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Gender Equality and ‘Independent Men’ Digital Feminism and Online Misogyny

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The term ‘independent women’, popularized in the new millennium, serves as a rallying cry for empowered women and feminists advocating for gender equality and personal autonomy. However, this term has come under scrutiny due to a disproportionate societal expectation placed on women to embody independence, without adequately addressing gender inequalities in private sphere, culminating in a call for commensurate level of independence to be expected of men. This chapter includes a thematic analysis study on 231 posts, engaging with discussions on ‘independent men’ within the Chinese social media platform, *Sina Weibo* (microblogging). Findings shed light on the dual rise of reflective digital feminism and online misogyny within Chinese cyberspace. The former advocates for gender equality through reviewing existing feminism terms and addressing inequalities in private sphere, while the latter employs misogynistic discourse ‘men going their own way’ to resist the loss of traditional patriarchal privileges. Although the debate continues, this study reveals that digital feminism in China has succeeded in bringing greater attention to gender inequalities within the private sphere.

The concept of becoming an “independent woman” seems to imply that women have to rely solely on themselves. They not only should not “depend” on their boyfriends but also should not “daydream” about their parents’ money. In contrast, men do not have this concern; parents’ money is naturally theirs, and they are inherently seen as “independent” individuals. (A-35, 26-01-2021)

Commencing in 2007, the ‘She Culture’ phenomenon has catalyzed a cultural and entertainment renaissance in China (Yang, 2023). This movement is characterized by a paradigm shift within

media representations, notably in television dramas and entertainment events, where adult women are increasingly cast as central figures. Such a shift has cemented terms such as 'heroic female' and 'independent women' within the Chinese context. In this context, 'independent women' are depicted as educated, urban professionals who are not only financially stable and physically attractive but also talented and resilient. These portrayals typically include the presence of a supportive male partner. While some are happy that the popularity of 'independent women' in media narratives reflects a broader societal recognition of women's enhanced agency, autonomy, and self-reliance in various domains of life, other scholars have criticized such cast feminism as popular pseudo-feminism, which seems to empower women with symbolic power through media narrative and consumerism without addressing the real-life gender issues or class and social issues that also occur.

In this context, women's independence, gender equality, and social and cultural norms have surfaced as lively and thought-provoking discussions in Chinese cyberspace. On 23rd January 2021, a popular debate show, '*Qipa Shuo*' [Strange Talk], invited participants to address the topic 'As an independent woman, should I accept a bride price?' Due to the show's popularity and the level of controversy surrounding the topic, the topic quickly raised heated discussion on social media platforms. *Sina Weibo* attracted 150,000 posts and 680 million views by December 2023. Throughout the online discussion, participants engage in a nuanced analysis of the roles and status of both men and women within intimate relationships. Advocates assert that the bride price has been a central part of marriage rites in Chinese culture and serves to safeguard women's rights, particularly their economic entitlements. Conversely, critics argue that the bride price perpetuates the commodification of women, reinforces financial dependency, and potentially places women in precarious positions within marital relations. Through this online debate, participants consistently expressed concern over the growing societal expectations placed on women to demonstrate independence, particularly financial independence in relationships, while questioning why comparable expectations for men to take on greater responsibilities at home were largely absent.

From New Women to Independent Women

Feminism in China was initiated over a hundred years ago by a group of male scholars and intellectuals. While different from the feminism that emphasizes women's rights and empowerment, people who advocated the independence of women during this time believed that educated women could better rear the next generation, to the benefit of national liberation (Duara, 1998). In his work 'On the Education of Women', published in 1897, Chinese philosopher and scholar Liang Qichao argued that 'to save the country, we should reduce dependents, educate women, and make them independent citizens'. This, he believed, would benefit both the family and the nation (Shen, 2016). Restorationists like Liang QiChao viewed the abolition of foot-binding and the creation of schools for women as foundational steps towards women's physical and intellectual emancipation, which is an early push to dismantle the oppressive structures of feudal society and stimulate the awakening of women's emancipation (Edward, 2000). Despite this being recognized as early feminist thought in recent Chinese history, scholars have criticized how it reflects the educated Chinese men's perception of women's empowerment. For instance, Mizuyo Sudo (2006) critiqued this male-centric feminism for following the Western trend, addressing males' financial difficulties, and expecting women to produce good children under the guise of nationalism. Notably, such feminism also dichotomized 'educated women' and 'ignorant women', positioning them at opposite ends of a spectrum of old-fashioned and modern, with educated women taking dominant roles in representing ideal women, while foot-binding women and women from the lower social class were marginalized in both modern history and women's developmental narratives (Shen, 2016). Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, state politics play an important role in navigating feminism development. This top-down manner is also known as state feminism (Zheng, 2005). During this period, women's emancipation mainly focused on the public sphere, and women were portrayed as proletarian soldiers who are strong, resilient, and capable of excelling in tasks traditionally deemed masculine (Shen, 2016; Li, 2000). Slogans like 'women hold up half of the sky' and 'iron girls' celebrated the spirit of gender equality and socialist ideals (Shen, 2016). Although this state-driven socialist feminism created a brief period of gender equality in the public sphere, while gender norms and roles within households continued to reflect traditional Confucian values, women shoulder a disproportionate share of

domestic work, and gender inequalities in occupations and wages were less discussed (Yang and Zhou, 2023). The national government often suppressed women's struggles in both public and private life under the guise of national planning. For instance, the 'gender erasure' politics during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) ignored women's subjectivity and encouraged women to behave and act like men. In Gill's (2021) study on images of women under the Khmer Rouge, she found that although the regime caused immense hardship and suffering, it also provided some opportunities for liberation and equality. Her work illustrates how women navigated the tension between traditional roles and revolutionary changes, revealing the conflict between societal expectations of gender and the realities. In China, women took the opportunity of reform to reclaim their subjectivity (Wang, 1997).

China's political and economic reforms, often referred to as the 'Chinese miracle', have ushered in a free market economy characterized by competition and entrepreneurial endeavours (Cho and Moon, 2022). Concurrently, the ideals of neoliberal individualism have gained prominence across genders, offering individuals greater autonomy in education, work, and marriage. This shift places the responsibility for personal success on the individual's shoulders (Yang, 2023; Steele and Lynch, 2013). As a result, the concept of 'independent women' has gained popularity, epitomized by women who fully embrace responsibility for their achievements and setbacks, and an individualistic outlook (Yang, 2023). However, in its pursuit of political and social stability, China continues to uphold patriarchal collectivism, encapsulated in the maxim, 'there is a country before there is a home'. This has led to a unique form of individualism, where people are individualistic in personal matters while maintaining a collectivist outlook in responding to national and family needs (Chen and Lunt, 2021). The 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women introduced the human rights-based liberal feminism to China. It emphasized women's subjectivity and freedom of choices, while later people noticed that such feminism was commodified in the Chinese context (Liao, 2023). Similarly, Yang (2020) argues that although the Chinese government continued to issue laws and regulations to protect women's rights, there remained a paternalistic logic that emphasized women's biological differences from men and their reproductive roles. For instance, a large number of women were laid off from state-owned enterprises during the reform, and the one-child policy reinforced the idea of

raising a 'pillar of the nation' through intensive mothering (Cook and Dong, 2011; Yang, 2020). Women's return to the family improved the possibilities that gender hierarchy would be determined by class divisions, especially when urban middle-class women aligned with the state in the free-market economy, giving the capacity to lead radical revolutions (Yang and Zhou, 2023). Hence, later the development of feminism in China and the claim of gender equality started transforming from state-oriented to individual centred.

The internet and social media platforms have empowered individuals to share experiences and opinions, sparking public discussions that challenge patriarchal views and advocating for institutional reforms (Peng, 2020). These platforms are crucial in driving feminist activism and have facilitated the emergence of diverse forms of feminism in Chinese cyberspace (Han, 2021; Xu and Tan, 2020). For instance, Xu and Tan (2020) found that social media platforms allow grassroots female to express their feelings, voices, and take part in the online feminism discussions. Notably, these grassroots women are active in embracing strong female-oriented attitudes and challenging patriarchal heteronormativity and the traditional reproductive order. For instance, they advocate against marriage and childbearing, seeking to shift the focus from private reproductive roles to public productive work and urging the state to dismantle the hegemonic patriarchal order, suggesting that women can be 'independent' without a man (Xu and Tan, 2020). Xu and Tan (2020) name feminism with such nature as grassroots radical feminism and explained that not all feminists in China support such radical discourses. For instance, conservative feminism suggests that women be emotionally and financially independent while still adhering to traditional norms. Hence, within this dualistic framework, two divergent narratives have emerged around the concept of 'independent women' in contemporary China. The first adopts a neoliberal perspective, resonating with the egalitarian ethos of the state socialist era, and highlights the importance of individual autonomy and responsibility. The second narrative aligns with more commonly accepted Chinese femininity, emphasizing the need to uphold the 'virtue of Eastern women' (Li, 2000). These divergent narratives illustrate the continuation of the double bind which has not been adequately managed or reconciled in terms of the demands of the socialist state on women.

Masculinity in Contemporary China

In contrast to the marginalization of women's discourse in the public sphere, Chinese men have found themselves in a constant negotiation of their authority with the patriarchal state in both public and private domains. For instance, during the Maoist era, the formidable power of the state significantly reduced the rights of male family heads, affecting their control and decision-making within their own families, which led to a corresponding rise in the ability of women to begin to determine their own destinies (Geng, 2004; Yang, 2010; Geng and Hird, 2014). The state's demand for unwavering loyalty to the party not only deprived men of property control but also limited their authority in making crucial life decisions, such as career choices, education, housing, and even the marriages of their children (Geng, 2004; Geng and Hird, 2014). As mentioned earlier, while women felt the loss in gender identity and subjectivity due to the 'gender erasure' policies during the Cultural Revolution, men experienced similar frustrations, feeling that their masculinity was suppressed and women had become too masculine (Yang, 2023).

With the rise of educated and financially independent women in China, a broader spectrum of life choices became available to women. Women's economic independence reduces their reliance on men for survival, while it increases their need for emotional satisfaction when establishing intimate relationships. However, this increased economic independence has not been accompanied by a wholesale increase in men's involvement in the domestic sphere (Yang, 2020; Yang and Zhou, 2023). Consequently, the traditional model of male dominance and female subservience is starting to face resistance among young Chinese women (Wallis and Shen, 2018). This is mainly reflected in the decline of marriage rates in China, particularly the decrease in marriage rate among rural men and the increasing difficulties in getting married (Lu et al., 2021). In addition to the gender ratio imbalance leading to fewer marriageable women in rural areas, the rising capabilities of women make them more likely to move to cities or towns. Meanwhile, rural men are easily pushed out of the marriage market due to their lower skills and family finances (Zhang, 2023). This shift left many contemporary men feeling relatively deprived of certain gender privileges that were once afforded to the feudal gentry, leading to a perceived crisis in masculinity (Yang, 2010; Geng and Hird, 2014). In response, there has been an emergence of biological determinism since the late 1970s, which posited women's inherent

frailty and inferiority to men, advocating for their return to domestic roles to support China's modernization (Wallis and Shen, 2018). Concurrently, media narratives have played a significant role in promoting gender polarization by reinforcing stereotypes of male dominance and female submissiveness. The pervasive portrayal of women in popular and consumer culture as 'delicate women' and in terms of 'feminine charms' underscores their perceived fragility and further emphasizes male strength. However, the concept of masculinity has become increasingly complex in the context of the neoliberal market economy and the state's link of masculinity to national pride, leading to nuanced and evolving gender dynamics.

In the context of economic marketization and the influence of Western notions of masculinity, traits like competitiveness and assertiveness have taken centre stage in shaping contemporary Chinese masculinity (Liu, 2019; Ging, 2019). This shift has reinforced a pronounced dichotomy, portraying men as resilient, assertive 'manly men', while women are delicate and fragile.

Additionally, China's patriotic education system predominantly features male-centric heroic sacrifice, further linking patriotism with masculine responsibility (Liu, 2019). In line with the pursuit of the 'Chinese Dream' and the revitalization of national pride, men are often envisioned as patriotic warriors, tasked with maintaining a harmonious familial structure (Chen and Lunt, 2021). This includes having a gentle, compliant wife, obedient children, and proud parents. However, there remains a prevalent perception of Chinese men as lacking in assertiveness and physical attractiveness, especially when compared to their Western counterparts (Geng and Hird, 2014). At the same time, China's complex position in global power hierarchies, marked by a certain degree of vulnerability, gives rise to nationalistic sentiments (Geng, 2004).

Paradoxically, these sentiments are intertwined with feelings of inferiority and unease among men (Ging, 2019). These complex sociopolitical dynamics impose substantial pressure on Chinese men, compelling them to assert their masculinity both in public and private spheres (Yang, 2010; Ging, 2019).

Additionally, the development of the feminist movement and the rise in female empowerment have caused discomfort within the government and among the male population (Huang, 2022). Emblematic of this conflict is the recent surge of feminized male idols or 'little fresh meat' idols, who embody a unique blend of physical allure and emotional depth. These idols showcase

qualities evocative of traditional masculinity, encompassing attributes like humility, thoughtfulness, physical strength, resilience, and courage (Louie, 2002), while also embracing a more feminine appearance and emotional expression (Peng et al., 2023). This contradicts the government's stance, emphasizing that 'true men' should avoid exhibiting feminine traits. This stance is exemplified by the Ministry of Education's implementation of sports programmes aimed at addressing the 'crisis of masculinity' and preventing the 'feminization of male adolescents' (News, 2021a). Correspondingly, rising critical expression like 'effeminate boys, weak country' exposes mainstream critics' latent biases against women and the stigmatization of feminism. This is also reflected in increasing anti-feminism and misogyny in Chinese cyberspace (Han, 2021; Wang and Chang, 2023).

Media platforms, especially commercialized social media platforms operating within state structures, manufacture and amplify misogyny (Liao, 2023). Social media platforms provide opportunities for grassroots women to have their voice heard, while for men such voices represent a challenge to their masculinity (Yang and Zhou, 2023; Huang, 2022). Hence, the anti-marriage and anti-fertility discourses attract wide criticism from Chinese men, who argue that such discourses promote gender-based antagonism and pose a threat to 'traditional' familial relations, gender norms, and the stability of the society. Mirroring trends in Western social media, some Chinese men have even joined the 'Men Going Their Own Way' (MGTOW) movement online (Huang, 2022). This participation is seen as a way to express their disdain towards the rising feminist movement and the increasing demands for gender equality (Huang, 2022).

Gender Equality in Social Media

The idea of 'independent men' has thus become an essential part of the debate about and the search for gender equality in contemporary China, particularly as this has emerged in cyberspace. The term itself has emerged in response to the increasing societal expectations of women. At the same time, it is a useful lodestone for the examination of gender equality in the debates that have emerged in Chinese social media.

Launched by *Sina* Corporation in 2009, *Weibo* is a microblogging platform that allows users to share, spread, and access information based on their online connections. By the fourth quarter

of 2019, it had over 516 million monthly active users and ranked as the second largest social media platform in China, following WeChat (Hu, 2020). The *Weibo* hot search list represents high trending topics among Chinese netizens. Indeed, *Weibo* has a function that formalizes its users' current interests and permits discussions among users with similar interests. *Weibo* users can become moderators to create a topic and manage a topic page. When users create a microblog and include a hashtag, the keywords in the hashtag become a topic tag. Simultaneously, the topic pages automatically gather and display relevant microblogs containing the specific topic keywords.

For this research, the keywords 'independent men' [*duli nanxing*] were employed to search the *Weibo* topic search engine. Thirty-one *Weibo* topics appeared after the first search; their topics were reviewed, with those that were not original and those that had not been read excluded. Then, 231 original posts were collected from the remaining topics on *Weibo*. Thematic analysis was conducted on these posts. The thematic analysis approach, suitable for exploratory studies, affords the flexibility to uncover emergent themes within *Weibo* users' posts. Moreover, thematic analysis facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the research data from various angles, including cultural, social, political, and historical dimensions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following the five steps outlined by Braun and Clarke, three distinct themes emerged as encapsulating the responses to the research questions: 'Financial and Emotional Independence from Natal Family'; 'Independence within Marriage'; and 'Men Going Their Own Way?' The first two themes reflect deep-rooted gender inequalities within individual households. The final theme represents men's negative response to the rising digital feminism and women's demands for gender equality to be addressed in the private sphere.

Financial and Emotional Independence from Natal Family

Intergenerational wealth transmission is nothing new in patriarchal society, and women sacrificing themselves for the benefit of their family is not limited to Asian culture. However, feminist groups in contemporary China have raised the issues of gender equality within intimate relationships and class disparities. A significant number of posts on *Weibo* highlighted the pervasive gender inequalities in asset ownership, with men being prioritized in intergenerational property and asset inheritance. In a patriarchal society, the family highlights

the responsibilities of the male heir of the family who carries on the bloodline and the family name and is endowed with filial piety. In contrast, daughters are more expendable. There is a long-standing expression 'a daughter married away is like a daughter poured out' that reflects the ideas families hold towards daughters. Once a daughter is married, she becomes a part of her husband's family, an outsider to her natal family. Under such influence, parents frequently favour their sons in intergenerational property distribution. This trend has become increasingly apparent with the implementation of China's one-child policy.

Initiated in 1979, the one-child policy was more effectively enforced in urban areas compared to rural areas and amplified discrimination against female children, as many girls were aborted, abandoned, or left unregistered (Kane and Choi, 1999). Having a boy became a source of pride and luck in Chinese households, and parents felt obligated to support a son's request for property purchase, particularly in the context of marriage (Deng et al., 2019). For families with girls, parents used to believe that a daughter would reside in their husband's home post-marriage, rendering individual property ownership as less crucial. However, following a ruling by China's Supreme Court that property acquired before marriage belongs only to the party who made the deposit or paid the full amount for the house, many divorced women were left without property, even if they contributed to the house loan. Consequently, there has been a trend in China where independent women feel they should own property before marriage. Many one-child families started supporting their daughters to purchase their first property (Deng et al., 2019). In contrast, families with multiple children tend to reject such requests or only agree to provide interest-free loans to their daughters (Deng et al., 2019).

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Other than being de-privileged in intergenerational inheritance, women with male siblings are expected to contribute to their brothers' property acquisition endeavours. The soaring property prices make it almost impossible for young individuals to purchase a property independently,

especially for young migrants who plan to settle in the largest metropolitan areas through property purchase (Shen, 2016). Consequently, a significant number of young men have to rely on parental support to climb the property ladder, while sometimes the price is so high that even parents are not able to provide sufficient financial support to their sons. As a result, close family members, siblings, especially daughters, are expected to contribute to the financial acquisition involved in a brother's marriage. In post-reformed China, women's social ties with their natal families can be instrumental in enhancing their status and autonomy. A married woman's connections with her natal kin are particularly valuable for negotiating within her marital patriarchal family (Zhang, 2009). Consequently, a married daughter is often expected to support her natal family as an expression of filial piety. In families with multiple children, a woman is expected to assist their natal kin, especially brothers, to demonstrate her closeness with her maternal family. This, in turn, can enhance their reputation and status both in their marital family and in society at large (Zhang, 2009). However, these expectations place significant burdens on daughters, particularly those from rural areas with male siblings.

One post includes a sad story about a young woman who tragically took her own life due to the pressure exerted by her parents. It was discovered that her parents frequently demanded money from her, which was used to fund her young brother's marriage. Despite the fact that the girl met the criteria of an independent woman – having her own job, earning her own salary, and maintaining an intimate relationship outside of her family with her boyfriend – she was burdened not only with filial duties towards her parents but also with the responsibility of financially supporting her brother's marriage.

The news about that mediator in Hangzhou made my blood pressure soar and my heart race. It's already 2021, yet there are still cases where daughters are financially drained to provide relief for sons. (A-2, 27-02-2021)

The so-called independent man sucks blood from his own sisters. (A-13, 04-02-2021)

As opposed to receiving social approval, women who are under pressure to assist the family in this way are discriminated against by being called a 'brother help demon' [*fudi mo*]. The name is derived phonetically from Voldemort in the Harry Potter series and used satirically to critique

women who perpetually aid their male siblings due to financial constraints within their natal family (Liu, 2023). Such a name reflects the dilemmas that Chinese women face in navigating personal growth and the traditional patriarchal expectations. In the selected case, parents tend to request a daughter in the family to provide financial support to the boy in the family, as in the traditional belief, daughters will marry away then parents will stay with the sons. Besides, sons carry the name and the bloodline of the family, while daughters become an outsider. Women use 'brother help demon' as a sarcastic tool to fight back against the gender system (Liu, 2023). Men criticize women for being money-oriented, exploiting the man's family to finance her natal family, with the bride price representing the start of exploitation. On the other hand, women use 'brother help demons' as a way to present their self-imposed dilemmas, and tools to fight back against the unequal gender system (Liu, 2023).

In China, many social and political issues are reduced to gender issues, and especially critiques of feminism and women are used to elide and confuse other social and structural issues. For example, the negative impact of soaring real estate prices and living costs on the willingness of young people to marry is simplistically attributed to women's materialism and greed on social media (Yang, 2020). Moreover, local authorities justify their suppression of feminist voices as a crackdown on extremism in an effort to 'clean up the internet' and protect the social order (Lindberg, 2021). Even within the women's community, middle-class women would flaunt their wealth and capabilities through personal consumption, marriage success, and scientific parenting and align with the state's narrative that those issues are 'personal issues' (Yang, 2020). Grassroots women who cannot achieve such a level of success or financial and intellectual independence are frequently framed as a failure of an individual (Liao, 2023, Yang, 2023). As a result, research captured Chinese women who are anti-marriage and anti-fertilization (Yang and Zhou, 2023) and women who use marriage as a means to climb the social ladder and accumulate personal wealth (Yang, 2023). Because for them, compared to replying to others to speak up for them or waiting for gender equality and women's rights to be addressed properly in reality, they prefer to take their own measures to safeguard their rights.

Independence within Marriage

Some women are trying to fulfil the familial and societal expectation to be the post-millennial ‘new woman’. At the same time, they also expect men to be a post-millennial ‘new man’: an egalitarian spouse who upholds the concept of companionship with marriage, the nurturing and involved father, the emotionally expressive and sensitive individual, and the educated and gentlemanly family-oriented man (Zhang and Xu, 2022). Men with these qualities often appear as white-collar, middle-class men in the media, including TV programmes and soap opera shows. While some men do try to be a modern husband and father, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate amount of unpaid family work compared to men, particularly pronounced in areas like child-rearing (Zhang and Xu, 2022). There is also the recent emergence of ‘widow-style parenting’ [sangou shi yuer], a phenomenon where women have to raise their children largely alone due to the reluctance of their partner.

Men can deliberately embrace a “lying flat” attitude and lower societal expectations towards them. Videos of dads taking care of children always bring smiles to everyone’s faces. Being unreliable seems amusing. However, when it comes to women, it’s often met with comments like, “What kind of mother is this? Irresponsible.” (A-58, 24-01-2021)

In 2021, in response to escalating work pressures and the challenges of outperforming their peers, Chinese social media users, especially young users, initiated the ‘lying flat’ movement as a way to pause from relentless work (Hsu, 2022). Since then, ‘lying flat’ has evolved into a catchphrase used to describe individuals adopting a passive attitude towards life, focusing solely on personal matters (Hsu, 2022). A-58’s quote highlights Chinese men’s passive attitude towards taking domestic work. The National Bureau of Statistics (2023) data reveals that nearly half of Chinese men do not engage in any daily unpaid domestic and family-related tasks, and on average, women spend 81 minutes more daily in such activities compared to men. Research also indicates that there is an intriguing nexus between men’s income and their participation in housework: increasing income correlates with reduced domestic engagement (Alduais et al., 2021). In contrast, women’s earnings do not exhibit a commensurate effect; instead, women even intensify their housework responsibilities so as to compensate for their dereliction of duty as a ‘daughter’, ‘mom’, or ‘wife’ (Alduais et al., 2021). Notably, elderly women exhibit

heightened dedication to housework compared to other age groups. As Tian et al. (2018) found, each additional year increases women's daily domestic labour by 0.776 minutes, with those aged 50–59 spending an average of 205 minutes daily on housework.

The notion of promoting so-called independent women nowadays, those who don't rely on men after marriage and such, can be seen as imposing moral constraints on women. Implicitly, it suggests that as a woman, besides getting married and having children, you must also continue to work hard, manage the household, take care of the children; if you cannot achieve this, then you are not considered an independent woman. (A-20, 25-01-2021)

The normalization of women's role in the household comes largely from the impact of the state which sees women as the cornerstone of the family and the society. Factors such as the floating population, significant sex ratio imbalances, and income disparities have led to an increasing number of rural men struggling to find wives (Sun, 2017). Scholars classify this as class issues and express concerns that the growing number of unmarried rural men may lead to more social issues, including increased prostitution, family strain, and subjective well-being (Sun, 2017). In response, local governments have developed new policies, such as abolishing the bride price and encouraging urban women to relocate to rural areas, to aid these men in finding spouses (News, 2021b). A post referencing a local government news report highlighted the authorities' mounting concern over the growing number of single men, particularly regarding the potential administrative and financial responsibilities the government might face in supporting them as they age. This post was reshared with additional commentary:

No one asks how a 60-year-old woman lives her life. When she is single, people believe she can take care of herself. When she has a partner, she often has to take care of that man as well. When will men become independent? (A-12, 08-10-2021)

More than physical labour, women have been the primary source of emotional labour within the family historically. There has been a transformation in family structures in contemporary society, with more egalitarian arrangements of emotional connection and mutual support required in intimate relationships (Giddens, 1992). Chinese men often grapple with societal

norms that encourage them to suppress their emotions, fearing that displays of emotional expression or heightened perception of female emotions could be associated with femininity, thereby weakening their masculine identity (Louie, 2002; McKenzie et al., 2018). As a result, men with such beliefs enter family settings exhibiting tendencies of emotional neglect towards their spouses and a propensity to limit their engagement in household responsibilities. This, in turn, leads to an overdependence on women in terms of emotional and domestic work, and women, especially feminists in China, encourage people to be aware of such gender inequality, and radical feminists even criticize married women as a way to demonstrate their resistance to patriarchal norms and escape perceived exploitation.

It is essential for an ordinary man to marry an ordinary woman as early as possible, because marriage can save you time and money to develop yourself. Let the ordinary woman do housework for you, take care of you, and jointly pay off the mortgage. You can focus on your career, and in the future, when you become successful, you can have any kind of young and beautiful woman you want ... I thank them for making me realize that married women are merely tools to be exploited. (A-36, 05-02-2021)

This quote, written by a woman, represents the radical feminism in the Chinese context, who claim their subjectivity by arguing against intimate relationships and marriages (Yang and Zhou, 2023). Three terms were mentioned in this particular post: 'average men', 'ordinary women', and 'married women'. 'Average men' is developed from a popular stand-up comedy punchline. Yang Li, a young female stand-up comedian, described men with an oversized ego as 'How can he be so average, yet so full of confidence?' Later, 'average-yet-confident' went viral and became the popular catchphrase of the year, subsequently shortened to 'average man' (Huang, 2022). In reaction, men started referring to women who looked ordinary yet held high expectations in romantic relationships as 'average women', a term reflecting their perceived commonness. Ironically, women would also use such terms to express their disdain for the ordinariness of other women, whether their appearance, their social or financial status, or even being 'married'. 'Married women', pronounced the same way as dim-witted women [*hu nv*] in Chinese, is another term coined by radical feminists to deprecate women who follow traditional gender roles, for instance, taking the full responsibility for the whole range of domestic work.

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Led by young women, grassroots radical feminism has become popular in Chinese cyberspace in the past few years. Grassroots radical feminism appears more aggressive and questions all gender structures and strongly demands total equality in the private sphere, especially through rejection of patriarchal heteronormativity and the reproductive order (Cheng, 2023). These radical feminists have faced opposition from various quarters, including men who view them as using fertility as a form of manipulation (Yang and Zhou, 2023). Women who hold traditional gender values and the state perceive them as promoting gender antagonism and hatred that contradicts the state's developmental agenda (Yang and Zhou, 2023). In addition, their anti-marriage and anti-fertility advocacy apparently motivates the radical feminists against the state's development plan and forces them to shift their attention from private reproduction to public production (Yang and Zhou, 2023). In recent years, China has made amendments to the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, aiming to promote gender equality and enhance women's rights and interests (Chen, 2022). Despite these legislative efforts, the effectiveness of policy implementation remains a public concern. Additionally, there is a notable expression of dissatisfaction among Chinese men, who believe that women have already been granted excessive rights.

Men Going Their Own Way?

Among all the posts on *Weibo*, only ten men joined in the online discussion about 'independent men', with two voices dominating the conversation. One voice expressed men's support for women by suggesting adherence to 'traditional' norms, where men assume leading roles in supporting the family while acknowledging women's contributions. As a result, providing financial support to women is considered essential in this view. At the other extreme, women were criticized by others for appearing greedy in intimate relationships. Two out of the ten male posts express their disdain towards the social pressure and wish they could go their own way. There are supportive voices for women that have emerged in the Chinese online space. For instance, some voices express deep appreciation for women's contributions to the family and advocate the idea that men should adopt a more independent stance within intimate relationships. This includes not only fulfilling established customs like paying the bride price but also expressing gratitude and recognition towards their female partners, aiming to establish

healthy and enduring marriages. These supportive sentiments from men reflect the evolving ideals of post-millennium good men, who are characterized by their consideration, responsibility, support for gender equality, and commitment to family values (Zhang and Xu, 2022). Given the growing gender tensions in Chinese online discourse, both men and women encounter increasing challenges when expressing their support for the opposite gender. As a result, the male voices advocating gender equality reflect some men's awareness about gender inequalities in the private sphere.

Despite these supportive voices, there is a more prevalent trend among male *Sina Weibo* users in rejecting the notion of 'independent men', which mainly requires men to shoulder more housework and be more committed to gender equality in the household. However, male *Sina Weibo* users argue that men are already independent in comparison to women, as men still see themselves as the breadwinner, the head of a family, who shoulder the responsibilities to care for the older, the young, and their wives. Instead, women are dependent and money-focused these days; for instance, they contend that men do not anticipate receiving financial incentives for marriage or seeking additional attention within relationships. Some male users even assert that they do not necessarily aspire to get married or have children. For example,

If marriage does not make a man happy and only adds to the pain, then a man is perfectly capable of choosing to be elegantly single. And many people should be clear about one thing, men have more capital to live a sophisticated single life, after all, the boys will not be difficult for several days a month. (A-136, 05-02-2021)

Such a statement shares great similarities with the 'Men going their own way' (MGTO) movement in Western countries. MGTO men consider Western society as having been corrupted by feminism and they feel powerless in challenging or changing such a gynocentric order; therefore, they reject romantic relationships with women and seek self-empowerment instead (Górska et al., 2022; Huang, 2022). Although, as Górska et al. (2022) found, men who claim to be MGTO on Twitter are not really going their own way. Instead, they use such terms to express their anger towards women's calls for gender equality to claim a more desirable return to 'traditionally' defined gender roles. The assertion made by men that they could choose a single life and live better than women due to physical advantages, such as not having

to endure menstruation, reflects a deeply ingrained misogyny rooted in biological differences. Such findings are consistent with Kim's (2017) work on online misogyny in South Korea, which encompasses discrimination and mistreatment based on gender and discussions that perpetuate established gender norms. These perspectives underscore the persistent challenges associated with gender equality in China, where deeply entrenched stereotypes and biases continue to influence societal attitudes and opportunities for both men and women.

Independent Women, Independent Men, and Gender Equality

This research captures the initial discussions on 'Independent Men' on the Chinese social media platform, which attracted 3.2 million views, while only 231 original posts were created under such a topic, and over 95 percent posts were created by female *Weibo* users. This could be due to the widespread misogyny and anti-feminism both online and offline in China in recent years. Since 2015, discussions about women's rights have become politically sensitive, and tight media regulations and online censorship have also made it more difficult for feminist media to operate (Han and Lee, 2019). Media accounts that promote feminist ideas have been abruptly suspended or shut down (Chen and Ding, 2024). As a result, feminist accounts have to express their ideas more strategically; topics on 'independent women' and 'independent men' represent such a subtle way in addressing women's rights and gender equality in the private sphere in Chinese cyberspace.

The analysis of 'independent men' as presented on *Sina Weibo* highlights the challenges that Chinese women face in negotiating gender equality under the impact of state regulations and market influence. 'Independent women', originally designed to signify women's autonomy and the success of feminism, later evolved into a commercialized form of gendered social pressure. Being an independent woman in China not only requires aligning with commercialized liberal feminism, emphasizing women's autonomy and agency in economic, spiritual, and emotional realms (Yang and Zhou, 2023; Yang, 2020), but also entails adhering to the 'virtues of Eastern women' by upholding duties and responsibilities defined by established gender norms (Shen, 2016). In this process, class divisions within the women's community have led to a more varied conversation about gender equality (Chen and Ding, 2024). In this article, when middle-class women and men encourage women to demonstrate their economic independence and

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understanding of gender equality by rejecting traditional bride prices, the economic struggles of rural women and the difficulties they face in marriage are largely ignored. This has prompted many women to reevaluate the 'independent woman' narrative shaped by middle-class women and men, questioning why men in the private sphere cannot take on more domestic responsibilities like women. They are also asking whether, as women achieve economic and intellectual independence, they can secure greater rights to inherit family property, obtain a fairer distribution of marital assets, and reduce the time and emotional labour they invest in household chores.

There is clearly the perpetuation of patriarchal norms within Chinese families, ranging from intergenerational wealth transmission to the distribution of domestic work, which has a negative impact on women's personal wealth accumulation and power negotiation within familial and intimate relationships. With the growth and development of a more capitalist market system, financial factor plays a significant role in the discourse surrounding the independence of both men and women, consistent with the prevalent value of the pursuit of money and material possessions in contemporary China (Li and Hu, 2022). For women in this study, personal wealth is closely related to power dynamics within familial and intimate relationships. From patriarchal families' expectations on women to make financial contributions to male family members to men's expectations of having a financially independent partner, women, especially marginalized women, face increasing pressure to claim their independence through financial independence. For instance, women from urban one-child families often inherit more from their parents, which boosts their financial independence and allows them to reject traditional practices like bride prices (Deng et al., 2019). On the other hand, women from traditional families with multiple children, particularly those with sons, usually inherit less or none, which restricts their financial autonomy and makes it harder to reject bride prices in favour of independence (Deng et al., 2019). These disparities highlight the importance of nuanced strategies to address gender inequalities in inheritance and marriage practices. Under the impact of neoliberalism and consumerism, the concept of 'independent women' becomes a title that women need to earn via demonstrating their financial and economic capacity. The new norm is characterized by Western commercialized actions in private domains,

ranging from identity-driven shopping, splitting bills with men, to owning property. As a result, the concept of the 'independent women' became a rhetorical device for the state, men, and elite women to celebrate women's empowerment and women's success, with underprivileged women being ignored and misguided (Yang, 2023). For instance, while modern societal norms and state policies might promote women giving up the bride price as a mark of independence, they often overlook the deeper, systemic gender inequalities that persist in the private sphere. These inequalities manifest in various ways, from inequitable household inheritance and uneven domestic workloads to legal disadvantages in marriages. A poignant example is the marital property laws in China. Since 2011, these laws stipulated that property acquired before marriage belongs solely to the person whose name is on the deed. This often disenfranchises women, especially in the event of a divorce, as properties are frequently registered only under the husband's or his parents' names. Additionally, any real estate purchases for a child after marriage are considered the personal property of the spouse who financed it, often excluding the other spouse from ownership. In 2011, approximately 70 percent of Chinese family property deeds were in the names of husbands or their parents, rarely including wives or their parents (the paper, 2021). By 2016, while 30 percent of families had transferred property deeds to their children, only 9 percent had added wives' names, and a mere 3 percent had transferred deeds exclusively to wives (the paper, 2021). This indicates a significant exclusion of married Chinese women from property ownership, despite their substantial contribution to domestic work, and the best outcome for many of these women is the indirect benefit of their children inheriting the property. Against such a context, although digital feminism provides a platform for women from diverse backgrounds to express their voices, the combination of state control and rising online misogyny often leaves underprivileged women with limited options for empowerment. Consequently, they may find that focusing on personal wealth accumulation is one of the few viable paths to claim their power and agency. In response to these developments, male participants in this study exhibited two distinct stances. Two out of ten male posts in this study acknowledged women's contributions within the household and supported the idea of men's independence in the private domain. In contrast, the majority echoed sentiments similar to the MTGOW movement observed in

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https://m.thepaper.cn/yidian_promDetail.jsp?contid=10708335&from=yidian

Western social media. This group advocates for leading a solitary life, choosing to abstain from relationships or marriage if they perceive that women cannot provide them with a 'happy marriage'. However, when women's empowerment challenges or threatens to disrupt established patriarchal norms, men may react by threatening to 'go their own way'. Górska et al. (2022) explored Twitter users' online discussion on MTGOW and found that this proclamation is essentially a tactic to maintain the patriarchal structure and resist gender equality and women's independence in private life (Górska et al., 2022). Some Chinese men who align with 'the MGTOW' philosophy often adopt traditional views of gender roles, positioning themselves as the expected providers in a family context. Despite not necessarily being married, they believe women should cater to their needs, suggesting that women must make them happy enough to consider marriage. However, when women who are financially and emotionally independent demand that men take on more household responsibilities or request equitable distribution of family property, these men often feel threatened. They resist such demands by arguing that they don't need marriage, indicating their preference to remain single or unattached rather than adapt to changing social expectations.

The discourse of 'independent men' on *Sina Weibo* suggests a conversation that extends beyond a simple message to men. It calls for a deeper reflection on class disparities under feminist terms, such as 'independent women' and the increasing prevalence of online misogyny. Under the impact of neoliberal feminism and consumerism, the idea of the 'Independent women' has become a rhetorical device to divert public attention away from real gender issues in the private domain, instead focusing on praising women's empowerment when achieved by privileged females. Men, for their part, seem to hold a bifurcated attitude towards women's independence, supporting it as long as it does not challenge established gender roles. They expect women to be financially and emotionally independent but also conform to submissive roles within the household. Aware of their own biological, societal, and political advantages, these men, while claiming to embrace a solitary path or 'going their own way', underscore the biological and workplace challenges faced by women, which can be interpreted as a manifestation of the widespread misogyny and a form of resistance to gender equality. This

complex interplay of perspectives underscores the multifaceted and contradictory nature of the gender equality discourse in China.

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