Digital Feminism: Social Media Portrayal of Housewives and "蕾神之锤" in Chinese Society

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Abstract: Based on the celebrity divorce case of Leehom Wang and Jinglei Lee, this paper adopted gender schema theory and digital feminism framework and conducted a qualitative content analysis of the online discussions of the role of housewives and gender issues in Chinese society. The research found that although feminism has been prevalent in China with the impact of globalization, women still face structural oppression and constraints as well as a double burden regarding their various roles in families and communities. Although the social institutions have created barriers and obstacles, information technology and social media provided platforms and opportunities for women to express their feelings and opinions, inspire and support each other, and raise public awareness of the deep-rooted gender issues in Chinese society.

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Introduction

In December 2021, a public divorce between singer Leehom Wang and his wife Jinglei Lee attracted people's attention on social media. Their divorce dispute dominated social media in Chinese' society for over a week. On December 15, 2021, Wang announced that he was divorcing Jinglei Lee on Sina Weibo, where Wang has over 67 million fans. The announcement received over 100,000 comments and 3.5 million likes on Sina Weibo. On December 17, Lee published a lengthy post on Weibo, where she has three million followers, and accused Wang's wrongdoings during their marriage. The post received 11.9 million likes within two days. In this post, Lee explained her sacrifice for their marriage including giving up her own career and taking care of their three children. Lee's post raised the issue of how women often face unfair marriage life and financial income inequality, as well as Wang being an absent father (Zuo, 2021). Lee's words and posts were described as "营神之锤 (the hammer of Thunder Goddess)" because of her precise and powerful post and following response with strong writing skills.

Lee's post described the gender inequality faced by many housewives in Chinese society and presented a modern concept about the role of women in a patriarchal society. It also raised extensive public discussions on housewives and gender issues on various social media platforms. This research focuses on public discussions on social media regarding this divorce drama and discusses how housewives and gender issues are portrayed on social media in Chinese society. Wang and Lee's case serves as an essential

case study to understand and interrogate the current notions of feminist discourse and their interaction with digital technology in contemporary China. Based on gender schema theory (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017), this research provides insights on the current feminist discourse as well as social reality regarding gender perception, women's role, and marriage on social media in Chinase society. It also helps to understand how social media in China have shaped feminist discourses and activisms.

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In the following sections, we first discuss the theoretical framework: gender schema theory, and the existing literature on feminist discourse in China, and digital feminism. After introducing the research design and research methods, we present the thematic analysis results of online discussions of Wang and Lee's divorce. The paper is concluded by summarizing the role of social media in promoting feminism in contemporary Chinese society.

Literature Review

Gender Schema Theory

Gender schema theory is a social-cognitive theory exploring the impact of gender on people's cognitive and categorical processing in daily lives (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017). The theory proposes that individuals develop perceptions about gender schemas such as masculine and feminine and use these perceptions to categorize information, make decisions, and regulate behaviors. According to Bem (1981), gender is a cultural construction. In a society like the United States, gender polarizing is dominant in its discourse and social institutions. Therefore, children become gender schematic or gender polarizing, evaluate and process information based on the cultural definitions of gender appropriateness, and "reject any way of behaving that does not match their sex" (Bem, 1981, p. 126). Social institutions then reinforce the gender schema. Therefore, discussion of gender issues must be grounded in understanding cultural, social, and economic processes (Leung, 2003).

Gender schema theory focuses on how cultures construct gender and gender schemas. Also, it discusses how social institutions reinforce gender identities and roles. For example, mass media have mainly depicted women as housewives. Since Bem developed the theory in 1981, it has been widely used in various disciplines. Studies have explored how gender schema impacted career cognition and issues within the workplace (Chang & Hitchon, 2004; Chen et al., 2014). As Wood (2009) noted, "What gender means depends heavily on cultural values and practices; a culture's definitions of masculinity and femininity shape expectations about how individual men and women should communicate; and how individuals communicate establishes gender that, in turn, influence cultural views" (p. 20). Gender schema is constructed by cultural values and socio-demographic characteristics. It influences individuals' perceptions regarding individual's identity, as well as romantic relationships and marriage (Alani et al., 2016). Laosethakul and Leingpibul (2010) studied gender perception of the computing-related career/education fields and found that Chinese women faced challenges to be recognized and successful in a male-dominated society, although they have been expected to be as capable as men. Regarding housewives' role and domestic labor, it has been primarily viewed as unwaged labor. Housewives' domestic and affective labor is unpaid and subject to exploitation because it creates uncommodified products such as emotional care (Tan et al., 2020).

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In China, gender schema is deeply rooted in Confucianism, with the notions such as "Men are born superior to women," "a woman without talent is a virtuous one" (Liu, 2006). The Communist Party of China adopted the one-child policy from the late 1970s until 2015. Some people believe that this policy might create more education and employment opportunities for girls and women. The reality is that most people still hold the gender binary expectations and stereotypes (Liu, 2006). As Liu (2006) argued, "gender-specific expectations for girls have been extended rather than fundamentally changed while those for boys remain largely the same as in the past." With social development, girls are expected to integrate both masculine and feminine characteristics.

Feminist Discourse in Chinese Society

In addition to gender schema theory, Hofstede (1984) also suggested that gender perceptions reflected cultural values. In both the United States and China, gender has been polarized as masculinity and femininity. The Chinese society has been historically a maledominant society in which women's role is primarily in families to take care of husbands and children (Xiang et al., 2015). Women have been expected to be "virtuous wife and good mother" (Liu, 2014, p. 19). Also, Liu (2014) summarized the traditional Chinese female virtues such as female gentleness and female beauty and claimed that women with feminine characteristics and attributes of caregiver, reproducers, and nurturers were much successful in the marriage market. With the social and economic change and globalization, the role and self-perception of women in China have been changed profoundly. On the one hand, Chinese women have been viewed as an important and equal part of the workforce. Chinese women believe that they are equal to men (Trauth et al., 2008). On the other hand, gender inequalities and discrimination are still existing, and women have faced more challenges and difficulties for work-life balance and career development.

Feminism has been defined as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (Hooks, 2000, p. 1). Since the early 1990s, feminism has become a popular discourse in China. Chinese feminists started embracing the global concept of feminism to address gender issues in China. Concepts such as women's empowerment and womencentered sustainable development emerged in the mainstream discourse (Wang & Zhang, 2010). Scholars criticized the term "equality between men and women" promoted by the Communist Party of China because it simply claims that men and women can perform the same service for the patriarchal state (Wang & Zhang, 2010). Therefore, Chinese feminists adopted the term "gender equality," explicated gender-power relations, and called for attention to the limitations and constraints of women's liberation.

Feminism emphasizes women's growing awareness of the oppression and exploitation in the existing social structure and power relations. However, scholars also claimed that within a neoliberal paradigm, the claimed individual choice, empowerment, and voice have nothing related to structural injustice and economic redistribution (Wu & Dong, 2019). Neoliberal feminism advocates an independent gender relationship that women and men are complementary to each other (Rottenberg, 2018). Under the marketization, female sexuality and the public discourse of nurturing children through mothering have called married women to return home to fulfill their domestic duties. Women's familiar

obligations have remained to be the main concept in Chinese society (Yin, 2021). Women are expected to be able to manage work-family conflict. Also, Peng (2021) argued that neoliberal feminism rationalized the complementary roles of women and men and promoted the feminized male ideal in an interdependent gender relationship. Moreover, the popularity of social media and information technology may help reach what Peng proposed. **Social Media and Digital Feminism**

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With the prevalence of information technology and social media in daily life, scholars have studied how gender is performed in this domain. With the emergence of social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Sina Weibo, and WeChat, individuals have had opportunities to communicate widely and express gendered identities in the digital space.

Existing literature has mainly focused on the gender difference in online platforms. Strano (2008) studied gender differences in impression management and found that women engage in impression management more than men. The study found that women used their profile pictures more than men for the purpose of impression management. Samp et al. (2003) examined gender-swapping and gender monitoring at online platforms and found that gender schema was not associated with these practices. Rose et al. (2012) also studied Facebook users' profile pictures and found that the prominent traits for males' pictures were active, dominant, and independent, while females were attractive and dependent.

With the "Chinese feminist awakening," information technology provides channels and platforms for every user to make commentaries on celebrity cheating affairs and marriages (Kaiman, 2016; Wu & Dong, 2019). The Internet becomes the main domain to mediate conflicts that occur regarding romantic relationships and familiar issues.

Digital feminism is a concept focusing on the interaction between feminism and digital technology (Chang & Tian, 2021). Scholars discussed how digital technology created new feminist expression and feminist culture and mobilized public awareness of gender equality (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Wang & Driscoll, 2018). For example, scholars have explored how women around the world use social media to fight sexism, sexual harassment, and gender inequality (Jackson, 2018; Rentschler, 2014). Studies on various social media platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube described how digital technology provided opportunities for contemporary feminism's development (Clark, 2016; Rentschler, 2014).

With the proliferation of information technology, individuals have more possibilities to express their opinions regarding gender identity and gender roles as well as their social relationships. Lemons and Parzinger (2007) found that women in information technology professions were much less gender schematic than men. The question here is whether social media simply replicate cultural and mass media normative versions of gender roles and identity, or social media can help us understand gender roles more from a diverse and inclusive perspective.

Overall, studies have explored how people felt and perceived their own identities and duties in a family through cultural and feminist perspectives. This research sought to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between the current feminist discourse, social media, and gender through gender schema theory (Bem, 1981). This research wanted to answer the specific question of how social media has portrayed housewives and reflected the gender schema changes in Chinese society.

Methodology

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To answer the research question, this research adopted critical discourse analysis as a qualitative content analysis approach to analyze an online poll conducted by the website Yahoo. The critical discourse analysis approach puts the texts within a specific sociocultural context and analyzes the texts at the textual, discursive, and socio-cultural levels (Fairclough, 2003; Khosravinik & Unger, 2016).

Right after Lee's post on Sina Weibo, Yahoo did a poll asking the question, "Do you think housewives should get paid?" Under the question, there was a blurb that stated,

In Leehom Wang's divorce controversy, his ex-wife JingLei Lee published an article. In this article, Lee mentioned that modern women had the capacity to receive higher education while they could only play roles as wives and mothers in families. She said, "the salary of this job should include the opportunity cost that you have the capability, but you don't work."

Before the poll closed on December 20, 2021, there were 10,221 people voted. Among these votes, 9,377 voted for "Yes, housewives make significant contributions to families," and 844 voted for "No, housework should not be paid." All the votes have comments.

We downloaded all the comments, deleted comments that only stated simple words such as "yes," "no," "of course," and "definitely." In total, 5994 comments, including 5,385 comments voted for "yes" and 609 comments voted for "no," were analyzed for the present study. These comments might not be able to represent all Chinese people's views and opinions regarding the gender issues in China; they provide a window into a general discourse among the public. All the comments were in Mandarin and translated into English for data analysis. Both the two researchers are fluent in both Mandarin and English.

Data analysis adopted a theme analysis approach and focused on the comments' perception of themselves, housewives' role, family, and marriage. The two researchers first read the comments separately and repeatedly to identify the significant and repetitive statements. Then the two researchers gathered together to discuss the significant statements and categorized those into groups, and developed a structure of themes for data analysis. In the process, we allowed for emerging themes or concepts to arise. The final themes were constantly compared with the collected data and the literature to derive the discussions and conclusions of this research. The discursive analysis allowed the researchers to interpret the texts, connect the texts with the socio-cultural processes, and examine the contextual discourse production within wider society (Fairclough, 2003).

Findings

Three major themes emerged from the data: (1) traditional gender roles and stereotypes in Contemporary China; (2) equality, empowerment, and social justice; (3) feminist identity: struggles between a collective and individual identity. Intercoder reliability confirmed that these themes were consistent between the two researchers. Attitudes, identities, and culture are all keys to understanding the current discourse of feminism and gender role in Chinese society. Also, these themes are consistent with Bem's (1981) gender schema theory. The online comments reflected people's experiences, identities, and their own attitudes on the similarities and differences in gender roles.

Theme 1: Traditional Gender Roles and Stereotypes in Contemporary China

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Traditional cultural expectations for women and gender role stereotypes emerged through ideas about marriage and family and reflected the cultural expectation of women's role in Chinese society. As mentioned in the literature, women have been viewed as the key to family, community, even state stability because women take the main responsibility to take care of the husband, children, and the parents-in-law. One comment claimed that "housewives should have salary because they are nurturing the next generation for the county." Another one stated, "housewives should get paid because they are the main force to stabilize our society." From a traditional perspective of Chinese culture, one of the women's core capacities is housetraining the husband and children. Like one of the comments stated, "I am a housewife, and I take care of my husband, children, and my family very well. My husband gives me almost 50,000 New Taiwan dollars. This is what I deserve. And he also has the ability to make so much money. If you are a true man, you should learn from my husband." This statement presented a gender stereotype and a feminized male idea in Chinese society that men are breadwinners who should make enough money to support the family.

Although housewives were viewed as playing a key role in maintaining the stability of family, community, and society, domestic labor is gendered and valued less in society. Therefore, people who perform domestic labor are also viewed as less valuable. Traditional Chinese culture views men as dominant while women as subordinate. Like one of the comments voted for "No" stated, "most men in Taiwan would say, we provide food and house for our wife. And the wife still wants salary? How could it be fair?" Housewives' main roles are taking care of children, husband, parents-in-law. A comment voted for "Yes" stated that nobody wanted to be a housewife because housewives were viewed as a parasite by society. A comment echoed and mentioned, "Housewives' job is harder than anyone else. I would rather go to work than stay at home to be a housewife. People would look me down and say that I rely on my husband." Both the people who voted for "Yes" and "No" reflected a Chinese culture that views women to play the main role in housework while the husbands are involved very little and don't care too much about the housework. Another comment also described the hardness of being a housewife, "Housewives take good care of the family, almost all year round, and is under great pressure. However, if the male protagonist pays the salary or the family, he often tramples on the housewife's dignity like charity. And the parents-in-law always treat the housewife like she just relies on their son. It is better for girls to make money on their own."

In Chinese society, the involvement of the parent generation in a family is very common. A comment stated, "In early days, the mother-in-law would force the wife to stay at home so that she could oppress the daughter-in-law. Some parents not only oppress the wife by themselves; they also make their son oppress his wife." A dichotomization of feminine and masculine work contextualizes these comments. A comment noted,

I used to be a housewife myself. When I buy a new dress, my mother-in-law would say that my husband very hard to make money. My husband opened the windows so that dust was inevitable, but he said that I was idle at home and could not mop up the ground clean. The baby was born. For half a year, I was unable to sleep well because I was breastfeeding, and once I got a fever to 39 degrees and vomited. So I asked my

husband to take care of the baby before midnight. He said that he needed to work the next day, and I could stay home and take a nap.

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Nowadays, many women have had equal education opportunities and work capacity like men. However, housewives are viewed as material, even gold diggers, when they ask for money from their husbands. The negative attitude neglects their invisible contribution in maintaining the family's stability and taking care of seniors and children at home.

Theme 2: Equality, Empowerment, and Social Justice

The feminist discourse in China has emphasized the terms such as equality, empowerment, and social justice and defined Chinese women as autonomous and modern with the desire for self-expression (Peng, 2021). On the one hand, women in China are expected to fulfill the family obligations of taking care of husband and children; on the other hand, a feminist agenda has constantly proposed that women should be self-reliant and independent because it would be too risky for them to rely on their male partners. This kind of discourse reflects the deep-rooted gender inequality in China's socio-economic structure (Wallis & Shen, 2018).

The collected comments reflected a progressive narrative of gender issues in Chinese society. Some comments stated that contemporary Chinese women are no longer living in ancient times but in the 21st century. With sufficient education and career opportunities, women should pursue their own happiness and true love. For people who voted that housewives should get paid, one of the main reasons was respect and fairness. Some comments mentioned that getting a salary is a way to respond to human beings' basic values. A comment noted that "the husband's family cannot just take for granted of, even ignore the housewives' contribution."

The term reciprocity was mentioned many times in these comments. And getting payment for housewives' work is a way to ensure reciprocity. A comment noted, "the contribution to a family should be equal between wife and husband. If it is not equal, there should be a payment." Another comment echoed the statement, "how can a man work hard without his wife help him take care of the family and support him?"

However, most of the comments have not addressed anything related to the patriarchal socio-economic structure of Chinese society. There is only one comment that discussed the current family structure and socio-economic environment,

The family structure of today's has undergone significant changes. The labor market is no longer solely dependent on labor. The popularization of higher education has also created more job opportunities in the workplace. However, workplace equality for men and women is another topic. After the child is born, whether it is a housewife or a househusband, there should be a quantitative economic calculation regarding the family's contribution. Full-time housewives and househusbands should have the so-called opportunity cost. And not only the financial resources are contributions. But human nature always sees that money is more than time spent. Therefore, in the current state of society, each opportunity cost should be calculated reasonably to calculate the remuneration due to full-time housewives and househusbands and to establish this remuneration as a social standard so that the work of full-time mothers or fathers can be valued.

In addition to gender issues, another term that emerged from the comments is class. Wang's family was viewed as superior to Lee's. Therefore, Wang's class is higher than Lee's. The rationalization of gender hierarchy adheres to a patriarchal objectification of women in the current Chinese society.

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Another controversy in these comments is about whether women should give up their career opportunities for their families. People who voted for "yes" stated that "housewives give up the opportunities for their own ability development and financial independence to take care of family. So, the other person who is making money should compensate the housewife." In contrast, people who vote for "no" commented, "Some people get married just because they don't want to work. They want to find a long-term meal ticket. So, it depends on the situation. Suppose they have a job and are forced to resign because of the need of the family or children; they might need to get the salary. But for people whose job is not stable, they should not get paid." Another comment expressed a similar idea,

Modern women have the ability to receive higher education, but they can only play the roles of wives and mothers in the family. This is entirely a personal choice. I don't understand why they don't go out to work if they have the ability. Professional women sacrifice the time they spend with their children when they grow up. Financial independence is the same as self-realization. Professional women have to face the problem of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law as they do housework after getting off work. Why can housewives enjoy both? There is a profession called babysitter, and you can give your baby to a babysitter. Take it; if you go out to work, no one will force you, unless you communicate badly with your partner, don't tell me it is not safe to have the babysitter take care of your child. Professional women are taking this kind of worry and risk!!! In short, you have chosen to be a housewife. You should bear your own choice, or you just need to go out and find a job!

The divorce between Wang and Lee attracted so much public attention because of the topic on housewives. Although some people believe that being a housewife is a personal choice, the current public discourse has promoted the idea that staying in the workforce and keeping the competitiveness on the job market is the safest choice for women. Compared to many Western countries, women's employment rate in Chinese society is much lower, especially when compared to women in different age groups. Statistics show that in 2018, women's employment rate in Hong Kong was 55.1%, while men's rate was 68.3%. And around 35% of women could not join the workforce because of the need to take care of their families. Taiwan is a similar situation. In 2020, women's employment rate was 51.41%, while men's was 67.24%. In addition, the employment rate for women at the age 55-59 in Taiwan was only 35, while it was 65% in Japan, 72% in Germany, and 82% in Sweden (本足, 2021). The longer time women spend time on housework, the less opportunity they will have in the job market, which truly hinders the development of gender equality in Chinese society.

Theme 3: Feminist Identity: Struggles between Collective and Individual Identities

Traditional Confucianism constructs women by defining their relations with men as mothers, sisters, and wives. Therefore, women are secondary within the collectives of the family and community (Leung, 2003). Family responsibilities impose a double burden on

women. With the purpose to maintain a harmonious family and state stability, women are expected and required to take responsibility and to be benevolent and caring for others.

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On the contrary, Chinese women have also been encouraged to seek individual liberation and emancipation through their own discourse, self-determination, and self-awareness raising. There is a clear shift in women's gender identities, combining women's domestic role, reproductive role, nurturing role, and work role. Among the comments, women's self-reliance has been mentioned many times. The comments asserted that women should live for themselves and should not sacrifice their life and happiness for their husband, partner, or family. Women should be outspoken, independent. One comment stated, "The most important part for housewives is the recognition of self-value. Many people think that only working outside makes contributions. Actually, dealing with all the big and small stuff in the family requires significant endurance."

The emphasis on women's role in the family also creates another debate regarding whether housewives should get paid, which is the power relation between the wife and husband and the associated impact caused by payment. People who think housewives should get a salary stated that the salary is a symbol of recognition, respect, and fairness. However, people who think there should not be paid claimed that if the housewife gets a salary from the husband, then the husband becomes the boss or employer, which would make the power relation between them more imbalanced. Like one of the comments argued, "if the housewife should get a salary, should we set up KPI [Key Performance Indicator]? So the wife should do housework based on the husband's standard. Just like in the workplace, the standard is not set by yourself."

From a neoliberal feminist perspective, women should take the self-responsibility for their own well-being. A comment claimed that the payment for housewives' work should be for their efforts and contribution but not a kind of alms. Under this situation, economic gain is much more important than anything else. Some people believe that housewives should not get paid because women make a choice because of their love for the family. However, another comment stated, "the love for a family cannot exchange for anything." Also, not everything in the family can be quantified and assessed by financial measures.

A comment connected the discussion with the feminist discourse and claimed, It is a conflict with the statement of "no gender stereotype and no gender discrimination" that is always shouted by some people. I would vote for yes if we were in a feudal society now. But we are in modern society. We can have a nanny and technology to help with the housework. And if both wife and husband can make money, they do not need to rely on anybody. If my wife truly wants to stay at home, I would spend money on a nanny, washing machine, and so on. But I would hope my wife could learn something about investment. So I can give my money for her to manage and invest.

Gender relations in China have gone through significant evolvement due to social, economic, and political changes. Chinese women's new identity involves aspects of their role in the patriarchal family and social relations. The discussion on whether housewives should be paid reflects the various opinions held by different people. One of the core arguments is that whether housework is a kind of job. People who think housewife is doing harder and more difficult work than most other jobs claimed that housewife should definitely receive salary as a recognition of their contribution to the family and society. On

the contrary, some people believe that housework should be the responsibility of both wife and husband and there is no way to measure the contribution by payment.

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Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the prevalence of social media has made the representations of gender inequality in daily lives more explicit. The online discussions raised the public's awareness regarding how the traditional gender schema has been normalized and become a dominant discourse in social life. Social media also provide spaces for women to share their experiences and opinions and to inspire and support each other beyond the location and environmental limitations. As Sadowski (2016) claimed, the current feminist activism became a digital-material entanglement with the impact of information technology.

In romantic relationships and marriage, not everything can be measured by financial ways. According to some of the comments, women generally feel the most uncomfortable because their contribution to the family is taken for granted by their husband, family, and society. Their housework is not considered to have the same work pressure as making money to support a family. Like some of the comments voted for "No" stated, housewives spend a lot of time at home, watching movies and shopping, and it is an easy job. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people are working from home. A comment stated, "the husband work at his company, and he does not need to do anything when he gets home. But the wife is working from home, without off time." According to the statistics of UN Women, the time that women spent on parenting was six hours longer than men. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this gap increased to 7.7 hours, and women averagely spent 31.5 hours on parenting, which is almost another full-time job (本尼, 2021). Among the collected comments, there were more than 9,000 who voted for "Yes," which means they believe housewives should get paid, and only more than 800 votes supported that housewives should not get paid. However, among the 9,000 comments, we can see there are still many people believe women's main job should be taking care of family and being a good housewife. Although gender equality has been the main term in public discourse, housewives' work still receives much less recognition due to the gender schema and the traditional perception of gender roles in Chinese society.

Social media have empowered women to express their voices and challenge the status quo, prejudices, and power imbalances. In the process of seeking social justice, social media and digital platforms have been an effective approach for women to advocate feminist ideas among the general public. Jinglei Lee took a non-confrontational approach to express her feelings and requests. The approach is also praised by many people. The online discussion also reflects that women's progress is still hindered in the male-centered society of China. The traditional Chinese culture has formed the segregation of gender roles that women should take care of and be devoted to family (Hofstede, 1984). Women are always more likely to sacrifice their careers. This research revealed the deeply rooted gender stereotypes and their overall influences in Chinese society regarding gender identity and gender roles. As previous studies have identified, the contemporary feminist culture in China did not explicitly confront patriarchal norms (Chang et al., 2018; Chang & Tian, 2021). Since the sphere of housework is not solely occupied by women, and some men have taken their domestic duties as "househusbands," it is interesting to continue such

research journey with the question of - are the househusbands viewed/expected similarly to housewives in media, especially social media?

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