

# Mediating gender in digital China: Post-2020s discourse and representation

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## Abstract

This editorial introduces a themed section that focuses on the production of gender discourse and representations in the midst of tightening social and cultural control in China's entertainment industry and digital media landscape. In various ways, the two articles featured case studies that exemplify how the production of gender discourses and representations in this context emerges from the interplay of state control, the market, and the digital realm and unfolds against the rise of platform capitalism and techno-nationalism. Both articles center on the intricate and sometimes contradictory configurations of gender within China's state-market nexus.

## Keywords

affordance, digital platforms, gender politics, masculinity, nationalism, popular misogyny

Over the last decade, in terms of digital media development, the world has witnessed the rise of super apps in Asia, including those in China (Steinberg et al., 2022). The proliferation of streaming platforms in the region has given rise to a wide range of entertainment options and various productions that circulate transnationally (Wang and Lobato, 2019). While these changes in China have captured scholarly attention in relation to digital governance (Xu and Yu, 2022), platform economy (Chen, 2018), labor (Zhao, 2019), and the emergence of data fandom (Yin, 2020; Zhang and Negus, 2020), the gender realm has

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received relatively less attention, despite the growing scholarship on digital feminist activism in China in the wake of the global #MeToo movement (Tan, 2023; Yin and Sun, 2021). The production of gender discourses and representations in this context results from the interplay of the state, the market, and the digital realm against the growth of platform capitalism. Such growth is coupled with an enormous population of audiences who are observed to be simultaneously creative and reactive. As we entered the 2020s, the state tightened its control on various levels and implemented further conservative policies. As a result of further suppression of grassroots gender and LGBTQ organizing, the online sphere has emerged as a crucial arena for expression and negotiation, but also as a battleground that is recognized as important by the state.

All these developments have led us to explore various aspects of gender in the digital space. For example, how has online platforms become a critical space for mediating gender in China? What role does the state play within the operation of the entertainment industry market in shaping these discourses and representations? How do netizens and media producers navigate the constraints of an increasingly conservative, nationalistic political landscape and its associated notions of gender? And how do these gender discourses and representations intersect with the rise of ethnonationalism in contemporary geopolitical trajectories?

This themed section of *Crosscurrent* brings together two articles addressing some of these questions. The first piece in this themed section, authored by Sara Liao, theorizes the concept of the platformization of misogyny through an in-depth case study of the controversy related to the luxury car maker Mercedes-Benz and stand-up comedian Yang Li in 2021. Yang was known by many in China for inventing the popular lexicon *puxinnan* (“average yet confident men”) which mocked male privileges. When she appeared in a short video for Mercedes, she and Mercedes received backlash from male netizens, who called for boycotting the luxury car maker. Liao presents a nuanced analysis of this controversy by investigating various official documents released by Weibo, industry reports, technology press, government regulatory papers, and comments related to the Yang-Mercedes controversy. Her findings suggest that the commercial model of the attention economy and affordances of Weibo, particularly the multi-tier certification system that incentivizes users to create content, produce, and amplify misogyny in the techno-social configuration of contemporary digital China. In this way, patriarchal governance is reinforced through the discursive affordances of Weibo as a platform within the techno-nationalist environment of the state-market nexus.

Following Liao’s (2023) discussion of how Weibo enables the platformization of misogyny within China’s state-media nexus, the second piece in this themed section, authored by Roxanne Yu Xian Tan (2023), focuses on the manufacturing of ideal masculinities in the context of China. Tan examines a state-supported TV and web series titled *You Are My Hero* (*Nishiwodechengchiyinglei*, literally “You are my city fortress”) and traces the parallel trends of military-themed TV dramas in East Asia, from the Korean drama series *Descendants of the Sun* (2016) to the “main melody” movies in China such as *Wolf Warrior* (2015) and *Wolf Warrior II* (2017). Unlike previous hypermasculine representations of male protagonists, the TV and web series *You Are My Hero* presents a different mode of militarized masculinity. The male protagonists are no longer the macho-military type of heroes skilled in martial (*wu*) masculinity. They prioritize careers,

military prowess, and leadership skills while remaining chaste. Meanwhile, they display gentle and caring qualities that make them desirable romantic partners for female audiences. This hybridized form of ideal masculinity also appeals to male audiences as they are seen as holistic role models. This new approach to coding nationalism in TV series appears to have become a staple of (hetero-)nationalism in China, not only promoting heteronormative values but also nationalism.

Both articles in this themed section highlight the enduring gender structure in China, which remains largely unchallenged in the digital era. One significant aspect here is the influence of specific media platforms and formats, which have played an increasingly significant role in shaping public opinions and have been further subject to manipulation by the state-market nexus. This unique state-market nexus within an authoritarian state, requires further study to understand its development in the post-2020s era. The amendment of China's constitution in 2018 was followed by even more conservative approach to politics and culture, including gender and sexuality. We invite scholars in media and cultural studies, along with those specializing in Chinese media, to further examine the gender representations and discourses resulting from these shifts in domestic politics and regional geopolitics. Additionally, we encourage the exploration of how these representations are resisted, negotiated, and reappropriated to align with the nation-state's objectives, all within the context of the backdrop of ethnonationalism and the global right turn in politics.

This Crosscurrent themed section is also part of a broader conversation on the growing interest in studying digital China and digital media. It specifically focuses on the complex and self-contradictory configurations of gender representations and discourses within the unique state-market nexus of an authoritarian regime. This environment encompasses individual resistance, social inequalities, and counter-publics, which are ongoing gendered struggles alongside the development of super apps, platforms, and the continuous digitization of media consumption.

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