.

This interpretation corresponds to Manne's (2017) understanding of misogyny as a policing mechanism that punishes women who fail to perform expected deference or compliance. In Yang Li's case, supporters suggest that the backlash intends to discipline women's critical speech by reframing it as hatred, irrationality, or social disruption. Echoing Huang's (2023) analysis of anti-feminist discourse on Chinese social media, feminism is often demonized and depoliticized by being cast as extreme, divisive, or morally deviant.

This "backlash as evidence" logic also appears in another comment from Xiaohongshu, where a user explains that they initially thought Yang Li was criticizing only a small number of men, but after seeing the scale of online violence against her, they realized the issue might be much broader. In affective terms, backlash becomes a moment of feminist awakening. The emotional force of anger, shock, and recognition transforms Yang Li from a comedian into a symbolic object through which women interpret their

own social position. This pattern can be understood through Ahmed's (2013) argument that emotions circulate socially and attach themselves to bodies and figures, forming boundaries between "us" and "them."

The supportive discourse therefore treats male anger as diagnostic. Terms such as "破防" ("defensive breakdown"), "被说中" ("being hit by the truth"), and "还嘴" ("talking back") frame backlash as revealing exposure of patriarchal sensitivity. This aligns with Banet-Weiser and Miltner's (2016) concept of networked misogyny, where feminist visibility often generates intensified digital hostility. Yet in this dataset, such hostility does not silence; rather, it confirms, for supporters, why feminist speech remains necessary. Thus, Yang Li's controversy becomes a site where backlash both attacks feminist expression and strengthens feminist recognition.

5.3 Oppositional Discourse

This section explores how oppositional users contested Yang Li's comedy by questioning the legitimacy of the feminist meanings attached to it. Across the dataset, criticisms of Yang Li extended beyond questions of comedic quality, as oppositional users prominently reframed her remarks as misandry, gender antagonism, emotional manipulation, market opportunism, or ideological threat.

5.3.1 Humor as mockery: accusations of misandry

The first major oppositional frame interprets Yang Li's humor not as satire, but as mockery directed at men as a group. In this discourse, the problem is not primarily whether her comedy is well written, but whether phrases such as "men" or "average yet confident" turn humor into collective ridicule. The joke is therefore reframed as an AOE (Area of Effect, 无差别攻击) attack: rather than criticizing a specific type of male behavior, Yang Li is accused of targeting all men indiscriminately. In this way, oppositional users shift the meaning of her performance from joke to group insult, transforming Yang Li from a comedian into an aggressor and constructing male audiences as unfairly injured subjects.

One representative comment under a post from Weibo makes this injury explicit. The user asks why, as "一个普通男生" ("an ordinary man"), he should be mocked by an

unrelated person. The phrase “我没招谁惹谁” (“I did not provoke anyone”) is symbolic and emotionally charged as it constructs male grievance through innocence: the speaker does not directly deny the existence of arrogant men, but objects to being included in a generalized category. Similarly, another comment frames the controversial phrase “男的垃圾” (“men are garbage”) as “AOE 全体男性” (“an area-of-effect attack on all men”). Gaming terms such as “AOE” and colloquial phrases such as “地图炮” (“sweeping attack”) are frequently used in this discourse to delegitimize feminist humor as indiscriminate collective violence.

This framing is closely connected to what Hu et al. (2021) describe in their analysis of the “Yang Li event” as male netizens’ sense of humiliation and self-cognitive crisis. Yang Li’s joke becomes threatening not simply because it criticizes certain men, but because it questions and challenges the assumed neutrality of ordinary masculinity. Oppositional comments therefore shift the focus from women’s experience of sexism to men’s experience of being attacked or humiliated. The figure of the “ordinary man” becomes a moral subject who seeks recognition as innocent, hardworking, and undeserving of ridicule.

At the discourse level, this frame relies heavily on universalizing language. Users repeatedly highlight the absence of qualifiers such as “some men,” arguing that Yang Li’s wording implicates all men. This strategy resembles what Ling and Liao (2020) identify in debates around #MeToo as the use of rhetorical moves to challenge feminist claims by redirecting attention from structural inequality to the alleged unfairness of the feminist form itself. In the Yang Li case, the question becomes less “what gendered experience does the joke reveal?” and more “who has been unfairly accused?”

From the affective view, this discourse is organized around injury, humiliation, and resentment. The recurring claim of being “被冒犯” (“offended”) constructs offence as a legitimate ground for resistance and boycott. The accusation of misandry therefore functions as more than a dissatisfaction about a comedic performance; it is a boundary-making device that redefines incisive feminist satire as unacceptable harm.

5.3.2 “Feminism creating gender conflicts”: anti-gender attacks

A second oppositional frame constructs Yang Li’s statement as evidence that feminism is “creating gender conflicts.” It links Yang Li to “女拳” (a derogatory term for feminism), “性别对立” (“gender conflict”), and broader social division. These anti-gender attacks do not merely express individual offence; they challenge the legitimacy of feminist critique by portraying feminism itself as the source of antagonism between women and men. Here, feminism is constructed as a dangerous ideology that turns gender equality into gender opposition.

One oppositional comment from Bilibili illustrates this distinction through the phrase “真正女权” (“real feminism”). The user argues that feminism should rely on women’s strength and competence, rather than “攻击男性，贬低男性” (“attacking and belittling men”). This move creates a binary between acceptable feminism and extreme feminism. The former is defined as self-improvement and equal competition; the latter is associated with resentment, complaint, and hostility. Such a distinction enables the speaker to reject Yang Li while still claiming support for gender equality.

This pattern corresponds to Huang’s (2023) analysis of anti-feminist discourse on Chinese social media, where feminism is demonized and depoliticized through strategies that represent feminists as deviant, excessive, or socially harmful. It is also bolstered by Wang and Chang’s (2023) argument that some anti-feminist discourse gains legitimacy by presenting itself not as misogyny, but as criticism of feminism’s alleged extremism, moralism, or online performativity. In my dataset, this is especially tangible in comments that claim to support “real equality” while framing Yang Li and her supporters as irrational or divisive.

Furthermore, this anti-gender logic extends into intimate life. Some comments claim that women who like Yang Li are “不适合作为伴侣” (“unsuitable as partners”) because they allegedly treat men as enemies. Here, feminist affiliation becomes a signal of relational danger; a woman’s support for Yang Li is treated as evidence of emotional abnormality and incapacity for heterosexual intimacy. This move personalizes and moralizes anti-feminism: feminists are denied the right to love and be loved.

Linguistically, terms such as “女拳” (a derogatory term for feminism), “打拳”

(“boxing,” used derogatorily to mean engaging in feminist confrontation), “极端女权” (“extreme feminism”) “原罪” (original sin) and “对立” (antagonism) condense feminism into aggression. They perform what Christiansen and Høyer (2015) call anti-feminist discursive boundary-making, where feminism is redefined as unreasonable excess rather than a critique of inequality. Affectively, this frame is driven by fear and disgust: fear that gender relations are becoming hostile, and disgust toward women who are perceived as politicizing intimacy. In this way, Yang Li becomes a symbolically charged figure through whom feminism is reframed as social harmony killer, endangering intimate relationship, marriage, and reproduction.

5.3.3 “Commercialization” of Yang Li: Profit, traffic, and authenticity

Significantly, a third oppositional frame delegitimizes Yang Li by portraying her feminist expression as a commercializing strategy. Her comedy is described as “财富密码” (“a formula for wealth”), “恰烂钱” (“making dirty money”), “流量” (“online traffic”), or “情绪生意” (“emotional business”). These terms reframe feminist speech as opportunistic performance.

One comment from Weibo claims that Chinese feminism are not real feminists but people who “骗钱” (“cheat money”) and run an “情绪生意” (“emotional business”). Similarly, another comment from Bilibili argues that Yang Li knowingly caters to women’s pleasure in mocking men and profits from it. The accusation here is not only that Yang Li attacks men, but that she exploits women. Feminist recognition is therefore reinterpreted as emotional consumption: women are seen as consumers whose dissatisfaction can be monetized.

Appropriating the language of anti-capitalist criticism, this frame presents itself as a critique of commodification and platform traffic. This resonates with Banet-Weiser’s (2018) argument that popular feminism is always entangled with media visibility and market logics, making it vulnerable to accusations of commercialization. However, oppositional users use this entanglement to dismiss the feminist content itself. The fact that feminist expression circulates through entertainment and platforms is treated as evidence that it is not genuine. For example, a Bilibili user describes Yang Li as “收割女性心理高潮” (“harvesting women’s psychological climax”) and argues that gender

issues are profitable because “最后有人买单” (“someone will pay in the end”). The metaphor of “harvesting” constructs Yang Li as a manipulator extracting value from women’s emotions. In CDA terms, this metaphor shifts agency away from women’s interpretation and toward Yang Li’s alleged calculation. In this sense, women’s reaction to Yang Li’s statement is no longer a response to lived inequality, but a resource to be exploited. To illustrate this point more deeply, in Liao’s (2024) concept of the platformization of misogyny in China’s state-market nexus, platformed controversy rewards affectively intense content, while gender conflict can be converted into visibility and commercial value. Yet in oppositional discourse, this platform logic is usually attributed only to feminist speech. While Yang Li’s comedy is criticized as traffic-seeking or commercially motivated, anti-gender outrage is presented as a legitimate moral response rather than as another form of affective platform participation.

5.3.4 Patriotic backlash: ideology, morality and populism

The final oppositional frame politicizes feminism as patriotic backlash, where criticism of Yang Li is articulated through ideology, morality, and populist claims about social order. Unlike the previous frames, this discourse escalates feminism within narratives of foreign infiltration, social decay, family breakdown, and national insecurity. Yang Li’s controversy becomes part of a larger imagined struggle over the protection of the nation, family, and moral community.

As demonstrated by Liu’s (2024) discussion of how Chinese feminists can be misidentified as traitors through nationalist disinformation, an original post from Weibo serves as a clear example of this patriotic-populist framing. It describes feminism as part of “西方颜色革命、和平演变” (“Western colour revolution and peaceful evolution”) and calls it “一剂最为下三滥的毒药” (“a most despicable poison”). The comment links feminism to the destruction of social consensus in the West, South Korea, and Japan, and claims that feminist discourse damages romance, marriage, fertility, and national cohesion, becoming an ideological weapon aimed at splitting society. This discourse also relates to Huang’s (2023) work on populist and misogynist nationalism, where feminist women are targeted as morally corrupt, unpatriotic, or socially dangerous. In my dataset, similar rhetoric appears when feminism is associated with “反华” (“anti-China”), overseas forces, or social collapse. Such language transforms

opposition to Yang Li into a patriotic defence of national stability, family values, and moral normality.

Based on Ling and Liao's (2020) analysis of the #MeToo debate, feminist activism in China can be delegitimized through analogies to social disorder. Affectively, this discourse is marked by moral panic and nationalist anxiety. Words such as "毒药" ("poison"), "撕裂" ("tearing apart"), "灾难性" ("disastrous"), and "社会解体" ("social disintegration") create a crisis narrative in which feminism threatens the survival of family and nation. This illustrates how the populist dimension becomes visible: feminism is positioned as an external or elite-driven danger, while "ordinary people," "men," "families," and "the nation" are constructed as the collective victims needing protection. In this frame, Yang Li becomes less important as an individual comedian and more important as a sign of an allegedly foreign, disruptive, and anti-social ideology.

Together, these four oppositional frames show how Yang Li and feminism are delegitimized through multiple but connected strategies: misandry accusations, the construction of feminism as gender conflict, suspicion of emotional commercialization, and patriotic-populist moral panic. These strategies shift attention away from the gendered experiences that Yang Li's supporters emphasize and instead recenter men, social order, market authenticity, and national stability as the objects purportedly subverted by feminist speech.

5.4 Ambivalent and Reflexive Discourse

This section analyses comments that do not fit neatly into either supportive or oppositional discourse. Taking a relatively neutral stance of Yang Li's statements, these users reflect on the boundary between satire and harm, the transformation of comedy through platform circulation, and the distinction between structural gender inequality and mutual antagonism.

5.4.1 Comedy boundary: when does satire become harm?

A central concern in ambivalent discourse is the boundary of comedy. These comments often accept that stand-up comedy involves offence, exaggeration, and social critique,

but question who can be legitimately offended and under what conditions. For example, one comment from Weibo illustrates this concern by arguing that “脱口秀是冒犯的艺术” (“stand-up comedy is the art of offence”), but that the object of offence matters. The user compares Yang Li’s case with crosstalk, where performers offend each other as paid participants or invited guests. By contrast, Yang Li is said to have offended “观众” (“the audience”) and “所有男性” (“all men”). The key distinction here is that the target has entered a shared performance contract. The comment therefore reframes the controversy as a problem of audience positioning: if male viewers become the object rather than the addressee of the joke, they may feel that comedy has turned into collective accusation.

Similarly, another comment distinguishes “调侃” (“teasing”) from “冒犯” (“offence”). It argues that good comedy should begin from self-mockery or shared social experience, rather than from direct humiliation of others. By comparison, a female user makes an interesting point: gendered jokes can be sharp and thought-provoking, but turning men and women into opposing camps risks becoming “引战” (“provocation of conflict”). In this sense, humor has become a contested cultural field (Billig, 2005; Kuipers, 2008). Krefting (2014) argues that socially charged humor often exposes inequalities, but its reception depends on audience position, context, and perceived legitimacy of the speaker. In the Chinese context, Xu and Liu (2025) note that female stand-up comedians often voice gendered dissatisfaction through “female complaint,” yet this form is constrained by expectations that women’s humor should remain soft, safe, and commercially acceptable. Ambivalent comments in this dataset reveal exactly this tension: they acknowledge the social function of feminist humor but remain uncertain about its rhetorical limits.

Affectively, these comments are marked more by discomfort than outright hostility. Their vocabulary such as “好笑不好笑” (“whether it is funny”) indicates hesitation and evaluative judgement. The result is a discourse that treats comedy as a negotiated space where feminist critique, audience vulnerability, and performance ethics are constantly contested.

5.4.2 From performance to platform controversy: circulation, amplification, and out-of-context meaning-making

A second ambivalent pattern focuses on the transformation of Yang Li's comedy after it left its original performance context. These comments suggest that the controversy cannot be fully understood by analyzing the joke alone. Instead, platform circulation, reposting, commercial campaigns, comment wars, and hot-search dynamics are always entangled, turning a stand-up performance into a wider symbolic conflict.

One comment from Bilibili "台下永远比台上精彩" ("what happens offstage is always more dramatic than what happens onstage") directly displays this point. The phrase "泛化和出圈化，已经脱离了段子的范畴" ("generalization and out-of-circle circulation have already moved beyond the scope of the joke") is particularly pertinent. It suggests that Yang Li's words became detached from their comedic form and reassembled as political evidence, commercial controversy, or gendered weapon.

Here, the platform is not a neutral channel but a conflict-generating environment. Another user further describes Yang Li as being pulled between anti-feminist communities, feminist circles, capital, and commercial calculation. Although the comment is speculative, it captures an important fact: Yang Li's public meaning is co-produced by platform publics, brands, commercial risk, and gendered audience blocs.

This finding powerfully corroborates a few platform studies. Poell, Nieborg and Van Dijck (2019) argue that platforms shape visibility and social interaction through algorithmic selection, datafication, and monetization. Gillespie (2018) similarly maintains that platforms present themselves as neutral intermediaries while actively structuring public discourse through moderation and ranking. In the Chinese context, Liao's (2024) concept of the platformization of misogyny is especially relevant: gendered antagonism is amplified within a state-market nexus where controversy can generate visibility and value, while feminist expression remains unevenly silenced.

Ambivalent discourse therefore highlights a process of meaning transformation. The joke becomes a clip; the clip becomes a quote; the quote becomes a label; the label becomes a weapon in wider gender conflict. This also echoes Ling and Liao's (2020)

discussion of digital feminist debate as discursive politics, where online texts, narratives, and interpretations shape how social issues are understood. However, in Yang Li's case, this discursive politics is not only emancipatory; it is further shaped by platform incentives that reward affective intensity and polarization.

5.4.3 Between structural inequality and mutual antagonism

The most analytically important ambivalent comments are those that attempt to distinguish structural gender inequality from mutual gender antagonism. These users often acknowledge that women's disadvantaged position is real, but remain cautious about "以牙还牙" ("an eye for an eye") or the use of gendered labels that expand from critique of specific behavior to condemnation of an entire group.

One comment captures this position clearly. The user states that women's historically lower status is an objective fact, but asks whether correcting this injustice must rely on retaliation. For this user, "倡导平权" ("advocating equality") is more meaningful than "你一拳我一拳" ("you punch me, I punch you"). Alike, another user appreciates Yang Li's comedy because it reflects "一类普遍现象" ("a type of common phenomenon"), but also stresses that it does not mean all men are bad. Also, someone further reflects on the danger of using a small negative subset of one gender to represent the whole group, asking why labels such as "下头男" (literally "off-putting men) or "捞女"(often translated as "gold-digging women) have become so easily attached to people. These comments do not deny gender inequality; they try to distinguish feminist critique from retaliatory antagonism. In other words, the users are concerned about whether revenge-based discourse may reproduce the very logic of hostility it seeks to challenge.

This pattern speaks directly to Wu and Dong's (2019) concept of made-in-China feminism(s), which emphasizes that contemporary Chinese feminist antagonisms emerge from deeply rooted post-socialist gender inequality and class hierarchy. What appears as "men versus women" may therefore reflect unresolved struggles over labor, intimacy, consumption, family obligation, and recognition. At the same time, this complexity is often flattened in digital spaces. Wang and Chang (2023) contends that Chinese digital feminism faces structural limitations when platform dynamics encourage simplified and polarized framings. The ambivalent comments in this dataset

reveal an awareness of this tension: they acknowledge that gender inequality is real, while also suggesting that platformed gender antagonism may distort digital feminism into mutual resentment.

6. DISCUSSION

Based on the Findings and Analysis section, it can be argued that Yang Li's comedy became meaningful as it condensed everyday gender frustrations into a popular cultural form that many women could recognize. Yet the same visibility also made her a target of anti-gender hostility, moral suspicion, and nationalist delegitimization. To dive more deeply and summarize, this chapter discusses what these findings suggest about the broader dynamics of digital feminism in 2020s China.

6.1 Digital Feminism as Visibility and Vulnerability

The first major implication of the findings is that digital feminism in China operates through a paradox of visibility and vulnerability. Supportive comments repeatedly interpreted Yang Li as a figure who made women's suppressed feelings audible. Phrases such as "being seen," "outlet," "talking back," and "holding an umbrella for others" show that many users treat Yang Li's comedy as a cultural moment through which women's ordinary frustrations with male entitlement, gendered confidence, and everyday sexism became publicly visible.

In reality, feminist expression often takes shape through personal storytelling, affective recognition, and mediated visibility rather than formal organization (Yin and Sun, 2021; Ling and Liao, 2020). In a further constrained political environment , such as China, feminist speech often enters public discussion through cultural and personal forms: anecdotes, celebrity controversies, screenshots, hashtags, and emotional narratives can become indirect vehicles through which gendered grievances are articulated, circulated, and contested (Chang, 2025; Mao, 2020). Yang Li's stand-up comedy fits this pattern. It did not present itself as a formal feminist manifesto, yet it provided a language through which many women could interpret their own gendered experiences.

At the same time, this visibility is fragile. Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of popular

feminism is pivotal here as illustrated before. Popular feminism can bring feminist ideas to wider audiences, but it can also be commercialized, simplified, and attacked. Yang Li's case attests to this ambivalence clearly. Her comedy became widely visible inasmuch as it was short, sharp, humorous, and easily circulated. However, these same qualities also made it vulnerable to decontextualization. "Ordinary yet confident" became detached from its performance context and reinterpreted by opponents as evidence of misandry, gender hatred, or emotional manipulation.

Therefore, Yang Li's case suggests that digital feminism in China often becomes publicly audible only in forms that are affectively powerful but politically precarious. Women's experiences may become visible, but this visibility does not guarantee legitimacy. On the contrary, the more visible feminist speech becomes, the more likely it is to attract hostile reinterpretation, ridicule, and reputational discipline.

6.2 Networked Misogyny and Anti-gender Sphere

The second implication concerns the organized nature of anti-gender discourse. The oppositional comments analyzed in Chapter 5 show that backlash against Yang Li formed a patterned counter-discourse that delegitimized both Yang Li and feminism through several recurring strategies: accusations of misandry, framing feminism as gender conflict, portraying feminist expression as profit-seeking, and associating feminism with moral or nationalist threat. This supports Banet-Weiser and Miltner's (2016) concept of networked misogyny, which understands misogyny as culturally embedded and amplified through digital networks rather than as isolated individual prejudice. In this thesis, I use the term anti-gender sphere to describe the networked discursive space in which anti-feminist, moral, nationalist, and platform-amplified claims converge around the idea that feminism itself produces gender disorder. In the Yang Li case, misogyny did not always appear as direct hatred of women. It often appeared as defence of "ordinary men," concern about social harmony, critique of commercial traffic, or suspicion toward "extreme feminism". This is precisely why the anti-gender sphere becomes powerful: it allows hostility toward feminist critique to present itself as reasonable, protective, and morally corrective.

This finding also needs to be read through Wu and Dong's (2026) discussion of the changing terrain of made-in-China feminism. They show that contemporary anti-

feminist backlash increasingly names more visible and combative feminist expressions as “radical”, while broader anxieties about economic stagnation, marriage markets, fertility decline, and social reproduction are displaced onto feminist subjects. In this sense, the accusation of radicalism is itself part of the Yang Li controversy: it is a way of making feminist critique knowable as danger, excess, or social crisis. This echoes Wu and Dong’s warning against reducing feminist expression to a symptom of neoliberal individualism or a cause of social breakdown. The more useful question is not whether Yang Li’s statement produced gender conflict, but what social contradictions were resurfacing and being reorganized through the language of gender conflict.

The nationalist and moralized strand of opposition is especially important here. This reflects what Liu (2024) identifies as the misidentification of feminists as traitors in Chinese cyberspace. Yang Li’s comedy thus becomes absorbed into a wider ideological field in which feminist speech can be reclassified as anti-social, anti-family, or even anti-national. At a deeper level, Wu and Dong (2026) further note that official and popular vocabularies such as “gender wars” or “men-women antagonism” can obscure the structural asymmetries behind feminist struggle by presenting the issue as mutual hostility requiring reconciliation. This is crucial for understanding the Yang Li controversy, because the backlash against her did not simply reject a particular joke; it reframed women’s critique of patriarchal privilege as one side of a supposedly equal gender war, despite of the persistent subordinated position of women in the society. Once the controversy is understood in this way, feminist speech is no longer understood as a response to structural inequality, but as an excessive contribution to social antagonism. The struggle over digital feminism is therefore also a struggle over interpretive authority: who can define the meaning of feminist critique, whether women’s anger or satire can be recognized as politically legitimate, and under what labels such speech becomes publicly intelligible.

6.3 Platformized Gender Conflict and the Conditional Visibility of Feminism

The Yang Li controversy also suggests that platformization is part of the condition that determines what forms of feminist speech become visible, profitable, risky, or governable. The key issue is therefore that interpretation of Yang Li’s statements was reshaped by a platform environment in which visibility is closely tied to affective

intensity, commercial value, and regulatory risk.

This has important implications for understanding digital feminism in China. Feminist speech becomes more visible when it can be condensed into easily circulated forms: a punchline, a label, a quote, or a controversy. Such forms allow feminist critique to travel beyond activist circles and enter popular culture. However, this same process also narrows the terms on which feminism can be understood. In this sense, platform visibility is not simply empowering. It is conditional: feminism becomes visible most readily when it is fragmentable, emotionally intense, and commercially or morally contestable.

This helps refine Liao's (2024) concept of the platformization of misogyny. In the Yang Li case, misogyny is not only platformized through the amplification of hostile comments. More broadly, the platform environment produces an asymmetrical field of interpretation. Anti-feminist outrage can circulate as humor, consumer dissatisfaction, male grievance, or defense of social order, while feminist critique is more easily reframed as extremism, emotional manipulation, or traffic-seeking. And this perfectly explain why several users mention that many comments disappear under their own posts. The problem, then, complicates the optimistic view of digital feminist visibility. while Ling and Liao (2020) argue that online discursive struggles can create alternative feminist interpretations and challenge dominant gender myths in relation to #MeToo in China, the Yang Li's case demonstrates its fragility in popular-cultural controversies. Unlike more explicitly activist discourse, comedy enters the public sphere as entertainment, which makes it both more accessible and more easily downplayed. Feminist meaning can be produced through humor, but it can also be denied on the grounds that it is "just traffic-seeking," "just a joke," or "not real feminism."

Therefore, the platform does not merely host the controversy; it reorganizes the conditions under which feminist expression can be recognized as legitimate. This is why a stand-up joke could become a brand crisis, a target of mass reporting, and a debate over national morality. The case demonstrates that digital feminism in China has been at a level where platform mechanism embedded with attention economies produces uneven distribution of discursive legitimacy.

7. CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to explore new dimensions of digital feminism in 2020s China through a case study of the Yang Li controversy, focusing particularly on her widely circulated punchline “average yet confident men.” The thesis has examined it as a discursive, affective, and platform-mediated struggle over the legitimacy of feminist speech in contemporary China. By analyzing supportive, oppositional, and ambivalent responses across Weibo, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu, the study has shown how Yang Li’s comedy became a symbolic site where broader tensions around feminist visibility, patriarchal backlash, platform circulation, and gender polarization were articulated.

In relation to the main research question, the Yang Li case reflects the dynamics of digital feminism in 2020s China in three interconnected ways. First, it shows that digital feminism often becomes visible through popular cultural forms rather than formal political activism. Yang Li’s stand-up comedy did not present itself as an explicit feminist manifesto, but her phrase condensed a recognizable gendered experience into a short, humorous, and highly shareable expression. For many supporters, this made everyday sexism and male entitlement easier to name, recognize, and discuss. In this sense, the controversy demonstrates how digital feminism can get momentum through affective recognition, personal resonance, and popular media circulation.

Second, the case shows that feminist visibility is inseparable from vulnerability. The more Yang Li’s statement circulated, the more it was detached from its original comedic context and reinterpreted by opponents as misandry, gender antagonism, emotional manipulation, or even moral and nationalist threat. This finding answers the first and second sub-questions by showing that supporters tended to defend Yang Li through frames of feminist recognition, humor as counter-speech, and backlash as evidence of patriarchal defensiveness. Opponents, by contrast, delegitimized her through accusations of “attacking all men,” framing feminism as “gender conflict,” questioning the authenticity of feminist expression, and associating feminism with social disorder. These responses were structured discursive strategies through which users negotiated who has the right to speak about gender, whose emotions are treated as legitimate, and what forms of feminist critique are publicly acceptable.

Third, the case reveals that digital feminism in China is strongly shaped by platform conditions. Yang Li's joke became controversial not only because of its content, but because platforms enabled its rapid fragmentation, circulation, quotation, and decontextualization. They actively shape the visibility, intensity, and interpretation of gender debate. In this sense, the Yang Li controversy illustrates the conditional visibility of feminism in Chinese digital spaces: feminist expression can reach wider audiences when it is humorous, affective, and culturally accessible, but these same qualities also make it easier to commercialize, ridicule, or politically delegitimize.

The thesis also contributes to the broader academic discussion of digital feminism by bringing together popular feminism, networked misogyny, platformization, and made-in-China feminism(s). The findings suggest that Chinese digital feminism should not be understood as a direct replication of Western liberal feminism. Instead, it is historically situated, internally contested, and shaped by the interaction of patriarchal norms, authoritarian governance, neoliberal market pressures, and platform economies. At the same time, the ambivalent and reflexive comments complicate any simple binary between feminist support and anti-feminist opposition. Many users are trying to make sense of the tension between feminist critique and the risk that platformed discourse may turn structural problems into mutual resentment. This finding is significant because it reveals both the possibility and the difficulty of sustaining more nuanced feminist discussion in a polarized digital environment.

However, the conclusions of this thesis should be understood within the limits of the research design. The dataset was purposively sampled and cannot represent the full distribution of public opinion on Yang Li or feminism in China. The analysis is also shaped by the visibility of available posts and comments, which may have been affected by platform algorithms, moderation, deletion, and censorship. Also, as the analysis is interpretive, the researcher's own academic interest in gender politics may have shaped the reading of the data.

Overall, this thesis concludes that the Yang Li controversy is a revealing case of how digital feminism in 2020s China becomes visible, contested, commercialized, and disciplined within platformed publics. Future research could build on this study by comparing the Yang Li case with other feminist controversies in Chinese popular

culture, conducting more systematic platform comparison, or examining how different generations, genders, and class positions interpret feminist humor. Such research would further clarify how digital feminism continues to evolve in China as both a cultural force and a contested field of gender politics.

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