"She uses men to boost her career": Chinese digital cultures and gender stereotypes of female academics in Zhihu discourses

Altman Yuzhu Peng, Jenny Zhengye Hou, Majid KhosraviNik & Xiaoxiao Zhang

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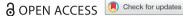Altman Yuzhu Peng [a], Jenny Zhengye Hou [b], Majid KhosraviNik[a] and Xiaoxiao Zhang[c]

[a]Media, Culture & Heritage, Newcastle University, UK; [b]School of Communication, Queensland University of Technology, Australia; [c]School of International Communications, University of Nottingham Ningbo, People's Republic of China

ABSTRACT

Portrayed by the media as the story of "how a female PhD juggles intimate relationship with four male PhD academics", the LM incident, named after the female main character of the story, was a high-profile case, which provoked public debates on Chinese social media in 2019. In this article, we explore how the stereotyping of female PhDs plays out in Chinese Internet users' discussions about the LM incident. We collected a total of 632 relevant posts from the most popular Chinese community question-answering (CQA) site – Zhihu and analysed them by drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA). The research findings reveal how a sexualised portrayal of female PhDs, which is dramatically "different" from the traditional, asexual stereotypes of well-educated women, is established in Zhihu users' postings. Many Zhihu users, including both women and men, mobilise an overwhelmingly sexualised portrayal of female PhDs, which speaks to the normalisation of patriarchal discourses in the status quo of Chinese academia and beyond. The research findings shed light on post-socialist gender politics, which facilitates the perpetuation of gender essentialism in China in the post-reform era.

KEYWORDS
Academia; China; female PhD; gender stereotype; post-socialist gender politics; Zhihu

Introduction

In July 2019, a love-affair story hit the headlines of major Chinese news websites.[1] The story was about LY – a senior research fellow based in a prominent hospital who attempted suicide after his PhD student – LM, with whom he had had an intimate relationship, decided to break up with him.[2] The love-affair story, often labelled as the LM incident, became breaking news, not only because the female main character was accused of having simultaneously dated four academic male colleagues (PhD candidates or holders), but also because the most valuable presents LY claimed to have given her were five research articles published in high-impact, Science Citation Indexed (SCI) academic journals. The story quickly went viral, encouraging extensive discussions about

female PhDs on the Chinese-language Internet. This particular debate bespoke a particular discursive site around discourses of gender, academia and patriarchy in contemporary China, which is the focus of this study.

Our extended search shows that the LM incident was one of the most discussed topics on the popular Chinese community question-answering (CQA) site – Zhihu in late July 2019. Zhihu is mainly populated by educated, middle-class Internet users (Peng 2020a). The LM incident was particularly eye-catching within this group of the population, evidenced by volumes of commentaries about the incident circulated on the CQA site. More interestingly, the characteristics of the female main character in the incident appeared to have defied the long-standing "*third gender*" stereotype in Chinese popular cultures, which portrays and perceives female academics, e.g. PhDs, as women who have lost their sexual attraction in the course of pursuing academic achievements (Liu 2014, 20). These Zhihu users' engagement with the LM incident caused this portrayal of female PhDs to be contested. This contributed to this female cohort being subject to a differing process of stereotyping in Chinese digital cultures.

This article uses the "LM incident" as a case study to unravel how the stereotypes of female PhDs play out in Chinese digital cultures. To this end, we analysed Zhihu users' discussions about the LM incident by drawing on a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach. Accounting for the theoretical stance of CDA, which aims to unpack the exercise of power through discourse (Bouvier and Machin 2018), the present research specifically focuses on the imbalanced gender power relations embedded in Zhihu users' postings rather than offering a grand narrative of gender representations in Chinese society. In this way, the research findings provide a glimpse of the socio-political processes through which the stereotypes of accomplished women can be mobilised as a communicative resource in social media and how such discursive practices facilitate the contestation of gender power relations in Chinese academia and beyond.

The article proceeds by providing a critical review of China's gendered higher education and its relation to the wider gender politics, i.e. arguing for the need to study the stereotyping of female PhDs in Chinese digital cultures. The background section is followed by a discussion of CDA as the theoretical approach of the study. We then detail the rationale behind the design of the present case study and analyse the findings drawn from the empirical data. We conclude by discussing the socio-cultural implications of the research findings.

Background

Women in China's higher education system

Throughout China's ancient history, a "*yin-yang* balance" between women and men is emphasised (Liu 2014, 20). This gender tradition appears to define women and men as complementary, but it involves an underlying, patriarchal logic that prioritises men over women. Under these circumstances, for thousands of years, Chinese women were only allowed to acquire particular types of knowledge, such as cooking, spinning, and needlework, in order to provide family services (Tang 1999). Their access to literacy education was denied because women's ignorance was considered an important female virtue (Liu 2014). China's education system began to open up to women from the early 1900s after early feminist thoughts were introduced to the country by socialites returning

from abroad (Lin and Baker 2019). With the founding of the communist regime, and in line with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) revolutionary manifesto that promised to include women in social production (Wallis and Shen 2018), there were significant improvements, in terms of gender equality, in the country's education system. From the 1980s onwards, that progress has been accelerated by the CCP's implementation of birth control policies, which have effectively encouraged single-daughter family units to invest in the female offspring's education.[3] Since then, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of women in China's higher education system, with recent statistics showing that female students now account for more than half of the university student population (Xu, Wang, and Ye 2017).

Yet, this closure of ostensible gender gaps in terms of access to education by no means suggests that gender equality has been achieved in Chinese academia. Female academics are still in the minority in China's higher education system, and they constantly encounter a variety of disadvantages or even discrimination (Lin and Baker 2019). In terms of career progression, there are clearly fewer female academics promoted to senior positions, with professorships, doctoral supervision posts, and departmental leadership positions dominated by men (Xu, Wang, and Ye 2017). Alongside the glass-ceiling effect, a nationwide funding system also officially privileges male researchers over their female counterparts (Xu, Wang, and Ye 2017). These gendered pressures impact- female academics' everyday lives as a society also expects them to manage a perfect family–career balance (Liu 2014). In this way, patriarchy is both institutionally and socio-culturally inscribed in China's higher education sector, creating numerous obstacles to the career progression of female academics.

Post-socialist gender politics

The position of female professionals in Chinese academia is the epitome of what Wallis (2015, 226) terms "post-socialist gender politics", which alludes to the socio-political engineering of the rise and fall of women's status in the post-reform era. Since the 1970s, the CCP has launched a series of economic reform policies, which have effectively provided men with competitive advantages in the labour market, because they are perceived as possessing the most prized technical skills and personal qualities in the workplace (Liu 2014). In this process, normative female ideals have been promoted to justify the male-dominance of the restructured labour market, urging women to "take on attributes of care, emotionality, communicativeness, and gentleness deriving from their role as reproducers and nurturers" (Liu 2014, 20). This has led to the post-reform revival of the patriarchal tradition, in which the *yin-yang* balance between women and men is once again highlighted (Feldshuh 2018).

The CCP's current administration, however, avoids engaging with this structural and systemic gender inequality (Evans 2008). This approach is most notably evidenced by the Chinese authority's suppression of grassroots feminist activism (Chu and Ruthrof 2017). The reasoning behind this approach is that contemporary China's gender inequality is associated with the reform of the Chinese economy. This means critical discourses of gender may be exploited by domestic critics of the CCP to undermine the legitimacy of the Party-State system (Peng 2020a). Therefore, while the Chinese government still administratively commits to improving women's status, its official propaganda,

paradoxically, tends to promote female role models with frequent reference to the notion of a *yin-yang* balance. As Liu (2014, 21) notes, it does not matter whether the female role models are "scientists, entrepreneurs, celebrities, or workers who have won recognition in mundane and low-pay work", the characteristics they share in common is that they never lost their feminine traits.

According to Evans (2008, 375), post-socialist gender politics has effectively promoted the marginalisation of gender "as a category of analysis" in Chinese society. Contemporary feminist literature has well-explained how gender differences are institutionalised through a socio-political process in which women and men are encouraged to behave differently in their everyday lives (Renold and Ringrose 2013). Yet, as Evans (2008) notes, the constructionist account of gender is marginalised in post-reform China, meaning that gender differences in Chinese public discourses are still intentionally confused with biologically determined sex. This tendency facilitates the perpetuation of gender essentialism, which defines gender differences as inherent, natural phenomena in Chinese society (Wallis and Shen 2018). While this is often framed as a form of empowerment that addresses their self-autonomy (Chen and Chen 2021), this strategic conflation has effectively hindered the agency of Chinese women, including female academics, who represent the most well-educated group of the female population, to challenge existing gender boundaries in both their profession and everyday lives (Xu, Wang, and Ye 2017).

Female PhDs in digital cultures

While being marginalised in academia, well-educated women are, at the same time, highly visible in Chinese society (Liu 2014). Amid the widespread penetration of social media, the visibility of these women is notably reflected as female PhDs are being stereotypically portrayed as asexual beings on the Chinese-language Internet because of their relatively higher career achievements compared to the average population (Peng forthcoming). This phenomenon is contextualised against the backdrop of digital cultures, which are largely led by men and advocate masculine values (Fang and Repnikova 2018). It confirms how women and womanhood become "the site of subordination, penetration, and insult", which facilitates male Internet users' push for their agendas in gender politics (Wallis 2015, 223). In this sense, a comprehensive understanding of how post-socialist gender politics plays out in Chinese digital cultures requires us to trace how the portrayals of women, such as female PhDs, feed into Internet users' contestation of gender power relations.

The stereotyping of female PhDs in Chinese digital cultures can be observed on the most popular CQA site – Zhihu. Similar to Quora, Zhihu is a unique social media platform, which allows Internet users to answer questions raised by their peers on the site. The socio-technological architecture of the site encourages its users to share high-quality, information-rich content (Peng 2020a). Significantly, middle-class intellectuals comprise the largest cohort on the site, as over 80 per cent of Zhihu users are either university students or professionals with a bachelor's degree or above (Zhang 2020). With middle-class intellectuals representing the political ballast in society, their frequent engagement with trending socio-political issues has turned the site into a fertile ground where popular opinions in China are nourished (Goodman 2014). Our extended search shows that female PhDs are under the spotlight in the Zhihu community, and this is evidenced by

over 1,800 questions asked on the CQA site being labelled as "female PhD"-related.[4] Extensive discussions of these questions on the site could possibly lead to the construction of a variety of portrayals of this female cohort in the discursive practices of Zhihu users, who are typically from a middle-class, intellectual background.

A critical discourse analysis approach

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) offers scope to address the portrayal of female academics in Zhihu users' postings. Co-founded by Fairclough and Wodak (1997), CDA is both a theoretical approach and a textual analysis method that integrates language and its context of use in critical analysis of meaning-making. It defines discourse as a socially conditioned practice, which takes the form of "language use in speech and writing" to shape people's mental cognition of the outside world (Wodak and Meyer 2016, 5). The theoretical stance of CDA is based on an assumption that discourse is the foundation for the exercise of power in society (Bouvier and Machin 2018). A CDA approach analyses texts by unpacking how differing discourses constitute "ways of representing aspects of the world" and frame "different perspectives on the world […] associated with the different relations people have to the world" (Fairclough 2003, 124). It articulates how discourse facilitates the exercise of power by "producing, reproducing, and contesting ideologies, and sustaining relations of privilege and oppression" (Xu and Tan 2020, 625).

Fairclough (2003) has developed a widely accepted, three-dimensional CDA framework, which analyses language use at the textual, discursive, and socio-cultural levels. The textual level of analysis involves a linguistic description that articulates the use of linguistic devices, such as lexical choice, referential strategy, predicational strategy, and argumentation strategy, in communication (KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh 2017). Based on the linguistic description, the discursive level of analysis unpacks the discursive patterns emerging with the process through which the language use is practised (Fairclough 2003). The socio-cultural level of analysis then links the discursive practice to the wider social milieu, examining how a discourse strategy is contextually shaped. While CDA is theoretically equipped to tackle various discursive genres, there is a general tendency for CDA studies to focus on "elite" texts produced by powerful institutions, such as the news media. Following the developments in the application of CDA on digital media, there has been a critical reminder that CDA is also about analysing the intersection of discourse and power relations in the context of ordinary citizens' everyday social media use (Bouvier and Machin 2018) or what KhosraviNik (2017) terms as digitally mediated, bottom-up discourse. This argument has been used to explore various forms of discursive power exercise reflected in Chinese digital cultures (Chang, Ren, and Yang 2018; Huang 2020; Peng 2020b).

Following Fairclough's (2003) scholarship, the exercise of power through language use involves mobilising available communicative resources to "evoke a particular persona, construct relationships, and define situations" (Guo 2019, 333). Focusing on the notion of gender, Baxter (2017) argues that stereotypes of women serve as an important type of communicative resource that constitutes the patriarchal nature of popular cultural discourses. Utilising a series of case studies, she has discovered that the production of popular cultural texts often involves using gendered discourse strategies, and constructing either hyper-masculine or feminine stereotypes of women in powerful positions to

rationalise their career achievements (Baxter 2017). These stereotypes endure over time, shaping people's cognitive perceptions of gender by influencing their impressions of women and womanhood (Peng 2020a). Yet, they tend to aid misunderstanding rather than understanding, as they often misrepresent the female cohort by characterising their members as homogenised without acknowledging variations in their individual characteristics (Feldshuh 2018). With frequent reference to these stereotypes in meaning-making, the gendered aspect of popular cultural discourses upholds the existing power structures of society by facilitating discrimination against women (Baxter 2017).

From a CDA perspective, the stereotype of female PhDs is typical of such communicative resources, which is indicative of the imbalanced gender power relations embedded in popular Chinese discourses of women. Similar to the "nerdy" construction of female scientists in Western societies, the *third-gender* stereotype in China portrays female PhDs as "unmarried, cold-blooded, pitiless, tough and aggressive woman […] with unusual intelligence" (Xu, Wang, and Ye 2017, 562). It emphasises the undesirability of female PhDs in the marriage market because of the threats they pose to men's hegemony in society (Liu 2014). Yet, the asexual *third-gender* stereotype is not the only type of stigmatised portrayal of Chinese women with outstanding accomplishments. As Baxter (2017) notes, stereotypes of accomplished women may also exhibit sexualised characteristics, which justify existing social orders by linking women's career achievements to their ability to "seduce" male colleagues. Such sexualised stereotypes function as a containment strategy, which publicly insults women who do not adhere to traditional social norms in order to maintain existing gender power relations (Dobson 2019; García-Gómez 2020).

While having touched upon the *third-gender* stereotype (Liu 2014), existing CDA literature has not yet systematically analysed how female PhDs are stereotypically portrayed in Chinese digital cultures. This is a much-needed intellectual intervention. In China's higher education system, a series of sexual harassment cases surfaced recently as a result of the global MeToo Movement spreading across the country (Xu and Tan 2020). As Xu and Tan's (2020) research shows, in this kind of sexual harassments, it is often female PhD students who are the victims, with suspected male professors deploying discourse strategies, with sub-textual reference to gender stereotypes, to dismiss charges against them. Such discursive practices provide the potential for constructing a sexualised stereotype of female PhDs, which is indicative of the entanglement between gender and institutional power relations in Chinese academia. In light of the exercise of power behind the scenes, a CDA account of how female PhDs' bodies are sexualised in Chinese digital cultures not only unveils the position of female professionals in academic hierarchies but also informs a better understanding of gender inequality in wider society.

Research design

Under the CDA rubric, the present research analyses the stereotyping of female PhDs in Chinese digital cultures by considering Zhihu users' discussions about the LM incident as the selected discursive site. To collect the textual data, we retrieved posts from a question on Zhihu, entitled "*What is your view on FD's female PhD – LM*".[5] The question was selected because it generated the most answers amongst the questions relating to the incident and, therefore, aggregated postings by Zhihu users with a variety of personal characteristics and socio-cultural backgrounds. It was also the one that explicitly referred to the

female main character – LM as a "female PhD", and this attribute encouraged numerous commentaries concentrating on the female-PhD cohort. By considering this question as the data source, we collected a total of 632 posts (136 women; 289 men; 207 anonymous users). The posts were written in the Chinese language, and we translated them to English for analysis. In this article, Zhihu users are provided with pseudonyms to ensure the confidentiality of their personal information.

Utilising a CDA account of the stereotyping of accomplished women, we focus on the communicative function of the female-PhD stereotype in Zhihu users' textual production. The research questions guiding the data analysis include:

> RQ1: How does the LM incident offer Zhihu users the opportunity to establish and assess a differing portrayal of female PhDs?

> RQ2: How do Zhihu users evoke the portrayal of female PhDs to rationalise or challenge gender power relations in the context of academia and beyond?

To address RQ1-2, we employed Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model, incorporating Baxter's (2017) CDA approach to gender stereotypes in popular cultural discourses, to scrutinise the sampled posts collected from Zhihu. The analysis focused on (a) how the word – "female PhD" was used in association with terms containing gendered connotations in specific instances, (b) how such linguistic features constitute consistent discursive patterns, and (c) how such discursive patterns speak to the gendered social milieu. In particular, our application of the CDA method at the textual and discursive levels followed KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh and Khosravinik's (2020, 3,619) advice in applying a Discourse-Historcial approach to CDA (Wodak and Meyer 2016); specifically tackling the "referential (naming) strategies, predicational (description) strategies, and argumentation strategies" used in Zhihu users' postings. This analytical technique facilitates a systematic categorisation of textual data units to uncover the "dominant representation of social groups" (KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh 2017, 3,619), which is suitable for the scope of the research.

Analytical discussion

With an account of the referential, predicational, and argumentation strategies used in the sampled posts, the analysis reveals a gendered focus embedded in Zhihu users' postings. Despite in-group variations, such a gendered focus is largely consistent, signifying both female and male Zhihu users' acceptance of existing gender power relations. A detailed analytical discussion of the research findings is provided below.

Referential strategy

In threads below the sampled question, Zhihu users' postings are prompted by the LM incident. Unsurprisingly, we detected a large volume of posts involving a direct reference to the female main character, who is a key focus of the current debate. Such a focus is gendered, and this is most tellingly revealed by Zhihu users' lexical choices.

As Table 1 shows, while the name of the female main character – "LM" is often used in Zhihu users' postings (227 hits in 129 posts), its frequency is lower than nouns, such as "PhD" (*boshi*; 284 hits in 131 posts), "female PhD" (*nvboshi*; 236 hits in 129 posts), and

Table 1. A list of words by hits

Words	In Chinese	Posts	Hits
people	*ren*	216	530
PhD	*boshi*	284	284
female PhD	*nvboshi*	129	236
academic	*xueshu*	121	236
LM	*LM*	124	227
male	*nan*	104	224
woman	*nv*	42	150
research	*keyan*	77	136
man	*nanren*	64	132
issue	*shiqing*	73	117
female	*nvxing*	57	114
supervisor	*daoshi*	45	102
female student	*nvsheng*	48	101
student	*xuesheng*	50	101
article	*wenzhang*	49	100
research paper	*lunwen*	62	92
society	*shehui*	64	90
woman	*nvren*	49	80
teacher	*laoshi*	38	78
other people	*bieren*	50	76
evaluation	*pingjia*	58	73
FD	*FD*	41	62
professor	*jiaoshou*	27	54

Note: some frequently used words, such as "she", "he", "they", and "we", were omitted.

"academic" (*xueshu*; 236 hits in 121 posts), which either describe academic professionals with a doctorate, or the type of work with which these professionals engage daily. This is in addition to the fact that related designation words describing an occupation in the higher education system, such as "supervisor" (*daoshi*; 102 hits in 45 posts), "student" (*xuesheng*; 101 hits in 50 posts), "teacher" (*laoshi*; 78 hits in 38 posts), and "professor" (*jiaoshou*; 54 hits in 27 posts), also frequently appear in Zhihu users' postings. Such lexical choices reveal that the LM incident has prompted Zhihu users' discussions about issues relating to academia, thus, going beyond the incident per se.

The lexical choices in Zhihu users' postings show that the designation words often collocate with a gender expression. In other words, the words – female and male are often used by Zhihu users to describe a profession, pointing towards the adoption of a gendered lens to participate in the discussion. This gendered lens is, in part, associated with Zhihu users' (re)examination of the traits of the female-PhD cohort. This tendency is revealed by the exact phrase – "female PhDs" (*nvboshi*) being used 236 times by 129 Zhihu users in their postings. On the contrary, the collocation of "male" and "PhD" is only found 51 times in 31 posts. The frequent, gendered use of the word – PhD by these users, alongside their sub-textual reference to it, constitutes a referential strategy that facilitates the construction of a differing portrayal of female PhDs on Zhihu.

> A37, woman: This female PhD dated four boyfriends at the same time [...]? She put female PhDs under the spotlight.

Referential strategy refers to the naming of "individuals or groups of people, through which social memberships are constructed and represented" (Franklin et al. 2005, 230–231). It is an important aspect of lexical choice, which reflects "the social, psychological, and political views and interests of the discourse producer" (KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh

2017, 3,623). As the above extract reveals, with LM belonging to a group of women having "unexpectedly high" academic achievements, the phrase – "female PhD" is often used to refer to the female main character in Zhihu users' textual production. Such a referential instance is strengthened by the fact that LM's proper name is rarely mentioned, and is systematically replaced by this designated gendered reference, which makes her an aberration to the norm, an attachment, a subsidiary of the academic context. In this way, a consistent discursive pattern is established, which brings the specific characteristics of LM to the forefront as a representative depicter of many, if not all members of the highly educated female cohort.

> A37, man: I feel a bit sorry for Dr LY […]. Based on the last few words Dr LY posted [on social media], I have always believed that the story was not at all simple.

Interestingly, the connection between LM and female PhDs established in Zhihu users' discursive practice comes against a backdrop where the same referential strategy is rarely applied to the male main character. Specifically, the name of the male main character – LY is only used 40 times in 16 posts, with most of these instances collocating with the word – "PhD" when it is simply used as a title prefixing his name. Such a lexical choice is largely gender-neutral and often used in a non-judgemental way. In the instance above, it is even evoked in a sympathetic tone, which paints LY as the victim. It is undeniable that the sampled question per se only explicitly references the name of the female main character, which limits any opportunity to open up a discussion about the male main character. Yet, the two parties are both accused of being involved in serious misconducts in their academic practice and personal life. The one-sided emphasis on the potential representativeness of the female main character, reflected in the above referential instances, provides a glimpse of the gendered scope many Zhihu users adopt to scrutinise the LM incident.

In a patriarchal society, gender power relations are expected to favour men. A female ideal constructed upon the imbalanced gender power relations generally depicts someone gentle and obedient to masculine power, who poses no threat to the male-dominance of the existing socio-economic structures (Liu 2014). Under these circumstances, in popular cultures across the world women with high achievements outside of the domestic sphere are always targeted as aberrations (Baxter 2017). The one-sided focus on the female main character indeed confirms the persistence of this popular cultural phenomenon within the Zhihu community, and it goes further as many Zhihu users evoke predicational strategies to ponder over the reasoning behind the achievements of this particular group of women.

Predicational strategy

Predicational strategy involves a "discursive […] qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, or events", which is "closely connected to the broader argumentation framing the discourse" (KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh 2017, 3,623). In threads below the sampled question, the predicational strategy used by many Zhihu users often involves qualifying the LM incident as a case that permits a rationalisation of female PhDs' "successes" in both romantic relationships and the workplace. In this regard, A13's post is a typical example.

> A13, woman: LM is not the most beautiful type [of women] amongst PhDs, but her appear-
> ance is not ugly either […]. This female PhD is a pickup artist, who also shares a lot in common
> with male PhDs. [I] have no doubt that with these characteristics she can pick up as many
> male PhDs as she wants.

In this post, LM is not primarily discussed as an academic person, but first and foremost as a sexualised woman whose value is predicated upon where she may sit on the beauty scale. She is a woman with access to the academic context and its natural residence, i.e. male PhDs, rather than being an integral component of the academic context. Refer-entially, she is referred to as a "pickup artist", who has unique personal qualities. These personal qualities are described to support a predication with respect to her desirability by men in a romantic relationship. This predication is constituting and constitutive of the long-standing stereotypes of women as sources of disruption, deceit, and loss (Baxter 2017). In particular, while acknowledging LM's possession of the highest academic degree, the narrative reframed this achievement as an additional part of her sexual appeal to the opposite sex. In this way, A13's post not only creates a specific represen-tation of LM as being very visibly feminine and flaunting her attractiveness to lure the opposite sex, but more importantly, it also assumes, perpetuates, and recreates the stereotype of femininity across the board among the whole cohort of women with a doc-torate. This is against the backdrop of an implicit assumption that women in academia lack "the appropriate sexuality" (Liu 2014). In other words, the posting is underpinned by the misogynist catch-22 that such women are either too feminine/sexual or too un-feminine/sexual.

A13's posting is not an isolated example. Although the message is narrated in different ways, the common trait running through this kind of postings is an integration of the broad stereotypes around women and sexuality in general (e.g. hereto-sexuality, norma-tive beauty, male gaze, etc.) within the specific academic contexts (e.g. a dichotomy of sexuality and education, sexual exploitation, etc.). Despite the social media dynamics afforded in Zhihu at the horizontal level, the above speaks to the fact that social media users are not separated from the vertical social discourses (KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018). In this way, Zhihu has provided the space for the re-somatisation of bottom-up social discourses-in-place in a consolidated manner (Sarkhoh and Khosravinik 2020).

Argumentation strategy

Social media discourse is not an isolated discursive manifestation. CDA prioritises dis-course rather than the medium. Thus, it is important to consider the inter-textual, inter-discursive, multi-media aspects in qualities of representation in a given CDA study. However, it is the overall shape of discourses at the intersection of media and society that is at the centre (KhosraviNik 2020). The discourses around female academics which are spreading on Zhihu are inevitably influenced by other synchronic framings in mass media. As previously mentioned, the media narrative, i.e. "a female PhD taking advantage of men by simultaneously dating four male PhD colleagues", has already boosted the pat-terns of stance-making in the Zhihu community. Nevertheless, through social media affor-dances, such as personal engagement, instant reactions, ungated interactions, Zhihu users are also provided with the opportunity to reassess and reengage with the working stereotypes around gender, femininity, and achievements of female

professionals in academia. The fact that the digital afforded discursive spaces give rise to bottom-up discourses does not, however, equate to a move away from the stereotyping. In this process, we have witnessed how the stereotyping of female PhDs facilitates different argumentation strategies when Zhihu users evoke it to participate in gender-issue debates.

According to Wodak (2015, 1), argumentation strategy refers to a "regulated sequence of speech acts, which forms a complex […] network of statements" to either challenge or justify "validity claims, such as truth and normative rightness". It is built upon a systematic use of referential and predicational instances to articulate arguments, which make the ideologies, worldviews, and interests of the discourse producer upfront (KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh 2017). In the LM incident, our scrutiny of Zhihu users' postings reveals that their scope is not limited to the incident per se, but involves using their commentaries on the female main character as a vehicle to rationalise their assessments of gender dynamics in China's academia and beyond.

> A17, woman: 'Low-end' LMs are too easy to find in academia […]. I have a senior female PhD colleague whose husband is coincidently a postgraduate student supervisor. She published three SCI [journal articles] during her first-year PhD study, and all of them were written by her husband […]. 'Work will be easier when women and men work together'.

The theme of gender dynamics within academia is a recurring topic across the posts retrieved from Zhihu. Describing the LM incident as a "typical" case, the argumentation strategy of many Zhihu users' leans towards a justification of women's subordinate position in male-dominant academia. As shown in the above extract, a reversed referential strategy surfaces when A17 uses the name "LM" as a designation to represent not the female main character herself, but the entire group of female academics who utilise romantic relationships or marriages for personal gains. While claiming to condemn such an act, A17 rationalises it by framing the imbalanced gender power relations in academia as a natural clause rooted in women's intellectual deficiency. In this way, the posting puts forward a legitimising argument, which normalises the problematic career path of a small number of female academics. Such an argument, by extension, justifies women's socio-economic dependence on men in general.

In this particular comment, A17 draws on a seemingly personal anecdote to evoke the stereotype of women as "con artists". While describing LM as an exceptional case, female user A17 suggests that women who utilise romantic relationships or marriages for personal gains are commonly found in academia. Such a commentary creates an imaginary of a female PhDs' career path, which echoes existing Chinese patriarchal norms that frame women's socio-economic dependence upon men in their everyday lives (Liu 2014). In this comment, A17's version of the story is articulated via a personal-journey frame. This is a rhetorical manoeuvre to increase the ethos of the speaker, and their legitimacy in connecting their judgements, to the claimed lived experiences in order to make a more convincing impact on her peer Zhihu users. In addition, this personal-journey frame is an abstraction of the phenomenon put forward by quoting the Chinese slang – "work will be easier when women and men work together" (*nannv dapei ganhuo bulei*). The slang is widely used in the Chinese language to explain the so-called "gender-diversity effect", which suggests that collaborations between female and male colleagues may improve productivity in the workplace (Yang 2016). Yet, user A17's post deploys the

slang in a unilateral, satiric fashion, indiscriminately accusing female academics and implying that a large proportion of them are using sexual attraction to men as leverage to boost their career.

> A455, man: To be honest, there are a lot of female PhDs and female master's students [similar to LM]. It is just most of them are not high-flying like her [does].

Echoing female user A17, male user A455 makes a similar assertion with the bottom-line misogynist assumption that women academics are to be viewed as an aberration within the normality of male recruits. This is obviously not a statistical statement, but a discursive judgement based on a body of patriarchal knowledge, which assigns certain limited roles to women and posits that they are categorically not fit for academia; hence the ones who are, must be exploiting their sexuality. These both reiterate a discursive representation of female PhDs as sexualised attachés in academia with little to offer. Furnishing the argument with the phrase – "to be honest", personal-journey rhetoric is also activated by A455 to reach the functional purpose of making his claim more convincing to viewers. Together, the two Zhihu users' discursive practice forms a consistent pattern that exploits the sexualised portrayal of female PhDs as a communicative resource to endorse the long-existing prejudice against women with non-domestic achievements, and which is affirmative of women's dependence on the opposite sex in their career progress (Baxter 2017).

Certainly, there is some positivity across digitally afforded discursive spaces. While the mono-directionality of textual flow in mass media framing leaves no room for variations and nuanced representations, social media provides the space for pushing against the dominant narrative (KhosraviNik 2018). A case in point is that there are instances where the sexualised stereotyping of female PhDs is also challenged and criticised by some Zhihu users, and female user A391 and male user A22's posts are exemplary in this regard.

> A391, woman: Hard-working female professionals indeed comprise the vast majority [in academia]. You cannot draw any conclusion just based on a single case.

> A22, man: It becomes a form of gender discrimination if you just talk about LM […]. He [LY] is not much better than LM, but is there anyone judging male PhDs or male supervisors at all?

Female user A391 starts with a radically different referential strategy in referring to the key actors. Here, female PhDs are referred to as "hard-working female professionals" without rejecting the dominant framing of the particular case of LM. The implicit predication that the majority of female academics are not like this particular case is rhetorically difficult to refute. In this way, the LM incident is defined as an isolated example, meaning that it does not permit the generalisation of the entire female PhD cohort. Aiming to build the same argument, male user A22 makes two assertions: (a). that the tendency to focus only on overgeneralisation stems from a discursive context in which women are at fault by default and (b). that the fact that there is little scrutiny of the role of male academics in sexual scandals points to their patriarchal advantage. In other words, LY was not a victim but an accomplice who violated the code of ethical academic practice but was able to avoid being penalised or criticised. In this way, the posting devises a differing, disproval argumentation strategy by returning to an assessment of the male main character – LY and, by extension, the male-PhD cohort, who are unfairly overlooked in the Zhihu community.

Alongside a few other Zhihu users, who take the same standpoint, users A391 and A22 form an opinion camp against the dominant discourse. Social media communication has been viewed as counterflow discourses. This is about the socio-technological architecture of Zhihu as a form of social media space, which turns the CQA site into a digital forum for gender-issue debates. Yet, this opinion camp has a much smaller group size within the Zhihu community compared to users who align themselves with the dominant discourses. This makes it a much harder voice to hear on Zhihu in relation to this event.

Blatant misogynist voices

With the LM incident being exploited as a vehicle to formulate arguments on gender issues in general terms, many Zhihu users' postings completely diverge from the original context of the story. Instead of judging the behaviours of LM and LY, many of these posts contained a direct expression of personal opinions. In many instances, the functionality of this body of structurally organised meaning-making space serves the recurrent and historical misogynistic arguments, which strive to rationalise the patriarchal status quo in academia and beyond.

> A16, man: I mean no offence to women. [However,] have a look at female professors at Chinese universities. Do you think the standards of their [work] are the same as male professors?

Rather than assessing the traits or behaviours of the female and male main characters in the LM incident, male user A16's posting, simply and readily, categorically dichotomises professorship across the line of gender. This juxtaposition prompts a comparative frame that, on the surface, invites the audience to evaluate the association between the gender of academics and their working ability. Such a rhetorical question imposes a legitimate rhetorical facade onto the misogynist proposition by superficially framing it as an innocent question. The opening phrase is also nothing but the use of an empty disclaimer in an attempt to sound polite. Rhetorical questions are part of presuppositional patterns in discursive evaluations. They make the cognitive processes of rejection more difficult for an average audience. At the same time, they reinforce the sharedness of certain evaluations on the part of the audience. Through these cognitive-linguistic mechanisms, a generalised, stereotypical portrayal of inadequate female professionals is rhetorically formulated in encoding and decoding processes of textual production and consumption. It intentionally neglects the chauvinistic culture institutionalised within China's higher education system, which has been identified by existing literature as hostile to women (Xu, Wang, and Ye 2017), to endorse his advocacy for men's hegemony in academia.

Furthermore, the rationalisation of patriarchy in many Zhihu users' postings does not merely take place within the context of academia but is also mobilised to justify the status quo in wider Chinese society.

> A366, man: I have to say something politically incorrect […]. Women are not as good as men. This is not something to be shameful or embarrassed about […]. Women have some qualities that men do not have, but they have a lot of weaknesses when judged by mainstream values.

As shown in the above extract, male user A366 simply makes a blanket judgement on men vs. women blatantly based on historical/current patriarchal socio-political and economic structures of Chinese society. In doing so, the male user presents his argument as if it were a statement based on "factual evidence" without any critical assessment. In this specific instance, the statement acknowledges the existence of imbalanced gender power relations within the current socio-political and economic structures of Chinese society. Yet, instead of questioning the issues it raises, the post naturalises the problematic gender power relations, describing the patriarchal status quo as "how things should be". To balance the argument, A366 concedes with a suggestion that both women and men have unique qualities not possessed by members of the opposite-sex cohort. This is a very common rhetorical manoeuvre in misogynist discourses that equate biology with the sociology of gender. Similarly, through this rhetorical manoeuvre, the commentary involves an implicit reference to the traditional Chinese notion of the *yin-yang* balance, suggesting that women and men have their defined social roles, which are of a complementary and interdependent nature (Liu 2014). With the wording suggesting that this statement is not meant to meet the requirements of "political correctness", it discursively places a hierarchy upon the female-male complementarity and interdependence, implying that women should accept the fact that they are subject to male-dominance in any field outside of the domestic sphere. A biased assessment of women's traits beyond the context of academia is therefore deduced, constituting a clear voice proclaiming the Zhihu user's approval of existing socio-economic orders.

> A538, man: The only thing fortunate is the world still belongs to men.

Following and feeding into A366's discursive practice, his fellow A538's argumentation strategy is even blunter. Without any attempt to conceal his intention, the male Zhihu user once again takes a statement-like presentation of personal opinions, framing the LM incident as a generalisable example with which to confront any dissenting voices challenging the legitimacy of the patriarchal status quo. Aligning with a large number of Zhihu users, including both women and men who take a similar stand, this post dismisses any anti-bias viewpoint in gender-issue debates. Such a discursive practice is also widely found in threads appearing below the sampled question. Together with their "shy" misogynist peers, these Zhihu users' postings underscore the trending male-chauvinism within the Zhihu community. The patriarchal values promoted therein add another layer of evidence supporting the findings of existing studies on post-socialist gender politics, which have identified similar misogynist discourses in the context of wider Chinese society in the post-reform era (Evans 2008; Wallis and Shen 2018).

Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed the stereotyping of female PhDs in Chinese digital cultures, using the LM incident as a case study. Without judging the behaviours of LM or LY in the incident per se, the analysis views this as a fertile discursive site to analyse the meaning-making processes through which the stereotype of female PhDs is mobilised in debates on gender inequality both within and outside of the context of academia in China. The research findings reveal a distinctive, sexualised portrayal of this well-educated female cohort in Zhihu users' discursive practices, which uncovers the contestation of

gender power relations in post-socialist gender politics unfolding on the Chinese-language Internet today.

Specifically, the sexualised stereotype of female PhDs established in Zhihu users' discursive practice involves an emphasis on women's sexual attraction, and an association between such traits and their career progress in the workplace. This is, in part, because the discussion about the incident is pre-contextualised by existing media discourse, which labels the female main character as both a "female PhD" and a "seductive" woman. In the same vein, Western scholarship shows that gender stereotyping in masculine fields, such as business and politics, often features alienation of womanhood, portraying female professionals as either hyper-masculine or feminine (Baxter 2017). Stereotypes of this kind serve to justify patriarchal values from two distinctive directions by rationalising a small group of women's successes in relation to their gender rather than their professional qualities (Peng 2021). The present research resonates with these findings, unveiling the position of power in Chinese academia, where female professionals are often subordinate to men, despite the fact that their representation in the academic community has currently increased (Xu, Wang, and Ye 2017).

It is worthwhile noting that there are two main directions through which the sexualised stereotype of female PhDs is evoked in Zhihu users' discursive practice: approval or disapproval. These two directions are subject to the standpoints that the users take in discussing the LM incident, which is informed by their perceptions of gender inequality. In this way, although two opinion camps are formed in the Zhihu community, the organisation does not seem to be as gendered as might be anticipated. The reasoning behind this seemingly degendered phenomenon possibly relates to the unique user-demographics of the CQA site on which the current debate occurs.

Compared to the average Internet-literate population, membership of the Zhihu community consists of mainly well-educated, middle-class intellectuals (Peng 2020a). The nature of the LM incident, which is relevant to academics, further encourages the participation of Zhihu users who work in the higher education system themselves. This permits the inclusion of more discussion participants, regardless of their gender identities, who are better informed about China's gender issues from a critical perspective. However, our analysis shows that this group of Zhihu users' voices are marginalised by an abundance of commentaries, which evoke the sexualised stereotype of female PhDs to legitimise existing gender power relations in Chinese society. The acceptance of patriarchal values by huge numbers of middle-class intellectuals, especially those who are women themselves, showcases the persistence of limited awareness of structural gender discrimination against this group of the Chinese population, and the absence of the pursuit of gender equality in their agenda (Xu, Wang, and Ye 2017). This phenomenon attests to the marginalisation of gender as a category of analysis in Chinese digital cultures, as noted by existing scholarship on post-socialist gender politics (Evans 2008; Wallis 2015).

The present study has limitations in terms of the research design. Without interviewing Zhihu users, we are unable to determine (1) whether their gender is accurately coded and (2) to what extent the posts they share on the CQA site authentically reflect their beliefs. Furthermore, the dataset is built upon naturally occurring data generated by Zhihu users, of whom the female-male ratio is not perfectly balanced. Thus, it might also be that women's voices have not been fully represented in the results. Yet, as an exploratory study, the research has identified a plethora of biased commentaries circulated by both

women and men on the popular CQA site. This would indicate that criticisms of the patriarchal status quo are seldom articulated in Chinese society, not even within the community of well-educated, middle-class intellectuals. This situation sheds light on aspects of the social problems caused by post-socialist gender politics, amid the revived patriarchal tradition in the country (Li 2015; Feldshuh 2018; Xu and Tan 2020). Thus, we propose future studies to integrate the exchange of liberal ideas on gender issues in China by accounting for middle-class intellectuals' experience beyond a textual analysis of user-generated content available on social media platforms.

Notes

1. NetEase http://dy.163.com/v2/article/detail/EL5TBPO705486522.html; Sina https://k.sina.com.cn/article_7067904335_1a547a94f00100dnm7.html;Sohu http://www.sohu.com/a/329516585_356941;Tencent https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20190731A04SSB.
2. LM and LY are abbreviations we use to respectively represent the female and the male main characters in this incident.
3. The strict 'one-child policy' has been replaced by the so-called 'two-children policy' since 2015.
4. Figure by 14th July 2020; retrieved from https://www.zhihu.com/topic/19601331/hot.
5. Retrieved 14th July 2020 from https://www.zhihu.com/question/336820841/answer/764230978; 5,940,275 views, 3,448 followers. FD is a code we use to describe LM and LY's affiliation.

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Notes on contributors

Altman Yuzhu Peng (PhD, Newcastle University, UK) is Lecturer in PR & Global Communications in the subject area of Media, Culture & Heritage at Newcastle University (UK). Altman's research interests lie at the intersections of Feminism, Public Relations, and Media & Cultural Studies. He is author of *A Feminist Reading of China's Digital Public Sphere* and has published more than ten scholarly articles in international peer-reviewed journals, such as *Asian Journal of Communication*, *Convergence*, *Chinese Journal of Communication*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, *Media International Australia*, and *Television and New Media*. Email: altman.peng@ncl.ac.uk

Jenny Zhengye Hou (PhD, University of Queensland) is Senior Lecturer in Strategic Communication at Queensland University of Technology, Australia. She studies on strategic communication in the digital age, public relations theories and practices, and transmedia storytelling in disasters. Jenny's work has appeared in *Public Relations Review*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, *Public Relations Inquiry*, *Communication Research and Practice*, and *PRism*. Jenny was awarded Legacy Scholar Grants by the Arthur W. Page Global Centre in 2019 and 2021. She is also the co-editor of *The Global Foundations of Public Relations: Humanism, China, and the West*. Email: jenny.hou@qut.edu.au

Majid KhosraviNik (PhD, Lancaster University, UK) is Senior Lecturer in Digital Media & Discourse Studies at Newcastle University (UK). He is interested in the intersection of social media technologies, discourse, and politics. Working through a Social Media CDS understanding, Majid's work includes the theorisation, characterisation, and adaptation of Critical Discourse Studies on a range of topics, such as digital (national/gender/ ideological) identity, digital populism, immigration/ nationalism, political communication etc. Majid is a founder and convenor of the Newcastle

Critical Discourse Group and sits on the board of the Journal of Language and Politics and Critical Discourse Studies, as well as serving as an Expert Reviewer for ERC actions, including Marie Curie IF, Combating Digital Misogyny, Islamophobia and Racism, British ESRC and several other international research funding organisations. His most recent work pertains to the integration of analysis of technology and discourse under the notion of Techno-Discursive Analysis as a model for the critical analysis of digital discourse formation and perception. Email: majid.khosravinik@ncl.ac.uk

Xiaoxiao Zhang (MA, University of Nottingham Ningbo, China) is currently a PhD candidate on a full scholarship in the School of International Communications at the University of Nottingham Ningbo (China). Her research interests include health communication, social and cultural aspects of emerging technologies, user experience of mobile health (mHealth), e-learning environments, and digital divide. Her recent work was published in *International Journal of Nursing Science*. Email: xiaoxiao.zhang@nottingham.edu.cn

ORCID

Altman Yuzhu Peng 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3440-0761
Jenny Zhengye Hou 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0276-6344

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