

GENDER LABELS IN FLUX:  
THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN GENDER DISCOURSE IN POST-REFORM CHINA

by  
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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures  
and the Division of Graduate Studies of the University of Oregon  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2022

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: Gender Labels in Flux: The Role of Women in Gender Discourse in Post-reform China

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy

Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures

June 2022

Title: Gender Labels in Flux: The Role of Women in Gender Discourse in Post-reform China

With the boom of networked digital communication, verbal misogyny permeates Chinese social media, reflecting and reinforcing a sexist gender order in society at large. At the same time, a new generation of Chinese women is seizing digital platforms to counterstrike linguistic sexism in a gender discourse warfare. How has the role of Chinese women in gender discourse changed from passive targets of gender labeling to active agents of feminist activism? My dissertation attempts to answer this question by analyzing the changing gender dynamics in the shifting social labels in contemporary China (1980 to present). Following the groundwork on verbal sexism in wireless China by Jing-Schmidt and Peng (2018), I take an interdisciplinary approach to gender label analysis, integrating the sociolinguistic principle of the mutual constitution of language and society, critical discourse analysis of gender labels as vehicles of power, feminist linguistics, and a socio-technological view on grassroots digital communication. Not only will this dissertation fill a gap in the interdisciplinary research on gender and language in Chinese, it is also the first to use data mining from digitized press and social media, supplemented with survey data on the perceptions of the social meanings of gender labels. This dissertation is an interdisciplinary digital humanities project and has implications for both gender research and social actions toward gender equality.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to express my deepest gratitude to my academic advisor, Professor Zhuo Jing-Schmidt, who is a knowledgeable professor, a passionate researcher, a dedicated educator, a compassionate mentor, and a role model in my life. I consider myself most fortunate to have been able to have her as my advisor, collaborate with her on multiple research projects, and work with her on teaching undergraduate linguistics and culture classes. Her enormous intellectual enthusiasm, expertise, and wisdom have continuously inspired my intellectual curiosity and broadened my perspectives. Her positive energy has always alleviated my feelings of frustration. Her genuine care and kind support have helped me vanquish difficulties at all stages of my doctoral studies. This dissertation manuscript could not have been completed without her insightful guidance, immediate feedback, and endless patience. I am wholeheartedly appreciative of her tremendous efforts in equipping me with multifaceted skills, paving the way for me as a new researcher, and preparing me for a future career in academia.

I would also like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee for offering me fresh perspectives on the earlier draft of this manuscript. I am deeply thankful to Professor Maram Epstein for her considerable expertise, fascinating insight, and timely advice on the social and cultural construction of gender in the Chinese context. I appreciate Dr. Keli Yerian for her enthusiasm for reviewing my draft and her helpful feedback on the theoretical concepts and research methods. I also acknowledge Professor Vsevolod Kapatsinski's guidance on statistical analyses.

My gratitude also goes to Professor Lucien Brown for his excellent teaching and research expertise when I took his course in the first term of my program, which gave me the inspiration



to conduct gender-related linguistic research. I also thank Professor Kaori Idemaru for her detailed comments and suggestions on an earlier version of one of my chapters.

I am very thankful to my department EALL and the UO Chinese Flagship Program for providing me with teaching and research fellowships all along. My sincere gratefulness also goes to the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies for awarding me the Professional Grant, EALL for offering me travel funds, and Prof. Roy Chan for his generous support of my conference travels so that I could present parts of this manuscript at the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> International Pragmatics Conferences. Components of this manuscript have also been presented at the EALL Colloquiums, and the CAS School of Language and Global Studies Seminar, University of Oregon. I am grateful for all the feedback from professors, researchers, and fellow graduate students.

I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who participated in my research and shared their valuable insights into gender dynamics in contemporary China. Without their participation and input, this research project would not have been possible.

I owe special thanks to Dr. Youli Sun, my previous employer and the founder of the China Studies Institute (CSI), a remarkable study abroad program at Peking University. CSI created numerous amazing opportunities for teachers and students, and I am one of those people who greatly benefited from him and CSI. Dr. Sun's unexpected and heartbreaking death in mid-June filled me with grief and sorrow during my last days here in Eugene. I wish I could express more gratitude to him for always encouraging me to embark on a Ph.D. journey in the United States when I worked at CSI. His guidance and support positively and tremendously changed the trajectory of my life. I will never forget his kindness, generosity, warmth, and good humor.

In my doctoral program, I was fortunate to have these wonderful people as friends and colleagues. I would like to thank Dr. Shuangting Xiong, Dr. Jungah Lee, Sara, Weijun, Denise, Dr. Jean Wu, Dr. Hui Shi, Dr. Lin Zhu, Dr. Yue Chen, Xiaoyan, Ai-ting, Pearl, Steffi, Dr. Clay Chou, Yi, and Leting. Their companionship made my path to the doctorate more enjoyable.

I am also very grateful to my dear friends – Fiona in Hobart, Chang in Hong Kong, Dr. Jun Zhou in Tokyo/Boston, Runhong in Tianjin, Yu in Beijing, and Yin in Xiamen – for their delightful and long-lasting friendships that transcend space and time. I truly appreciate their love, kindness, support, and generosity irrespective of how far apart we are.

Finally, I am greatly indebted to my parents for their unconditional love and unwavering support. Words cannot express my gratitude to them for allowing me the freedom to be who I am and supporting me in pursuing my intellectual passion. I also appreciate them for encouraging me to play musical instruments when I grew up, which not only taught me about resilience and perseverance, but also provided me with a way to restore inner peace when life is full of challenges and the world is disrupted by pandemic diseases, war conflicts, political unrest, natural disasters, and human-caused tragedies. Last but not least, my deep appreciation goes to my significant other, Dr. Wesley Erickson. I would not have made it this far without his support, understanding, encouragement, and compassion.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

As a recent Chinese joke goes, “There are three genders: male, female, and *female with a doctorate degree*.” This blatant mockery of highly educated women as a sexless third gender sums up the gender bias against women in contemporary China. In recent years, gender bias and gender inequality in post-reform China have started to garner attention among China observers and scholars. Piketty, Yang, and Zucman (2019) found a substantial increase in China’s national wealth-income in post-reform China, but 70% of the national wealth is held privately. Fincher (2014) further noted that economic resources are primarily controlled by elite men, leaving women in an economically powerless position and reinforcing gender disparity. Osburg (2013: 3) attributed social inequality and gender discrimination to key factors such as “the rise of new forms of leisure and consumptions” and “new patterns of marriage and sexuality.” Focusing on the *beauty economy* in the post-reform era, Xu and Feiner (2007: 310) observed that commodified female *beauty* is “a significant source of individual economic success and China’s economic growth.” Such commodification of female sexuality has contributed to the increase of sex-related bribery and corruption (Jeffreys 2006), male infidelity in heterosexual relationships (Jeffreys 2010), female competition for financial security from wealthy men (Zurndorfer 2015), and resurgence of prostitution (Ruan 2013). In addition, Chen, Ge, Lai, and Wan (2013) pointed out significant gender discrimination against female workers in China’s manufacturing industry under globalization, as indicated by a large gender wage gap in foreign and exporting firms in China. Addressing a similar issue on gender wage differences, He and Wu (2017) discussed the impacts of marketization and occupational segregation on gender earnings inequality in urban

China's labor markets. Although Berna (2013) reported a narrowing trend in the gender gap in educational attainment, educated single women over the age of 27 are collectively called *leftover women* in China and are deliberately discriminated against, both socially and economically (Fincher 2014). At the same time, public socioeconomic data on gender parity in China paints a complex picture. The Global Gender Gap Report (The World Economic Forum 2021) shows that China's ranking dropped steadily from 57 in 2008 to 107 in 2021, suggesting a deterioration of women's status. The latest Human Development Report (United Nations Development Programme 2020), however, ranks China within the top 40 nations that have made the most progress towards gender equality, with a decrease of 20% in the Gender Inequality Index within the last decade.

Gender asymmetry in Chinese language has been widely recognized and discussed, including gender bias in the Chinese writing system (Moser 1997), Chinese lexicon (Blum 1997), Chinese grammar and formulaic language use (Ettner 2002; Farris 1988), as well as asymmetrical gendered patterns of sociophonetic variations (Li 2017; Zhang 2005). Along with these linguistic biases, gender inequality in China has also garnered attention in sociology with a focus on socioeconomic disparity including unequal labor force participation (He & Wu 2006; He & Wu 2017), gender wage gap (Chen et al. 2013), educational inequality (Lin & Baker 2019), and women's health status (Yu & Sarri 1997). However, the mutual constitution of language and society with regard to gender bias has rarely been explored. With the exception of a few studies that probe the social realities and social changes reflected in the waxing and waning of gender labels in contemporary China (Jing-Schmidt & Peng 2018; Lang 2020; Lang & Jing-Schmidt, forthcoming), the social dynamic of gendered social labeling as a discursive practice, its sociohistorical context, as well as its socioeconomic and socio-technological

mechanisms are largely unknown. How is gender discourse influenced by the larger sociocultural context and socioeconomic forces? In the context of China where top-down regulation of media and public discourse shape gender representation in the media, how do we understand and contextualize gender discourse and gender labeling? When gender labels change over time, what does the change tell us about societal changes including technological development that brings about an unprecedented participatory digital culture? How does this digital culture shape gender discourse? All these questions remain to be explored.

To fill this research gap, this dissertation takes an interdisciplinary approach by analyzing gender labeling during the post-reform era from 1980 to the present. Gender labels in this dissertation are terms being used to refer to people in a gendered way to categorize or characterize people (McConnell-Ginet 2003). I treat gender labeling as a social practice of using gendered terms in which gender ideologies are embedded. Gender labeling practices sort people into different categories, pay attention to their “unidimensional existence” and ignore their “multifaceted personhood” (Lang & Jing-Schmidt, forthcoming). In digital communications, as this dissertation will show, these labels are used, re-visioned, contested, and reappropriated. To explore gender labeling practices in post-reform China, I adopted three perspectives: a feminist linguistic perspective, a socio-historical perspective, and a socio-technological perspective. The socio-historical aspect allows for untangling how gender ideologies change over time as reflected in the changing semantics of social labeling, while the socio-technological aspect highlights the crucial roles played by digital information technology in the democratization of information and grassroots participation in gender discourse. Both these strands are described and explained from a feminist linguistic perspective that critically interrogates the intersection of language and gender by analyzing the conceptual entrenchment of pervasive gender ideologies in words and

how these words are used. This project contributes to interdisciplinary digital humanities research by demonstrating how digital technology amplifies women's voices in gender discourse and how these voices may finally usher in humanistic changes to the deep-rooted patriarchal gender structure.

## 1.2 Theoretical frameworks

This dissertation addresses the interplay between language and gender from a feminist linguistic perspective, with an emancipatory goal of redressing gender inequality through the examination of the role that language plays in creating and perpetuating sexism, a sociohistorical perspective situating language use and gender relations in a specific social context, as well as a socio-technological perspective aligning with the most-up-to-date collective political actions taking place in the digital world.

### 1.2.1 A feminist linguistic perspective

Language and gender research often draws on feminist politics and principles offered in a variety of western models of feminism. Western feminism is generally characterized into three waves of women's movements. First Wave feminism is commonly linked to women's suffrage movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century throughout the Western world, whereas 'Second Wave' and 'Third Wave feminism' attract scholarly attention from a linguistic perspective (Mills 2003; Mills & Mullany 2011). Starting in the 1960s, Second Wave feminism concerned women's sexuality and reproductive rights, calling for social equality regardless of sex and more opportunities for women to work in the public sphere (Rampton 2015). Unfolding in the context of second-wave feminist movements, feminist linguistic research focused on differences in language uses between women and men, supposing all women as a subordinated group and all men as a powerful group (Lakoff 1973, 1975; Spender 1980). Moving away from

the assumed gender stereotypes, Third Wave feminist linguistic research beginning in the 1990s refuses to consider women and men as two homogenous categories and instead emphasizes the diversity of gender identities, including differences among groups of women and among groups of men (Mills & Mullany 2011). A Third Wave feminist linguistic approach views language as an index of individual negotiation with social forces around gender relations and explores the ways in which gender manifests in language and language constructs gender in a local and specific context (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992a, 1992b; Mills & Mullany 2011).

This theoretical construct provides a fresh outlook on gender identities, power relations, and communities of social practice. Drawing on Butler's (1990, 1997, 2004) notion of performativity, Third Wave feminist linguists see gender as a site of struggle over hegemonic gender politics and a process constructed over time within everyday interactions (Crawford 1995; Holmes & Meyerhoff 2003). In other words, gender is something enacted through repeating certain styles of speech acts and gendered acts based on specific context and culture, the process of which is also known as "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman 1987). Third Wave feminist linguists have also been influenced by Foucault's (1972, 1978) theories of power, and therefore they examine power relations in concrete and tangible ways without a presupposition of power as a fixed category. They view power as something fluid, which is performed in daily interactions. As noted by Cameron (1998: 452), any global assumptions about the relevance between gender and power need to be "connected to local forms of social relations" to avoid overgeneralization about women and men. This caveat is directly tied to the notion of a "Community of Practice," which is defined by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992b: 464) as "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor" and their practices such as the "ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations ...

emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor.” A community of practice approach focuses on the interaction of a group of people who construct their values and beliefs through the joint attention or action, such as adopting a specific speech style and choosing particular words in their spoken or written language. Feminist linguists argue that a community of practice can be seen as “a bridge between analysis of the local and the wider society” (Mills & Mullany 2011: 71).

Drawing upon a community of practice perspective, Jing-Schmidt and Peng (2018) examined linguistic sexism in contemporary China by analyzing the emergence of *biǎo* ‘slut’ as a productive personal suffix in the Chinese cyber lexicon, where it is used to construct social labels that degrade women and perpetuate consensual gender stereotypes. Their analysis showed that female users of the microblogging platform Weibo are complicit in the misogynistic labeling of women. They argued that sexism in language is an indicator and reinforcer of gender inequality in society and attributed female participation in the misogynistic discourse to women’s powerlessness in the existing gender order. Furthermore, Jing-Schmidt and Peng (2018: 387) made a theoretical contribution by proposing and adopting a socio-morphology approach, which they defined as “a socially situated analysis of a morphological phenomenon the explanation of which requires an examination of the larger social structure and societal dynamics.” Their innovative approach is well aligned with the third-wave feminist linguistic model by investigating the way that gender is discursively constructed at a local level within a particular context and at the same time addressing the global issues of gender politics as well as calling for language reforms in the context of wider institutional and social change.

Following this line of research, this dissertation starts with a socio-morphology analysis of the social meaning reflected in the morphological markedness in gender labels (see 1.3), then draws on a Third Wave feminist linguistic approach to analyze language meanings and functions



to achieve certain purposes in a local context. Specifically, I first examine linguistic sexism embedded in gender labels in institutional settings to probe state gender ideology and then explore female agency and women's discursive resistance to top-down gender politics through a digital community of practice. In addition, this dissertation does not treat women as a homogeneous grouping but addresses the diversity of linguistic practices and social perceptions regarding gender labeling. At the same time, I am aware that contemporary Chinese feminism has evolved within a culturally specific context, the trajectory of which does not entirely follow the development of feminist movements in the Western world (Barlow 1994, 2004; Dai 1995; Rofel 1999, 2007; Spakowski 2011). Therefore, a socio-historical perspective is brought into play to expound on the complex interplay between language and gender within the Chinese-specific sociopolitical landscape.

### 1.2.2 A socio-historical perspective

Situating contemporary Chinese feminism in a specific historical and political background has been brought to the fore since Spakowski (1994: 309) associated women's studies in China with "Chinese characteristics" and Croll (1995:178) explicitly termed it "feminism with Chinese characteristics," both of them alluding to the term "socialism with Chinese characteristics" as a description of Chinese socialist market economy. Scholars have undertaken serious efforts in the demarcation between Chinese feminism and Western feminism, contextualizing women's struggles in the unique sociohistorical context of China (e.g., Chang et al. 2018; Dai 1999; Hopper 1998; Li 1999; Wu & Dong 2019; Yang 1999; Zhu & Xiao 2021).

As many feminist studies have noted, Chinese women have long struggled with gender inequality and social injustice. In feudalist China, women were positioned as a marginal and inferior group whose behaviors were subject to the Confucian doctrine of *sāncóng sìdé*, 'Three

Obediences and Four Virtues.’ The Three Obediences give restrictions to the entirety of women’s existence, requiring a woman to be obedient and deferential to her father and older brothers when young, to her husband when married, and to her son when widowed; the Four Virtues impart precepts for women to govern female conduct, including her adherence to subordination, her restraining and modest speech, her endeavor to adorn herself to delight a man, and her diligence in household duties (Croll 1983, 1995; Gao 2003). Under the double-standard code for men and women laid down by Confucianism and the hierarchical society, women had no freedom in terms of education and marriage, and they were restricted in the domestic sphere (Tao et al. 2004). Consequently, women were exhorted to fulfill their roles and identities as filial daughters and daughters-in-law, loyal wives, and good mothers during China’s long history of imperialism (Tan 2019). Women’s confined space and limited autonomy were further manifested by the notorious practice of foot binding, a form of oppression and a symbol of seclusion in the interest of patriarchy, which lasted for centuries until it was officially banned in 1912, a watershed in Chinese history ending thousands of years of feudal monarchy (Lim 2007; Shepherd 2019).

The early twentieth century witnessed unprecedented and profound social movements, such as the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement. These political actions were carried out by intellectual youths who were enlightened by Western scientific theories and doctrines of democracy and were simultaneously engulfed with rage at Western colonialism. The anticolonial nationalism stimulated feminism and inspired demands for women’s rights (Yang 1999). Women started to participate in politics and fought for women’s educational rights, autonomy in marriage, and liberalized social relationships, devoting themselves to reforming the entire society through the attempt to eradicate the Confucian ethnical code (Lu 2004). As noted

by Yang (1999: 39), May Fourth women's literature of the self "provided a public space for women to construct, explore, and strengthen their personal subjectivity as women." Many of these women's progressive ideas were later adopted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to form the theoretical foundations of policies on women in the Maoist era (Lu 2004). Under Mao's planned economy during the 1950s through the 1970s, women were encouraged to leave home and participate in public work, as formulated and reflected in the socialist slogans 'women hold up half the sky' and 'men and women are the same' (Dai 1995). Women seemed to have as many opportunities as men in the public sphere under the state discourse of "women's liberation." However, the sameness rendered gender invisible and erased the entire category of women, as many feminists have noted (e.g., Barlow 1994; Croll 1995; Li 1999; Yang 1999).

In the late 1970s, China's reforms and opening-up policies marked the revolutionary transition from a state-planned to a globalized market economy, which was termed "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and a "socialist market economy." The advent of this reform has led to a dramatic transformation of China's economy and unparalleled changes in all aspects of society (Zhang 2007). One of the major changes is the economic boom at the cost of relocating the workforce from urban state-run economies to private-owned businesses, with a large number of female workers being laid off in the 1990s (Yang 2007). At the same time, fertility and birth rates greatly declined due to the strict implementation of the one-child policy. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour signified an aspiration of a transnational economy geared toward modernization, commercialization, and neoliberal consumerism (Rofel 2007). Rapid economic growth also gave rise to the emergence and the fast growth of the "beauty economy," exploiting women's youth, attractiveness, and sexuality for economic gains in urban China (Osburg 2013). In rural areas, de-agriculturalization has proceeded at a striking pace as the gender wage gap

substantially widened. Numerous rural women were able to leave their households, abandoning farming in order to immigrate to urban areas to take manufacturing jobs (Jin 2004, Tan 2004). As economic reforms have progressed, women's educational attainment rates have also increased. Women's participation in higher education has increased from 23.4% in 1980 to 51.7% in 2019 (China Population Census 2020). In the private sphere, the majority of women gained autonomy in marriage and the freedom to divorce (Xiong 2004). Simultaneously, all forms of mass media, such as novels, movies, television shows, and advertisements, have become an indispensable part of urban women's lifestyles (Bu 2004). The mass media production and consumption in the market era have quickly become an arena of public culture where new desires, subjectivities, and genders are being shaped (Chen et al. 2001; Davis 2000; Rofel 2007; Osburg 2013).

However, as feminist scholars Yang (1999: 59) and Dai (1995: 261) critically pointed out, although the market economy has provided women with a public space in the mass culture, it is "delimited and constrained by a male-oriented commercial culture," which reinforces "men's power and sexual discrimination against women" and results in the deterioration of women's social and cultural status. At the same time, the acceleration of economic reform has challenged the erasure of gender difference promoted in the Maoist era, allowing active construction and reconstruction of femininity and masculinity "in dialogue with economic changes, global influences, and reimagined and reinvented traditional gender forms" (Osburg 2013: 41). Examining these sociohistorical aspects allow for the untangling of how mainstream gender ideology sustains or changes over time in the contemporary era. Drawing on a sociohistorical perspective, this dissertation situates gender discourse in the shifting sociopolitical landscape of contemporary China by exploring the changing semantics and usage

patterns of social labeling as well as the way that they are related to shifting realities and political agendas in the post-reform era.

### 1.2.3 A socio-technological perspective

Rapid and drastic socioeconomic changes brought about by the economic reform and open-door policy coincide with a global surge of information and technological development. The rise of digital technologies has altered the means of daily communication in today's China. When entering the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China was home to 1.03 billion Internet users, representing 73% of the country's entire population (CNNIC 2022). As of December 2021, the proportion of Internet users using mobile phones to access the Internet has reached 99.7% (CNNIC 2022). As the Internet has become growingly accessible, residents in China increased their daily dependence on Internet social networking sites, such as WeChat and Weibo, where information is produced, consumed, and disseminated. As discussed by scholars in political science, the Internet and social media platforms have potential contributions to the democratization of information as well as the creation and expansion of a public sphere (e.g., Abbott et al. 2013). In the Chinese context, the public technological environment faces governmental restrictions and information control, but the Internet community actively presents their desire for freedom of expression and views digital technology "as a force for democratization" (Rosen 2010: 510).

The best example of utilizing digital technology as a tool of democratization is when Chinese tech-savvy women carried on the feminist torch ignited by their western sisters to join the digital wave of the #MeToo movement in 2018, unleashing their own stories of sexual harassment, decrying sex crimes, expressing solidarity, and demanding change. Although supported by transnational feminism and global connectivity, digital feminist movements in

China are confronted by formidable structural forces. Recent years have witnessed political suppression and media censorship undermining feminist progress in authoritarian networked communication (Vogelstein & Stone 2021). Facing such systemic barriers, Chinese women challenge hegemonic gender politics through their linguistic innovation. For example, to avoid rigorous censorship, the hashtag #MeToo was localized using Chinese pronunciation #米兔 *mitu* (literally “bunny rice”) and their corresponding emojis to keep the campaign alive (Abbott 2019; Zeng 2019). Hashtag adaptations have also been seen in a variety of Chinese translation ranging from classic literary style 吾亦然 *wúyìrán* ‘me too’, to northern dialectal phrase 俺也一样 *ǎnyěyìyàng* ‘me too’, to contemporary colloquial bantering style 老子也是 *lǎoziyěshì* ‘me too’ (e.g., Guttenberg 2021).

As Vogelstein and Stone (2021: 47) observed, “the widespread access to the Internet and social media created an avenue for dialogue and dissent that hadn’t existed in earlier waves of the women’s movement in China, amplifying voices that otherwise would have been silenced.” When these voices traveled across the Internet and acted as an influential force, public gender awareness dramatically increased, especially among young people on social media who voiced scathing criticisms of sexual violence and pleaded for organizational efforts to enact legislation. Social media undoubtedly accelerated the creation of a public space where social problems like sexual abuse and gender discrimination are discussed. With the assistance of digital technological tools, women’s collective actions gained not only public support but also policy change. In 2020, the definition and prohibition of sexual harassment in the workplace were added to the Civil Code of the People’s Republic of China, a landmark legislation on sexual harassment in Chinese history.

Feminists' online activism has awakened a new generation of Chinese women, and digital technology facilitates this process despite structural barriers. Therefore, I propose a socio-technological perspective, in addition to a feminist linguistic perspective and sociohistorical perspective in this dissertation. With the explosive development of the Internet in the last decades, its digital infrastructure provides an unprecedented online public space that fosters grassroots activism and public discourse, which co-evolves with top-down state control (Roberts 2018; DeLisle et al. 2016). This dynamic context requires a socio-technological view that treats public discourse and linguistic diffusion of self-expressed identity and subjectivity as an integral part of digital advancements. The digital developments in return facilitate changing sociocultural realities and language use that reflects and reproduces such realities. This perspective allows for scrutinizing the extent to which grassroots participation in gender discourse demands institutional changes as well as for exploring the role of digital technology in the democratization of information.

### 1.3 Gender labeling of successful women

Since China's market-oriented economic reform began in 1978, the mobilization of women into the workforce has been greatly reduced compared to that in the Maoist era (Yang 2019). Despite this slowdown in women's participation in the market economy, the socioeconomic transformations brought about by the policy have occasioned a rising tide of economic participation and economic success among Chinese women. These women who made valuable contributions to the national economic growth, however, have been labeled by one gendered term after another. This section focuses on the origin and social conceptualization of commonly seen gender labels used to describe successful women at different stages of the economic reform, including 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* 'strong women,' 剩女 *shèng nǚ* 'leftover

women,’ and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ and points out the linguistic sexism embedded in the labels from a socio-morphological perspective.

The label 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ was created at the early stage of the reform and has been used for a few decades. First coined in a best-selling novel entitled *nǚ-qiángrén* in 1984, it came to be a popular term to refer to financially independent entrepreneurial women (Yeh 1991). Before the coinage of this label, the term 铁姑娘 *tiě-gūniang* ‘iron girls’ was used between the 1950s and 1970s to refer to working-class women who had strong willpower and a high level of competence to do demanding work usually assigned to men, such as oil drilling and coal mining (Pei & Ho 2006; Zhang & Liu 2015). During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), this term was employed as a political campaign in state media to express a symbolic and rhetorical equality between men and women, in order to mobilize the female labor force to compensate for a labor shortage due to the out-migration of male labor (Jin 2006). Another similar term is 铁娘子 *tiě-niángzǐ* ‘iron lady,’ referring to talented capable women who focus on their careers and make achievements. Both 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ and 铁娘子 *tiě-niángzǐ* ‘iron lady’ were once used interchangeably in Chinese media to refer to the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and 1990s. At the turn of the new century, 铁姑娘 *tiě-gūniang* ‘iron girls’ and 铁娘子 *tiě-niángzǐ* ‘iron lady’ seemed to vanish from public language use, but the term 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ has never been outdated as it is constantly seen in state media, mass media, social media, and daily conversations.

As pointed out by Moser (1997) and Tso (2014), the term 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* shows gender asymmetry in Chinese. The term literally means ‘female strong person,’ but the male



equivalent 男强人 *nán-qiáng rén* ‘male strong person’ does not exist in the Chinese lexicon. This asymmetry implies that a strong and capable person is thought to be or by default a man rather than a woman. Therefore, if a woman is assumed to be strong, she could be referred to with a gender-marked term using the prefix 女 *nǚ* meaning ‘female’ or ‘woman.’ From a socio-morphological perspective, there is clear sexism in the word-formation of 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women.’

The label 剩女 *shèng nǚ* ‘leftover women’ was first seen in the headline 欢迎来到剩女时代 ‘Welcome to the Age of the Leftover Ladies’ on 时尚 *Cosmopolitan*, a Chinese magazine in 2006, foregrounding the trend of late marriage among the most educated urban women (Larson 2012). This term was then selected as one of the 171 new Chinese words announced by the Ministry of Education in 2007 to refer to highly educated professional women over 27 years old who remain unmarried (Wang 2011). The use of this term has caused controversy since its coinage. Fincher (2014) argues that 剩女 *shèng nǚ* ‘leftover women’ was created and employed by the state media to urge unmarried young women into marriage in order to avert the potential threat of social stability posed by the dissatisfaction of unmarried young men. The ‘leftover women’ campaign therefore raises the sense of crisis that highly educated unmarried women in their mid-twenties are on the verge of becoming ‘leftover women.’ The fear of becoming ‘leftovers,’ as suggested by Fincher (2014), can also cause a woman to accept a divorce arrangement with unequal terms regarding home ownership, which may discourage women from leaving the marriage. In 2017, ‘leftover women’ was included in a list of sexist terms published by *China Women’s Daily*, which suggested these sexist terms should be banned from use (*China Women’s Daily* 2017).

Morphologically, the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ stands in a paradigmatic relationship with the nouns referring to unused food or unconsumed goods, as seen in 剩饭 *shèngfàn* ‘leftover food/rice,’ 剩菜 *shèngcài* ‘leftover dish,’ 剩肉 *shèngròu* ‘leftover meat,’ 剩粥 *shèngzhōu* ‘leftover porridge,’ and 剩货 *shèngguò* ‘leftover goods.’ The semantics of 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ points to women’s reproductive capacity that is unused, unconsumed, and over time, unwanted. The socio-morphology of the term reveals the pejorative social function, which is to prompt women to use their currently unused reproductive capacity.

The neologism 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ was selected as one of the top 10 buzz words by the Ministry of Education and the State Language Commission in 2013. It refers to women who are as possessing masculine personalities and behaviors (Huang 2018; Zhuang 2016). Their traits may include that (1) they do not *sājiāo* ‘act spoiled’ (e.g., pouting, whining, flirting), (2) they do not like putting on make-up or dressing up, (3) they call guys “bros,” and (4) they are independent and do not ask for help (La 2019; Li 2016; Zhao 2013). Women having some of these traits used to be called 男人婆 *ná rén-pó* ‘man women, tomboys’ or 假小子 *jiǎ-xiǎozi* ‘pseudo-boys.’ The term 女神 *nǚshén* ‘goddess’ is treated as an antonym of 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys.’ Unlike *nǚ-hànzi* who are thought to be masculine in personality, *nǚshén*, which conventionally refers to goddesses in myths and legends, is nowadays associated with an ideal female image that is feminine, beautiful, kind, pure, and refined. The contrast between “masculine women” represented by *nǚ-hànzi* and “hyper-feminine women” represented by *nǚshén* was dramatically magnified in a comedy skit entitled “*nǚshén* and *nǚ-hànzi*” in 2015 Spring Festival Gala produced by the Chinese state-owned broadcaster (Huang 2018).

However, most of the studies failed to identify that the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ is demeaning. In this label, the head noun 汉子 *hànzi* ‘man’ was used to refer to lower class vulgar men in Song Dynasty. Having experienced semantic development, 汉 *hàn* ‘man’ has become a productive head noun, as seen in 莽汉 *mǎnghàn* ‘boorish man,’ 醉汉 *zuìhàn* ‘drunkard,’ 懒汉 *lǎnhàn* ‘sluggard,’ 壮汉 *zhuànghàn* ‘able-bodied man,’ and 好汉 *hǎohàn* ‘good masculine man.’ The semantics of 汉 *hàn* originally suggests a derogatory category of men, who are uneducated, unrefined, and brutish working-class men, contrasting to 君子 *jūnzǐ* ‘literati,’ who are regarded as elite men or gentlemen. Semantically, the female counterpart 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ is an oxymoron, combining 女 *nǚ* ‘female’ or ‘woman’ and 汉子 *hànzi* ‘man,’ and referring to independent strong women who are perceived as manly or mannish. The linguistic sexism is reflected in the morphology and the semantics of this label.

#### 1.4 Anthropological and sociological findings on successful women

As noted by Croll (1995), academic disciplines such as sociology and anthropology use their distinctive field research techniques to investigate women’s lives in various social settings, contributing to our understanding of women’s experiences. Research on women labeled with these terms have yielded abundant findings in anthropology and sociology studies.

Anthropologists and sociologists have taken an ethnographic approach to the general understanding of 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women’ in the contemporary Chinese context. The label is found to be used as a derogatory term for career-oriented entrepreneurial women (Osburg 2013). On the one hand, the derogation comes from the disdain businessmen feel for female entrepreneurs who are perceived as “lacking feminine charms and virtues” or “use their sexuality to get ahead” so that they can acquire capital, get a promotion, and secure business deals (Osburg

2013: 151). In other words, these women's personal efforts and career success are often regarded suspiciously by their male counterparts. On the other hand, those capable businesswomen who are perceived to achieve their own success are often described by men as “masculine,” “not fun,” or “awkward” in terms of their personality and demeanor (Osburg 2013: 152). In either case, Chinese men do not consider *nǚ-qióng rén* as desirable marriage partners because their ideal wife is supposed to be warm, gentle, presentable, and able to take on household responsibility, but *nǚ-qióng rén* depart from this ideal and are thought to be too strong and assertive (Choi & Peng 2016; Osburg 2013; Zuo & Bian 2001). In addition, not only men but also women think that the career ambition of *nǚ-qióng rén* stops them from taking care of household affairs and thus causes familial conflict, marital disharmony, and divorce (Zuo & Bian 2001).

Since the coinage of the term, 剩女 *shèng nǚ* ‘leftover women’ has garnered scholarly attention and has been widely discussed. In her journalistic work based on sixty interviews with urban young women, Fincher (2014: 2-12) argues that this derogatory term was popularized by the All-China Women's Federation “in the campaign to pressure urban, educated women in their mid- to late twenties to stop being so ambitious and get married,” which “serves a state program to upgrade population quality” so that “they have a high-quality baby for the good of the nation.” In their ethnographic studies, sociologists (Gaetano 2014; Gui 2020; To 2013, 2015) also interviewed women who are considered to fall into the category of ‘leftover women’ about their experiences of being single, their views on marriage, life goals, career aspirations, gender roles, and property rights. They found that although these women were negatively impacted by patriarchal gender norms and sexist stereotypes and thus were ambivalent when choosing between marriage and their own life, they expressed their self-identities as independent women, crying out for institutional change to achieve gender equality and egalitarian roles for women in

relationships and marriages. Their findings provide an insightful understanding of how women labeled with this term interpret and navigate social changes.

In terms of the recently-coined 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ scholars in sociology, gender studies, and media studies have complex findings. Successful women such as female business owners have struggled with being labeled *nǚ-hànzi* because they were perceived as less feminine and unwilling to conform to gender stereotypes (Long 2016). Alternatively, women celebrities having both *nǚ-hànzi* personalities and attractive appearances in the entertainment industry have gained vigorous support from their Chinese fans (Cui & Zhang 2017). It is unclear whether appearance and occupation play a role in the social labeling and social acceptance of women considered “tough guys.”

### 1.5 The goal and structure of this dissertation

Scholars in sociology and anthropology have produced insightful findings regarding these linguistic terms. Building on these scholarly contributions, this dissertation aims to explore several unanswered questions (1) How are these labels used by the Chinese mainstream media? Have the official usage patterns changed over time? (2) How are these labels currently used on social media platforms? What can the digital gender discourse tell us about social realities and changes? (3) How are these labels and women labeled with these terms perceived in today’s society? And (4) Is social labeling restricted to women? How are Chinese men labeled and perceived by Chinese women?

To answer these questions, this dissertation begins by providing the background of gender labeling practices in China and introducing an interdisciplinary approach to gender label analysis based on the mutual constitution of language and society, third-wave feminist linguistics, sociohistorical settings in a local context, and a socio-technological perspective.

Chapter II “Data and Methods” continues this theoretical focus by describing data sources and methods of analysis, including corpus analysis, critical discourse analysis, and digital ethnographic analysis of gender labeling. Chapters III – VI align with the abovementioned research questions, with each chapter addressing one question. Chapter III examines the social labeling and representation of successful women in state media. Considering the sociohistorical and socioeconomic contexts, I discuss how their representation served larger state agendas and how the representation evolved in response to shifting agendas. In Chapter IV, I investigate grassroots women’s voices on social media in response to the use of gender labels objectifying and stigmatizing women. Here, I discuss the complexities of Chinese cyberfeminism. I then move in Chapter V to explore social perceptions of female labels and women who are labeled with these terms to understand the sociocultural values embedded in the perception of gender labeling practices among various demographics. In this chapter, I discuss how gender, age, and education can individually or jointly contribute to the complex interplay between language use and social labeling. Chapter VI focuses on labels women give men, investigating female agency and empowerment in digital gender discourse. This chapter explores how contemporary Chinese women’s rising gender awareness empowers them to claim agency in condemning toxic masculinity and expressing an anti-macho aesthetic and rhetoric through linguistically sexualizing men. Lastly, Chapter VII synthesizes corpus findings and sociolinguistic findings, explores convergence and/or divergence between the two types of findings, and provides a more comprehensive picture to discuss the role of women in gender discourse in post-reform China.

## CHAPTER II

### DATA AND METHODS

#### 2.1 Data

To investigate gender labeling practices in post-reform China, this dissertation uses three types of data: mainstream media data, social media data, and sociolinguistic survey data. The mainstream media data and social media data were collected as corpus data to examine usage patterns of gender labels in state media and grassroots practice. The former consists of diachronic linguistic data whereas the latter focuses on synchronic and contemporary language data. At the same time, I bear in mind the methodological caveat that corpus data used in historical investigation “is bound to be highly selective” (Graddol & Swann 1989: 114) and may result in limitations in interpretation. Therefore, I collected subjective perception data to complement the corpus-based media data using sociolinguistic surveys, as this kind of data offers an efficient and effective research tool for gaining access to large amounts of information and uncovering general trends within groups of women or men (Mills & Mullany 2011).

##### 2.1.1 Mainstream media data

Media language has often been adopted by sociolinguists to understand how language use and attitudes are reflected and shaped by media usage in a speech community (Bell 1995). As an important social institution, the media plays a pivotal role in presenting political ideologies, cultural beliefs, and social views, and thus shapes and reflects how these aspects are formed and communicated (Bell 1995). Baker (2008: 107) also noted the importance of using newspapers as a source of media language data:

(T)he language which occurs in the media is one of most influential ways that discourses can be circulated, maintained or challenged due to the fact that media language both has a

large audience and is plentiful. A negative or ambiguous word, phrase or association may not amount to much on its own, but if similar sentiments appear on a regular basis, then the discourse will become more powerful, penetrating into society's subconscious as the given way of thinking. Newspapers are therefore ideal sites where the incremental effect of discourse can take place.

As a social practice, gender labeling is enabled in public discourse through top-down media language to grassroots language use. Top-down language equipped with state ideology is often seen in national newspapers, radio programs, television shows, and advertisements. Among these media, mainstream newspapers have been found as arenas to deliver male heterosexual discourses, attack confident professional women in the public sphere, and downplay male responsibility for sexual violence against women through sexist language use in western countries (Clark 1992; Mills 2008; Meyers 1994; Speer 2004; Walsh 2001).

In the contemporary Chinese context, mainstream newspaper data has rarely been adopted to research skewed gender representation and linguistic sexism except in a few recent studies (Zhu & Liu 2020; Zhu et al. 2019). Zhu, Liu, and Su (2019) retrieved synchronic linguistic data from national and local newspapers to study gender representations of occupations. They found a growing gender bias against women in newspaper texts where occupational terms (e.g., businessperson, diplomat, chef) are often marked with overt gender marking *nǚ* 'female, woman,' especially in the fields requiring managerial experience and professional skills. Zhu and Liu (2020) collected diachronic linguistic data from the national press 人民日报 *People's Daily* between 1946 and 2018 to study adjectival phrases that modify men and women over time. They found that adjectives used to describe men and women show a strong masculine skewing during the period of the Cultural Revolution. Adjective collocations



were found to indicate a trend of neutralization after this historical moment, but the authors discovered that the usage of negative adjectives describing women (e.g., *juéjiàng* 倔强 ‘stubborn’) has greatly increased since China’s economic reforms in the 1980s up to the end of the 2010s. In addition, adjectives modifying men mostly focus on their personality or inner traits, whereas adjectives modifying women also involve women’s appearance. These studies shed light on how state gender ideology embedded in top-down language use constructs a biased gender representation in Chinese mainstream media.

Informed by these studies, this dissertation chose *Rénmín rìbào* 人民日报, *People’s Daily*, as the official site where gender labeling practices embedded in state discourse take place, to represent top-down mainstream media language use. *People’s Daily* is the most authoritative and influential newspaper and the largest newspaper group in mainland China with a circulation of 3 million worldwide. It is the official articulator of the central government of China and the Central Committee of the CCP. It has also been the “true barometer of the political climate of Chinese society on a daily basis” (Oriprobe). The newspaper data was retrieved through Oriprobe Information Services (<https://www.oriprobe.com/peoplesdaily.shtml>), which provides digitized historical and current press data and covers the publication of *People’s Daily* from June 1946 to the present. The texts and image files were collected from the Chinese version of the *People’s Daily* between January 1, 1980 and May 1, 2021. Chapter III presents the media representations of Chinese women labeled *nǚ-qíáng rén* ‘strong women,’ *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women,’ *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ and *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ and the state gender ideology in the mainstream media language use.

### 2.1.2 Social media data

While mainstream media data provides information of how state ideology is delivered, it does not capture social dynamics among ordinary language users. As a medium of interpersonal communication, computer-mediated communication (CMC) affords a democratic environment, empowering its users to create Internet content and communicate individual values and beliefs (Herring 2004). CMC allows women and men to participate in discussions more equally in comparison to face-to-face communication traditionally observed to be male dominated (Graddol & Swann 1989). Women’s participation in social networking websites has also been found to equal and even exceed men’s participation in the global world (HuffPost 2017). However, as Herring and Stoerger (2014: 567) reminded us, although Internet-based interaction seems to “lead to greater gender equality, with women, as the socially, politically, and economically less powerful gender, especially likely to reap its benefits,” men also benefit from anonymity in CMC. The anonymous forms of online communication reduce social accountability, encouraging aggression and hostility in a web-based milieu (Herring & Stoerger 2014). This is true in Chinese digital communications. For example, recent years have witnessed a domestic backlash against feminist causes using antagonistic terms such as *nǚquán-biǎo* ‘feminist slut,’ *nǚquán-ái* ‘feminist cancer,’ and *zhōnghuá tiányuán nǚquán* ‘Chinese rural/country feminism’ to stigmatize local feminist movements (Jing-Schmidt & Peng 2018; Lang 2020; Mao 2020; Wu & Dong 2019).

Although women’s increasing access to the Internet does not necessarily bring about greater gender equality in CMC, the popularization of social media accelerates online communication and promotes complex gender dynamics among a new generation of technologically savvy users including women and men (Lang 2020). Women’s voices and the complexity of digital feminism are worth investigating to understand how grassroots language users react to state gender discourse and engage in the mass communication of online gender

discourse. Social media data involving Chinese women's digital voices have been retrieved and analyzed to research scholarly topics such as the East Asian politics of speaking out, networked authoritarianism, and the affordances and constraints of social media platforms (e.g., Chen & Wang 2020; Huang 2021; Xiong & Ristivojević 2021; Zeng 2020). However, little is known about how social media potentially empower Chinese women to engage in digital interactions to claim discursive agency and challenge patriarchal authority in public gender discourse except for a limited number of recent studies (e.g., Merriman 2015; Han 2021, see Chapter IV). To contribute to this line of scholarship, this dissertation explores how grassroots language users utilize social media as a technological tool to express their varying attitudes toward gender labeling practices.

This dissertation chooses *Xīnlàng wēibó* (lit. 'Sina microblog') Sina Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, as its source to retrieve social media data. The reasons for using this platform are twofold. First, Weibo has become one of the biggest social media platforms in Mainland China since its launch in 2009. Although being criticized for Internet censorship (Griffiths 2019), Weibo attracted millions of users and its monthly active users reached 573 million as of the third quarter in 2021 (China Internet Watch 2021), making it one of the most influential social media websites in China. Given that nearly 40% of the entire Chinese population was using Weibo by 2021, Weibo is an accessible and popular medium for a large community to participate in social practice at the grassroots level. Second, microblogging plays an active role in forming a civil society and thus propels rapid social changes in China (Lu & Qiu 2013). Microblogging platforms have crucial features, such as allowing users to take an anti-authoritarian stance, act as opinion leaders, and organize social campaigns (Lu & Qiu 2013). These features make the Weibo platform an ideal venue for the bottom-up investigation of public

online gender discourse, where microbloggers adopt attitudinal stances to construct counter-discourse, disseminate personal sentiment, participate in digital movements, and interact with other users. Therefore, I chose Weibo as the major source of linguistic data to represent the grassroots language use. Chapter IV explores gender discourse concerning female labels on Weibo, whereas Chapter VI examines gender dynamics involving male labels on Weibo.

### 2.1.3 Sociolinguistic survey data

Sociolinguistic surveys have been widely used since Labov's (1966) survey on phonological and social variables in New York City. As Cooper (1980) pointed out, sociolinguistic surveys are employed to assess language behaviors such as proficiency, acquisition, and usage, and behaviors toward language including attitudinal and implementational behaviors. Sociolinguistic surveys may be undertaken to achieve multiple goals, including language policy decisions, program planning, hypothesis testing, and language promotion (Cooper 1980). In addition to dealing with practical issues, sociolinguistic surveys also serve the purpose of providing empirical linguistic data to contribute to theoretical research on the interplay between language and society (Bolton & Luke 1985). For example, Shi and Jing-Schmidt (2020) investigated the innovative usage of a Chinese numeral classifier and its social indexicality (Eckert 2000, 2008) using both Weibo data and sociolinguistic survey data, contributing to the methodology of sociolinguistic research.

Following Shi and Jing-Schmidt (2020), the surveys designed for this dissertation project were intended to shed light on how language users interpret the social meanings of gender labels and how they perceive people who are labeled with these gendered terms. Two anonymous surveys were designed using the online survey platform Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com>). Survey I concerns gender terms that are used to label women, including *nǚ-qíángǎn* 'strong

women,’ *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women,’ and *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys.’ Survey II involves two neologized terms that are adopted to label men, including *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat.’ For Survey I, the target female labels have been widely used in mass media and social media by grassroots language users including men and women (Feiner 2014). The term *nǚ-qiónggrén* ‘strong women’ was coined in the 1980s, whereas *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ and *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ are more recent labels. Therefore, both women and men were recruited to respond to the survey questions and there was no age limit for the survey participation. For Survey II, the target male labels were recently coined and used by Chinese women to refer to certain groups of men (Li 2020, Lang 2020). For this reason, I distributed it only to female native Chinese speakers to elicit subjective data on their perceptions of men labeled with these two terms and how they understand the meanings of the terms. According to Baidu Index, the Chinese equivalent of Google Trends, the terms are usually used by the younger generation (mainly 20-30 years old and generally under 50 years old). Therefore, only women younger than 50 years old were recruited to participate in Survey II.

Both surveys were carried out in Chinese, first asking prospective respondents to give informed consent for research participation. For respondents who agreed to participate in this study, the survey asked demographic questions including age, gender, and education levels. The surveys then asked the participants to (1) rate frequencies of encountering and using the target terms on Likert scales, (2) select one or multiple answers from options indicating places of encounters, (3) select one semantic affective valence for each target term, and (4) fill out open-ended questions in terms of the perceived features of women and men who are labeled with these terms. The only difference is that Survey II asked the female respondents to rate preferences for men labeled with the target terms on Likert scales, whereas Survey I did not include the rating of

preferences for women labeled with the target terms. Both surveys were expected to be completed within five to ten minutes (see Appendix A and Appendix B for the Chinese original and the English translation of the surveys).

Because the population of sociolinguistic perception surveys generally ranges from 100 to 200 people (Campbell-Kibler 2009; Levon 2014), I distributed the survey links to native Mandarin speakers residing in China with accessibility to the Internet and I expected responses from 100 to 200 participants for each survey. This study has been reviewed by the University of Oregon Research Compliance Services (RCS) under the 2018 Common Rule and determined to qualify for exemption under Title 45 CFR 46.104(d). Chapter V presents the analysis and findings of Survey I and Chapter VI shows the analysis and findings of Survey II.

## 2.2 Methodology

This dissertation combines three types of methods to analyze gender discourse: corpus analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and digital ethnographic analysis. Corpus techniques not only help analyze a large amount of linguistic data in an efficient and productive way but also offer a meticulous overview for further qualitative analysis of gender discourse using CDA. As a theoretical research method, CDA facilitates the investigation of how language is used as a social practice to disclose power relations and ideologies. Therefore, I used these two methods to analyze both mainstream media data and social media data for greater synergy. I also used digital ethnography to analyze the digital data retrieved from the social media platform Weibo. By tracing how digital communications unfold in time on social media, digital ethnography provides me with an efficacious way to explore the meaning-making process in grassroots gender discourse. To analyze the sociolinguistic survey data, I used statistical analysis for forced-choice questions to detect whether there was a significant association between variables and

sociolinguistic factors such as gender, age, and education level. For open-ended questions, I manually examined the content and frequency of self-reported answers.

### 2.2.1 Corpus analysis

Corpus linguistics is an empirical method that relies on computational techniques to research a large collection of linguistic data (Gries 2009). In Baker's publications (Baker 2008, 2010; 2014; Baker & Levon 2015; Baker et al. 2008), he offered using corpus linguistics as a supplementary approach to discourse analysis of gender and language because corpus data involves "authentic cases of language use as it occurs in the real world," and it is useful for identifying repetitions and implicit meanings (Baker 2014: 7; Hunston 2002). Corpus research techniques, such as collocation analysis and concordance line analysis, go beyond the word level and consider a broader context of the text, enabling productive examinations of linguistic sexism in discourse. As Baker (2008: 77) argues, "words are 'primed' for use in discourse due to the cumulative effects of our encounters in language." Baker (2014) also emphasizes the importance of sampling and representativeness underpinning corpus linguistics research. He suggests that corpus data should be sampled in a way that it can represent the language variety under study. Language variety, in this dissertation project, concerns different forms of linguistic expressions using formal/official and informal/unofficial registers in public gender discourse. To provide a representative sample of gender labeling in post-reform China, I built three corpora, a mainstream media corpus representing a formal official register in top-down language use, and two social media corpora representing an informal register in grassroots language use. The social media datasets include a corpus containing female labels and a corpus containing male labels.

Analyses of corpus data often rely on both quantitative and qualitative methods (Baker 2010). In corpus analysis, measuring associations between linguistic features and contextual

factors requires quantitative analysis such as examining keywords and collocates, whereas functional interpretation needs qualitative methods such as concordance line data analysis (Baker 2014; Baker & Levon 2015; Biber 1988; White 2017). Keywords analysis or keyness analysis is based on statistical measures to identify typical words used in the target corpus by comparing word frequency against a larger reference corpus (Biber 2011). The reference corpus provides information of normal frequency in language use, and thus typical terms identified in the target corpus indicate higher frequencies of language use. This information throws light on what is unique in terms of themes and common usage patterns in the target corpus (Baker 2008). Relying on similar statistics-informed frequency data, collocation analysis examines the ability of a certain word to co-occur with or attract other words (Gries 2013). The tendency of certain words occurring with other words reveals how meanings are constructed through repeated usage events (Baker 2008; Gries 2013). Concordance line analysis, as a commonly adopted corpus linguistic approach to social issues, focuses on how words are displayed in immediate contexts, providing a direction for a further detailed functional qualitative analysis (Baker 2008). For example, Baker (2008) examined a sample of concordances of *feminist* and *feminists* in the British National Corpus. The findings show that these terms often appear with words meaning anger (e.g., outrage, irk, enraged), indicating a collective usage in journalism of stereotyping feminism in a negative way.

Recent corpus linguistic techniques adopted in the field of language and gender also involve changing patterns of frequencies for target terms over time (Baker 2008, 2010). However, tracking the change in frequency of a word over time could cause a simplistic representation, lacking a contextual account from a historical perspective (Baker 2008). For example, the frequency of the pejorative term *slut* has increased since the 1960s in the Corpus of



Historical American English, but the frequency change cannot reveal the alteration in its social meaning when it started to be used in a gender-neutral way in recent decades (James 1998).

Therefore, careful concordance analyses are needed to examine whom this term refers to. A more nuanced qualitative analysis of how the meanings fluctuate over time should also be taken into consideration (Baker 2008).

Following Baker's (2008, 2010) research on language and gender, this dissertation examines corpora data quantitatively and qualitatively. For the mainstream media dataset (Chapter III), corpus analyses include temporal tracking of usage patterns changes over time, and examinations of typical words, collocation networks, and concordance lines. The temporal analysis situates female labels in historical moments when gender labeling takes place, whereas other quantitative analyses provide information of themes and backgrounds of the state gender discourse. For consistency, the social media dataset containing female labels (Chapter IV) was also analyzed quantitatively in terms of the word typicality and collocation networks. For the social media dataset containing male labels (Chapter VI), collocation analyses were conducted to compare high frequency collocates revolving around male labels with the aim of understanding contrasting attitudes toward men who are labeled with these terms. All these corpus analyses provide important clues and directions for further detailed qualitative investigations using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). As argued by many linguists, CDA can benefit from corpus linguistics because CDA allows researchers to link what is observed from the decontextualized data in corpora to the interpretation of these observations (Hunston 2002; Mills & Mullany 2011; Morrish & Sauntson 2007).

### 2.2.2 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is known as a theoretical and practical approach to the study of linguistic texts in their socio-cultural contexts (Fairclough 1995, 2013; Fairclough & Wodak 1997; Weiss & Wodak 2003). As argued by critical discourse researchers, CDA is not about analyzing the discourse itself but inquiring into the way that language is used as a social practice to reflect ideologies and power relations through a systematic examination of discourses (van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 1992, 1995; Wodak & Meyer 2009). One of the goals of using CDA as an interdisciplinary method is to “study the discursive reproduction of dominance (power abuse) and its consequences on social inequality” (van Dijk 2003: 87).

To serve as methodological guidance for multidisciplinary research, a three-dimensional CDA framework was formulated to investigate the relationships between texts, discourse practice, and wider sociocultural practice (Fairclough 1992, 2013). The investigation of texts involves a form-meaning analysis in which linguistic forms and textual meanings are interdependent. Discourse practice focuses on how language users participate in the moment-by-moment process of producing and interpreting texts. The framework also requires the examination of social organization such as the institutional context in which power and ideology emerge. The three dimensions in this model are intertwined. The sociocultural practice provides a macro-sociological context for discursive events, whereas the exploration of textual properties offers a micro-linguistic lens to scrutinize discursive practice. This three-dimensional model has been used by a number of studies in exploring feminist politics, women’s identity, gender relations, and media representations of women in contemporary China (Li 2015; Li 2021; Peng 2021; Xu 2015). Following this line of research, this dissertation employs Fairclough’s CDA framework to study gender labeling discourse as a sociocultural practice at the state level where a political agenda is embedded and as a discursive practice at the grassroots level reflecting

feminist concerns and activism. Both levels of gender labeling practices were also investigated in terms of linguistic formal and semantic analysis.

As an analytical research method, CDA has been adopted to research dialectical relations between linguistics and other disciplines such as politics, sociology, psychology, education, and cognitive science among others (Fairclough 2013; Unger 2016). Despite its wide application in interdisciplinary research fields, CDA has been criticized for intentionally selecting and interpreting linguistic data for predetermined research arguments due to a lack of criteria for fragment selection (Widdowson 2004). However, corpus linguistic techniques can make up for this methodological deficiency by systematically detecting language usage patterns in a large body of data and then identifying representative texts for further qualitative analyses (Baker & Levon 2015; Baker et. al. 2008; Cheng 2013; Yu 2019). Corpus linguistic analysis has also been questioned for its quantitative limitation in that it fails to explain contextual factors in discourse (Widdowson 2004). To respond to this limitation, a corpus-assisted approach to CDA was developed to balance computer-assisted quantification and discourse-oriented methods, allowing researchers to investigate both textual traces in corpora and complex interactions between linguistic and contextual features in discourse (Baker et al. 2008; Yu 2019). Yu (2019) has used corpus-assisted CDA to study media representations of ‘leftover women’ in China by building and examining a corpus of English news articles. Informed by this methodological synergy, this dissertation adopts both corpus analysis and CDA in exploring language use, state ideologies, and women’s voices in discursive events concerning gender labeling as a social practice in post-reform China.

### 2.2.3 Digital ethnography

Traditional ethnography, known as an anthropological research method, requires researchers to undertake fieldwork in a small community for a long-term investigation of the people, language, culture, and society through observation and participation in their daily lives and social activities (Howell 2018). Linguistic ethnography not only uses fieldwork techniques but also situates language and discourse in social life to study sociocultural processes and society at large (Blommaert & Dong 2020; Varis 2016). As Lu and Blommaert (2020: 229) noted, the goal of ethnography is to “obtain comprehensive knowledge of the society under study and to reveal the social structure underlying communicative practices and social life.”

Digital ethnography applies an ethnographic approach to explore the culture and community shaped by and mediated with digital technology (Varis & Hou 2020; Lu & Blommaert 2020). Due to the fast-growing development of the Internet into a medium for global mass communication, digital forms became linguistic ethnographers’ new research sites. These forms rely on new technologies, such as online surveys, email interviews, digital videos, social networking platforms, and blogs among others (Murthy 2008). Consequently, semiotic resources in digital communication provides a large body of useful and accessible data for researchers to follow, observe, collect, store, and analyze. At the same time, the structure of our everyday social lives and cultural practices as “the infrastructures for our lived realities” have become different due to continuous changes of communication environments (Varis 2021: 165). In other words, today’s communications have largely been technologically mediated with increasing access to the Internet (Varis 2016). Therefore, digital ethnographers’ research focus, be it about communicative practices, social relationships, or new types of social structures, has also been undergoing a constant change due to the “processual nature” of digital forms and data (Varis 2021: 166). To understand digitalization for communication brought about by newly developed

digital technologies and configurations, researchers may also need to observe emergent interaction patterns of “loose, temporal, and elastic collectives operating in social media environments” (Varis & Blommaert 2015: 31). As pointed out by Lu and Blommaert (2020: 229), digital ethnography requires familiarity with the digital field so that researchers are able to “enter the life-worlds of participants and follow their locally situated experiences.” As a Weibo user myself, I have spent the last five years following and observing how people use gender labels and comment on the usage of gender labels in their posts and digital interactions with others. Through the observation of digital gender labeling practices, I examine the ways participants engage in communicative actions, such as meaning-making and meaning-negotiating in gender discourse as well as how social facts emerge from the underlying sociocultural values among grassroots language users.

Digital ethnography has been employed to study language, gender, and sexuality (e.g., Darwin 2017; Hou 2018; Varis 2021). However, using digital ethnography as a theoretical approach to studying gender discourse in the urban Chinese context is relatively rare except for a few studies (Chen 2017, 2020; Zhang & Hjorth 2019). Adopting this research method, Chen (2017) examined how media representation of corruption is transformed into a gendered narrative; Chen (2020) analyzed differences in managing marriage between women from different social classes; Zhang and Hjorth (2019) explored gender performativity of female hosts on a Chinese live-streaming website. These studies shed light on how to utilize this research method to investigate gender politics and the intertwined relationships between gender, class, and state in contemporary China. Informed by these studies and the theoretical underpinnings of the ethnographic approach, this dissertation uses digital ethnography in addition to the abovementioned corpus analysis and CDA to study grassroots gender politics and feminist

engagement in collective actions taking place in the social media environment in contemporary China (Chapter IV).

### 2.3 Summary

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary digital humanities project with an innovative methodological framework, retrieving data from top-down and bottom-up media sources, complemented by subjective perception data, as well as combining corpus analysis, critical discourse analysis, ethnographic analysis, and statistical analysis. The strength of this multifaceted approach lies in the value of using mixed methods for language and gender research to gain a more comprehensive picture and a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between language, gender, and society.

The research is primarily based on corpus data, including digitized historical press data from *People's Daily* and social media data retrieved from the Chinese digital platform Weibo. Corpus data allows for examining the diachronic trends and usage patterns of gender labels used over time in mainstream official language represented by newspaper language, as well as the major themes of gender labeling on social media at the level of grassroots language use. A secondary data source is anonymous subjective data from Qualtrics surveys of Mandarin native speakers residing in China, designed to elicit interpretations of the social meanings of gender labels and the perceptions of people who are labeled with these terms.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses are adopted to analyze the three types of datasets. The quantitative examinations, including corpus analysis and statistical analysis, focus on the frequency changes and temporal distributions of Chinese gender labels, as well as quantifications of the survey data. The qualitative analyses involve a semantic analysis of gender labels, critical discourse analysis of their social and historical significance, and a digital

ethnographic analysis of women's voices. The semantic analysis focuses on the classification of gendered labels highlighting female objectification and female empowerment, while critical discourse analysis examines socio-dynamics in gender labeling practice. Digital ethnography concerns feminist gender politics and their discursive events as collective actions. Survey data was also examined qualitatively to provide an index of social perceptions of gender labels.

CHAPTER III  
SOCIAL LABELING AND REPRESENTATION OF SUCCESSFUL WOMEN IN STATE  
MEDIA (1980-2021)

### 3.1 Introduction

Gender labeling practices at a societal level perpetuate gender stereotypes and gender inequality. Gender labels used in official media serve as a linguistic barometer of government policy and ideological agendas as the sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociohistorical background of the development of these labels. This chapter explores official media representations of successful women, labeled as 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women,’ 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women,’ 女汉子 *nǚ-hàn zi* ‘female tough guys,’ and 剩女 *shèng nǚ* ‘leftover women’ in post-reform China.

Film studies on successful career women in Chinese TV dramas and movies have shown that the construction of images of 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women’ has been undergoing a shift from a stereotypical perspective to a more progressive view (Chen 2019; Jia 2016; Luo 2012). Chen (2019) and Luo (2012) argue that *nǚ-qióng rén* was depicted as aggressive and overbearing women in TV series and films in the past, but the new century has witnessed a refreshing wave of portraying *nǚ-qióng rén* as resilient, optimistic, and courageous in mass media. Despite these positive changes in representation, as Jia (2016) pointed out, career women continue to be judged on their dual roles in work and family spheres in media representation. Xu (2015) shows that official print media *People’s Daily* also highlighted that *nǚ-qióng rén* bear the double burden of career and family, with a strong connotation of a default assumption that an ideal woman belongs in the family sphere. The way state media reports the double burden suffered by women reflects double standards for career women. These women face the “social



penalty” for not giving up their career to return home, regarded as a violation of the conventional norms of femininity.

Since state media started using the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ in pressuring women into marriage for the sake of the nation (Fincher 2014), the controversy of this derogatory terminology has been seen in heated discussions and criticisms of negative media representations of women subjected to the labeling (Fledshuh 2018; Li 2021; Luo & Sun 2015; Merriman 2015; Yu 2019, 2020, 2021). Merriman (2015) argues that print media plays a fundamental role in shaping public opinion on *shèngnǚ*. The author examined texts and images of 46 English-language articles published by the All-China Women’s Federation, and found that these articles not only classified unmarried women by age and labeled them using various terms containing 剩 *shèng* “leftovers”, but also categorized unmarried women into different types in the hope of “helping” them identify and fix their “problems.” Images portraying *shèngnǚ* also delivered subtle messages that blame women for not being married. Through circulating articles and images concerning *shèngnǚ*, the state media outlets promoted pejorative views on these women and negative associations between women’s high education attainment and single womanhood despite their personal success and economic independence.

Fledshuh (2018: 38) contends that *shèngnǚ* is “an artificial construct through socially generated gender stereotypes and furthered through media messaging.” Through qualitative examination of media representations of *shèngnǚ* in Chinese reality shows 我们结婚吧 *Let’s Get Married*, 非你莫属 *If You Are the One*, and the television show 爱情公寓 *iPartment*, Fledshuh found that the semantic derogation of the term has been de-problematized and normalized. For example, the *shèngnǚ* discourse in *Let’s Get Married* not only legitimizes marriage as a social requirement for women but also reinforces the patriarchal myth that holds women accountable

for marrying late. Marriage is viewed as the ultimate goal for women to find happiness. The show *If You Are the One* also delivered indirect sexism, associating women's age and marriage desirability, as well as perpetuating the misperception that professional women are primarily responsible for solving marriage difficulties. Through a gendered narrative of irreconcilable conflicts between women's educational attainment and their sexual appeal, the TV show *iPartment* perpetuates a sexist ideal of femininity and womanhood. Even women themselves, as shown in popular mass media, internalized gender stereotypes and patriarchal misperceptions of ideal womanhood. Both the sexist messaging communicated through media and women's own internalization of the antiquated gender constructs pose a threat to women's well-being, self-perception, and empowerment.

Yu (2019) investigated 303 English-language news articles containing *shèngnǚ* in Chinese media using corpus techniques and critical discourse analysis. The author found three major themes in these news articles: discussions of *shèngnǚ* as a neologism, *shèngnǚ* as a social phenomenon, and various social actions and attitudes toward women thus labeled. Yu (2019: 390) then linked linguistic representations to three "conservative gendered ideologies" including ageism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy. Ageism supposes that women's value on the heterosexual marriage market largely depends on their age, an ideology that goes hand in hand with the heteronormative ideology. Patriarchal gender ideology imagines ideal femininity to be associated with cultural expectations of women being dependent, unambitious, submissive, and marrying young. At the same time, Yu (2019) found that these ideologies co-existed with an egalitarian ideology in Chinese media as indicated by progressive representations of women who are empowered to redefine their gender roles in both private and public spheres. Yu (2019, 2020: 15) attributed this kind of "hybridized discourses" in English-language news to the worldwide

target audience of Chinese state-sponsored media outlets. Adopting a similar approach, Yu (2021) analyzed metaphorical representations of *shèngnǚ* in 28 English-language news articles published in China and discussed the underlying hybrid forms of ideologies, including patriarchy and egalitarianism. Despite these insightful findings, Yu's (2019, 2020, 2021) focus was predominantly on English-language news articles written by Chinese journalists, leaving the reader puzzled about how these English language publications impact Chinese women as a target audience in a closed discursive loop of government agencies.

Li (2021) scrutinized 54 online Chinese-language news articles featuring female PhDs, who are often depicted as a sexless third gender or 'leftover women' in running jokes, from state media outlets to commercial portal sites. The author found that female PhDs were either portrayed as "anxious" in women's own self-deprecating descriptions or framed as "threatening" from others' perspectives. In these portrayals they deviated from social norms. Only a smaller proportion of media coverage expressed positive views of these high achieving women. Li argues that public attitudes toward female PhDs indicate discursive marginalization propagated by media. Li (2021: 12) attributed the "anti-intellectual sentiment in media's coverage of female PhDs" to patriarchal gender views assuming women's "domestic and reproductive values as more important than their professional worth," which shows insidious eugenic concerns of "population quality" in post-socialist China.

Visual and textual representations of women labeled 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* 'female tough guys' in Chinese media have also been recently analyzed and discussed. Huang (2018) analyzed the CCTV (China Central Television) representation of *nǚ-hànzi* in comparison to *nǚshén* "goddess" in a comedy skit. The comedy skit contrasted the behaviors of the two stereotypes of women, conveying traditional gender expectations that ideal femininity is slim in figure and

feminine in demeanor. Women who do not conform to these traditional gender norms are thought to be masculine and made fun of. Huang (2018: 174-175) compared the media's representation of two types of femininity (i.e., "masculine woman" and "hyperfeminine woman") and pointed out that "the post-Mao government is complicit with gender essentialism to encourage more consumption." Zhuang (2016) investigated news articles between 2013 and 2016 containing *nǚ-hànzi*, from which she found that the images of *nǚ-hànzi* were constructed differently in different contexts. In news reporting women's irrational behaviors and unlawful acts, the term *nǚ-hànzi* is used to express derogation and accusation of these women being violent and culpable, whereas in the national news discourse this term turns into a compliment for female model workers. Zhuang (2016: 54) argues that "female masculinity is more of a promotion of socialism and collectivism" in China's state media. However, there seems to be a controversy of whether *nǚ-hànzi* signifies a type of "femininity" or "female masculinity" in the scholarly discussions.

While researchers have examined media representations of successful women in China, there is a lack of attention to the sociopolitical contextualization of the official gender labeling practice over time. The current literature only documents one study that takes a sociohistorical view when examining the media portrayal of women (Luo & Hao 2007). My chapter investigates how state media represents women labeled as *nǚ-qiángrén* 'strong women,' *nǚ-nénggrén* 'capable women,' *nǚ-hànzi* 'female tough guys,' and *shèngnǚ* 'leftover women' in light of the sociohistorical and socioeconomic contexts in which these representations served larger state agendas and discusses how these representations have evolved in response to shifting agendas.

## 3.2 Data and Methods

### 3.2.1 Data

Data used in this chapter was retrieved from 人民日报 *People's Daily* through Oriprobe Information Services (<https://www.oriprobe.com/peoplesdaily.shtml>), which provides digitized historical and current press data and covers the publication of *People's Daily* from June 1946 to the present. *People's Daily* is the largest newspaper group in mainland China with a circulation of 3 million worldwide. It is the “official voice” of the central government of China and the Central Committee of the CCP, and it has also been the “true barometer of the political climate of Chinese society on a daily basis” and represent official discourse (OriProbe). The texts and image files were retrieved from the Chinese version of the *People's Daily* between January 1, 1980 and May 1, 2021.

Four key terms were used to conduct the initial keyword searching: 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women,’ 剩女 *shèng nǚ* ‘leftover women,’ 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ and 女神 *nǚshén* “goddesses.” During the keyword searches, other female gender labels emerged from the data, including generic terms, such as 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women,’ and 女超人 *nǚ chāo rén* ‘superwomen.’ The former has a similar connotation of 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women,’ referring to competent women, while the latter originated in American comics and is now used to describe women who are capable and independent as if they are omnipotent. Other terms emerging from the data are occupation-related referential terms with 女 *nǚ* ‘female,’ such as 女专家 *nǚ-zhuānjiā*, ‘female experts,’ 女企业家 *nǚ-qǐyèjiā*, ‘female entrepreneurs,’ 女经理 *nǚ-jīnglǐ*, ‘female managers,’ 女管理人才 *nǚ-guǎnlǐréncai*, ‘female management talents,’ 女厂长 *nǚ-chǎngzhǎng* ‘female factory directors,’ 女校长 *nǚ-xàozhǎng* ‘female principals,’ 女书记 *nǚ-shūjì* ‘female secretaries,’ 女部长 *nǚ-bùzhǎng* ‘female ministers,’ 女大使 *nǚ-dàshǐ* ‘female ambassadors,’ and 女工程师 *nǚ-gōngchéngshī* ‘female engineers.’ Given the wide variety of

occupation-related gender terms, only generic terms were used to carry out the second keyword searching: 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women,’ 剩女 *shèng nǚ* ‘leftover women,’ 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ 女神 *nǚshén* ‘goddesses,’ 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women,’ and 女超人 *nǚ chāo rén* ‘superwomen.’

Because the new meanings of ‘superwomen’ and ‘goddesses’ are of low frequencies of use in the mainstream media (14 and 4 respectively), they are not able to represent the official voice and thus were not included. I thus obtained a total number of 404 news articles containing the four gender labels 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women,’ 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women,’ 剩女 *shèng nǚ* ‘leftover women,’ and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ with a total of 514 token frequencies, as shown in Table 3.1. These articles made up the *People’s Daily* (PD) corpus using Sketch Engine (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/>). Table 3.2 shows the counts information of the PD corpus.

**Table 3.1** Numbers of news articles containing the generic female gender terms and their frequencies in *People’s Daily* (January 1980 - May 2021)

|   | News articles | Frequency |
|---|---------------|-----------|
| 女强人 <i>nǚ-qiáng rén</i> ‘strong women’  | 156           | 195       |
| 女能人 <i>nǚ-néng rén</i> ‘capable women’  | 108           | 116       |
| 剩女 <i>shèng nǚ</i> ‘leftover women’     | 63            | 105       |
| 女汉子 <i>nǚ-hànzi</i> ‘female tough guys’ | 77            | 98        |
| Total                                   | 404           | 514       |

**Table 3.2** *People’s Daily* corpus counts information

| Category   | Counts  |
|------------|---------|
| tokens     | 538,794 |
| words      | 435,440 |
| sentences  | 22,661  |
| paragraphs | 7,678   |

### 3.2.2 Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used in this chapter. The quantitative methods include different types of corpus analysis using corpus analysis tools such as Sketch Engine, while the qualitative methods include Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the news articles that contain the target terms. The corpus approach to discourse analysis is “bottom-up” or “data-driven,” expecting linguistic patterns to emerge as salient and frequent (Baker & Levon 2015), whereas the CDA enables the examination of the contextual meaning of the target terms and whether the meanings of these terms have evolved over time. The quantitative and qualitative methods, therefore, complement each other.

For the quantitative analysis, I used RStudio as the data analysis tool to cleanse, inspect, analyze, and visualize the data. R packages used in this chapter included *tidyverse*, *lubridate*, and *ggplot2*. I first followed Baker (2008) who used corpora to analyze gender to examine the annual frequency of female gender labels used between 1980 and 2021. This process helps to gain a big picture of whether the official adoption of these labels has changed over time. I then investigated the typicality of the words used in the PD corpus by identifying what is unique in the PD corpus compared to a reference corpus, which is the Chinese Web 2017 Simplified corpus (i.e.

zhTenTen17) using Sketch Engine. The reference corpus has a total of 4,177,802,880 tokens. The process yielded a list of multi-words terms with raw and relative frequencies of each term that occurred in the focus corpus (PD corpus) and the reference corpus (zhTenTen17), ranked by the scores calculated by simple maths for keywords (Kilgarriff 2009) that focuses on higher-frequency words. Lastly, I examined high-frequency collocations with the target gender labels in a collocation network (Desagulier 2020). I kept five collocates on the left and five collocates on the right of each target label in this collocation network. This process allows me to see the four gender labels' own collocates, their shared collocates, the influence of a node in the network, and the association between a word and its collocates.

For the qualitative analysis, I took the context of language use into consideration using CDA and conducted five inquiries in my examination. First, who are the women being labeled 'strong women,' 'capable women,' 'female tough guys,' and 'leftover women'? Second, have the referents of the labels 'strong women' and 'capable women' changed over time? Third, how are they portrayed in the mainstream media? Fourth, how does the official mainstream media comment on the neologisms 'female tough guys' and 'leftover women'? Lastly, do women accept these labels reported in the official newspaper? Although these inquiries were probed qualitatively, the first and the second question involved quantitative techniques to check the frequency counts of each referent category of the gender labels used between 1980 and 2021.

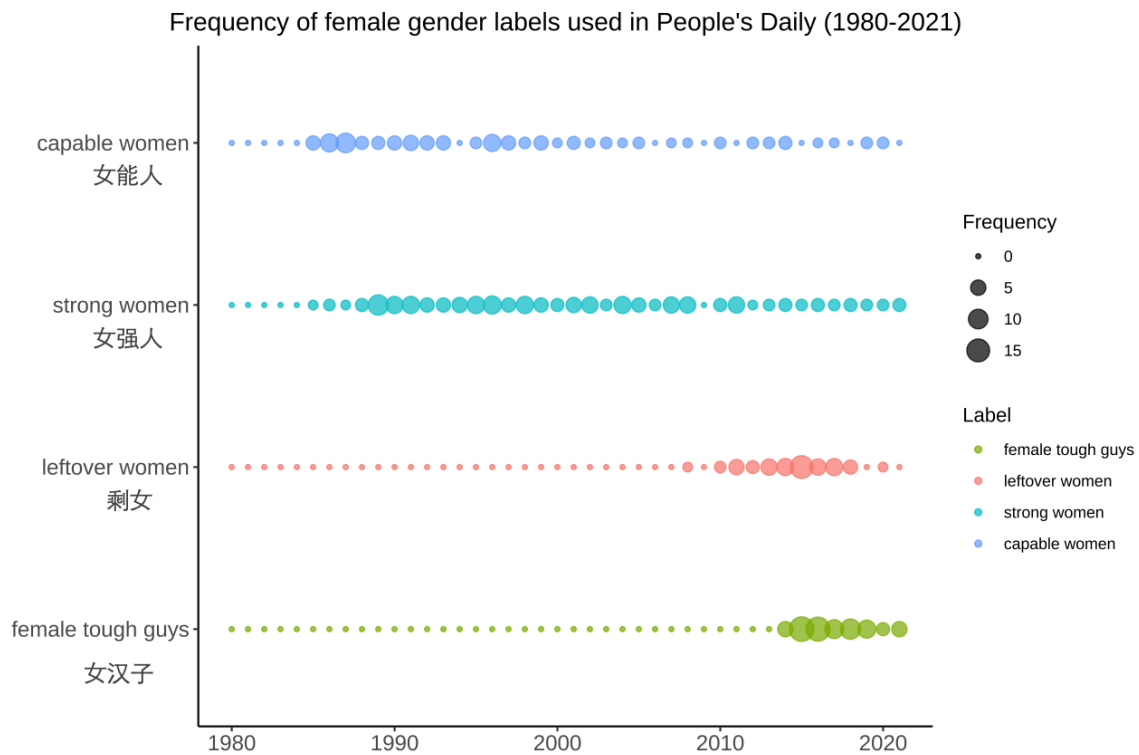
### 3.3 Results

#### 3.3.1 Corpus analysis findings

The first corpus linguistic inquiry concerns the frequency of the four female labels used in official discourse in post-reform China. In Figure 3.1, the size of each circle represents the frequency, ranging from 0 illustrated as a smaller dot to 15 illustrated as a bigger circle. The



horizontal axis indicates the timeline with five ticks and four intervals for every ten years, while the vertical axis indicates the four female gender terms 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women,’ 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women,’ 剩女 *shèng nǚ* ‘leftover women,’ and 女汉子 *nǚ-hàn zi* ‘female tough guys.’



**Figure 3.1** Frequency of female labels used in *People’s Daily* (1980-2021)

Figure 3.1 shows that the term 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ was used widely in the 1980s and the 1990s and then started to fade out in the 2000s. The label 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women’ was largely used in the 1990s and 2000s, the frequency of which decreased in the 2010s. The label 剩女 *shèng nǚ* ‘leftover women,’ as a neologism, appeared in the late 2000s and was not widely used until the 2010s, then its frequency has diminished with time. Lastly, the label 女汉子 *nǚ-hàn zi* ‘female tough guys’ popped up in the 2010s and it was still broadly used

in the 2010s, the total frequency of which outnumbered that of other female gender labels. The frequency change in using the four female labels over the last 40 years indicates a historical change of linguistic terms to label women. It also suggests a possibility that 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ and 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women,’ although focusing on different aspects of women’s life, started to replace 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ and 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women’ in official language use since the 2010s.

The second corpus linguistic inquiry is about the typical terms used in the PD corpus compared to a reference corpus, zhTenTen17 (i.e., Chinese Web 2017 Simplified corpus), using Sketch Engine. Table 3.3 lists the top 30 typical multi-word terms in the PD corpus ranked by the score. The top term “the All-China Women’s Federation” is an official and political organization to promote and protect women’s rights led by the CCP in China, which suggests that most of the official media coverage of talent and competent women is inseparable from reports published by this political organization. Other political terms include “good party secretary,” “women’s federation,” and “The Happiness Project” established in 1995 to help lift poor mothers in rural areas out of poverty. Importantly, the “Four Modernizations” was set forth by Deng Xiaoping to rejuvenate China’s economy in the late 1970s through promoting the development in agriculture, industry, military, and science and technology (Dilon 2015).

Among the top 30 typical terms, except for words used in all media coverage (e.g., newspaper reporter, time), most of them are related to women, including terms referring to women in general such as “numerous women,” “poor mothers,” “rural women,” “left-behind women,” and terms referring to women specifically related to their job titles, such as “the director of women’s federation,” “female/women cadres,” “female factory directors,” “female entrepreneurs,” and “female soldiers.” There are also terms related to official or public

commendation, including “model title,” “labor medal,” and “moral model.” These top-ranked typical terms not only include words referring to women’s work life, indicated by “female workers,” “female workers’ job,” and the aforementioned terms, but also include terms referring to women’s family life, such as “housework” and “role conflict.” Other terms refer to newly sprouted things in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as “women-only carriages” and “blind date shows.”

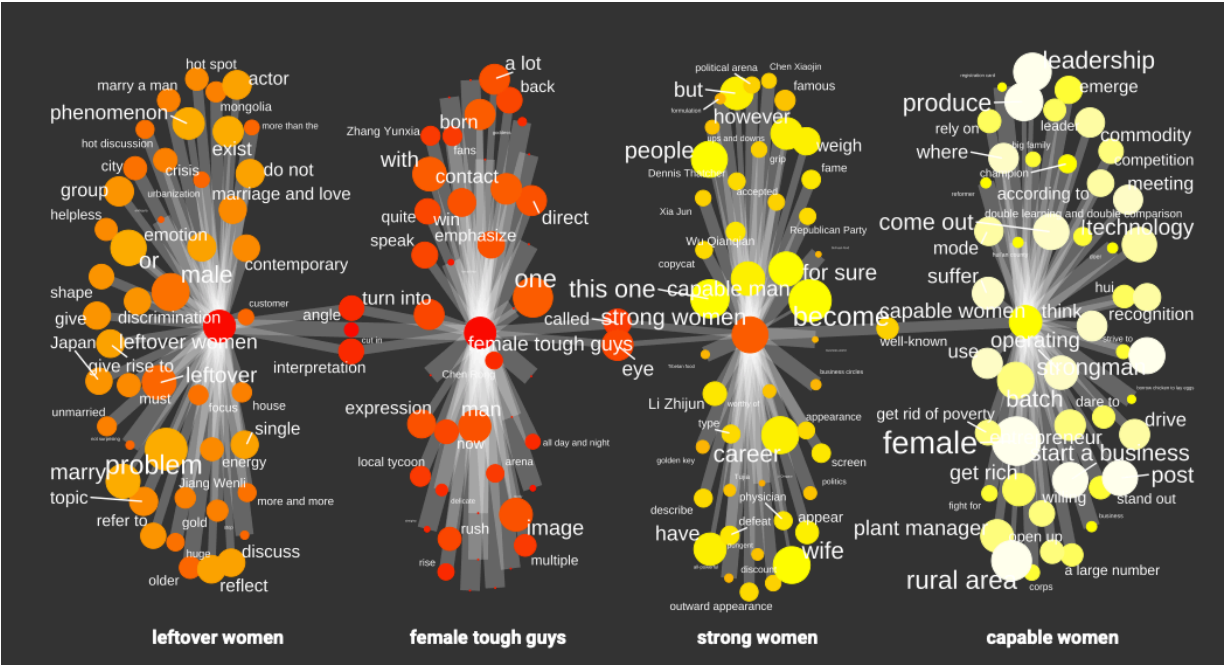
**Table 3.3** Top 30 typical terms used in the *People’s Daily* corpus

| Chinese term | English meaning                  | Freq. (focus) | Freq. (reference) | Relative freq. (focus) | Relative freq. (reference) | Score |
|--------------|----------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|-------|
| 全国 妇联        | The All-China Women’s Federation | 71            | 13459             | 131.8                  | 0.8                        | 73.3  |
| 广大 妇女        | numerous women                   | 67            | 16425             | 124.4                  | 1                          | 63    |
| 贫困 母亲        | poor mothers                     | 46            | 6722              | 85.4                   | 0.4                        | 61.5  |
| 女性 车厢        | women-only carriages             | 34            | 1003              | 63.1                   | 0.1                        | 60.4  |
| 好 支书         | good party secretary             | 31            | 845               | 57.5                   | 0.1                        | 55.7  |
| 农村 妇女        | rural women                      | 78            | 27655             | 144.8                  | 1.7                        | 54.7  |
| 幸福 工程        | The Happiness Project            | 36            | 4424              | 66.8                   | 0.3                        | 53.5  |
| 女 厂长         | female factory directors         | 28            | 120               | 52                     | 0                          | 52.6  |
| 新兴 公司        | new companies                    | 30            | 2104              | 55.7                   | 0.1                        | 50.3  |
| 相亲 节目        | blind date show                  | 34            | 4567              | 63.1                   | 0.3                        | 50.3  |
| 女 干部         | female cadre                     | 46            | 12329             | 85.4                   | 0.7                        | 49.6  |
| 妇联 组织        | Women’s federation               | 59            | 21152             | 109.5                  | 1.3                        | 48.6  |
| 妇女 干部        | women cadres                     | 35            | 7030              | 65                     | 0.4                        | 46.3  |
| 模范 称号        | model title                      | 27            | 2241              | 50.1                   | 0.1                        | 45    |
| 家务 劳动        | housework                        | 33            | 6635              | 61.2                   | 0.4                        | 44.5  |
| 女 企业家        | female entrepreneurs             | 42            | 13533             | 78                     | 0.8                        | 43.5  |
| 平原 制药厂       | Plains Pharmaceutical Factory    | 21            | 12                | 39                     | 0                          | 39.9  |
| 女 军人         | female soldiers                  | 23            | 1676              | 42.7                   | 0.1                        | 39.7  |

**Table 3.3, continued**

| Chinese term | English meaning                | Freq. (focus) | Freq. (reference) | Relative freq. (focus) | Relative freq. (reference) | Score |
|--------------|--------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|-------|
| 留守 妇女        | left-behind women              | 31            | 7940              | 57.5                   | 0.5                        | 39.6  |
| 女工 工作        | female workers' job            | 20            | 781               | 37.1                   | 0                          | 36.4  |
| 报 记者         | newspaper reporter             | 197           | 150600            | 365.6                  | 9.1                        | 36.4  |
| 时间           | time                           | 19            | 39                | 35.3                   | 0                          | 36.2  |
| 妇联 主任        | director of women's federation | 19            | 1458              | 35.3                   | 0.1                        | 33.3  |
| 妇女 工作        | women work                     | 28            | 10465             | 52                     | 0.6                        | 32.5  |
| 劳动 奖章        | labor medal                    | 32            | 15603             | 59.4                   | 0.9                        | 31.1  |
| 角色 冲突        | role conflict                  | 17            | 987               | 31.6                   | 0.1                        | 30.7  |
| 四化 建设        | Four Modernizations            | 17            | 1175              | 31.6                   | 0.1                        | 30.4  |
| 女 职工         | female workers                 | 70            | 55061             | 129.9                  | 3.3                        | 30.3  |
| 黄 学军         | Huang Xuejun                   | 16            | 245               | 29.7                   | 0                          | 30.2  |
| 道德 模范        | moral model                    | 57            | 42274             | 105.8                  | 2.5                        | 30.1  |

Table 3.3 offers a glimpse of the themes or backgrounds of official media coverage containing the four target labels, but it does not show how the labels are associated with other words in the news articles. Figure 3.2 shows high frequency collocates with the four target labels in a collocation network, where the female gender labels have their own collocates in each group and have shared collocates in the middle areas between the collocation groups. The size of each node represents the log frequency of a Chinese word translated into English. The color was assigned along a heat continuum skewed to reds and yellows, calculated by centrality, which is a measure of the influence of a node in a network. In other words, the more influential a word is, the higher score it has and the redder it is. The thickness of the edge between two nodes is calculated by mutual information, which is a measure of the association between a word and its collocates.



**Figure 3.2** High-frequency collocates with target labels in a collocation network in the PD corpus

Figure 3.2 shows that each female gender label has a group of collocates around them in the official discourse. For example, when the mainstream media talks about the gender label 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women,’ its high-frequency collocates include “phenomenon,” “problem,” “males,” “marriage and love,” “being single,” “emotion,” and “discrimination.” High-frequency collocates around 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ include “expression,” “turns into,” “a lot,” and “image.” When the mainstream media reports about 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women,’ high-frequency words associated with this label include “becoming,” “career,” “wife,” and “people.” As to 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women,’ its high-frequency collocates have “female,” “leadership,” “rural area,” “coming out,” “technology,” and “start-up businesses.” The two neological gender labels 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ share three collocates 诠释 *quánshì* ‘interpretation,’ 角度 *jiǎodù* ‘angle,’ and 切入 *qiērù* ‘cut in,’ which suggests a few formulaic expressions such as “interpret from a certain

perspective/angle” and “cut in from a perspective/angle” used in Chinese media coverage. The label 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ and 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women’ share two collocates 称为 *chēngwéi* ‘called’ and 眼 *yǎn* ‘eye.’ It could be possible that when these two gender labels are mentioned in the official news articles, they are related to how other people “call” and perceive women labeled with these terms in their “eye”. The term 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women’ also shares one collocate 远近闻名 *yuǎnjìn wénmíng* ‘well-known’ with the label 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women.’ Interestingly, 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ do not share any collocates, while the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ does not share collocates with 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women’ or 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women.’

Viewing the terms in the collocation network gives a big picture of how the target gender labels are associated with other terms, giving us an impression of how women labeled with these terms may be reported and portrayed in the mainstream media. To further understand how the labels are used in the context, qualitative examinations were conducted.

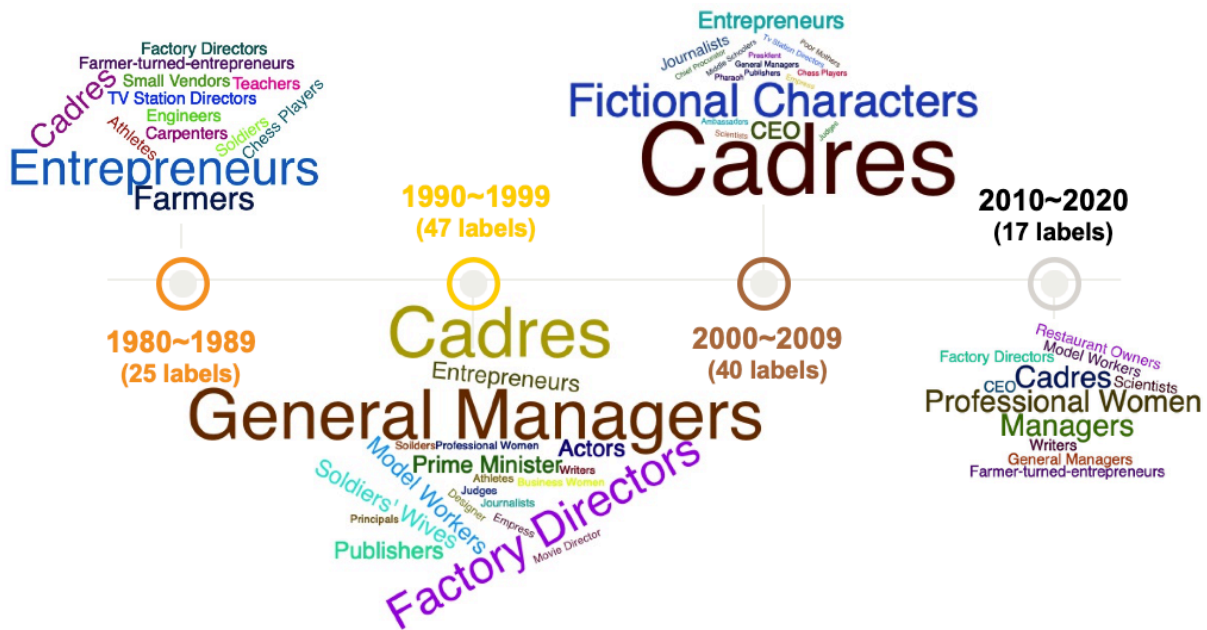
### 3.3.2 Qualitative analysis findings

The qualitative examination focuses on five research questions: (1) Who are the women being labeled ‘strong women,’ ‘capable women,’ ‘female tough guys,’ and ‘leftover women’? (2) Have the referents of the non-neological labels ‘strong women’ and ‘capable women’ changed over time? (3) How are women labeled with these terms portrayed in the mainstream media? (4) How does the official mainstream media comment on the neologisms ‘female tough guys’ and ‘leftover women’? (5) Do women accept these labels reported in the official newspaper? I probed

each target gender label with the questions and attempt to answer these questions one by one in this section.

### 3.3.2.1 女强人 *nǚ-qíáng rén* ‘strong women’

The first two questions ask who are the women being labeled 女强人 *nǚ-qíáng rén* ‘strong women’ and whether the referents of this term have changed over time. I conducted a close reading of the news articles that contain this gender label referring to women with specific occupations and then counted the frequency of each referent. Figure 3.3 shows a total number of 129 referents of 女强人 *nǚ-qíáng rén* ‘strong women’ as a referential term used in *People’s Daily* between 1980 and 2021, the time duration of which was divided into four parts with an interval of about 10 years each. Along the timeline, four wordclouds were plotted to indicate referents of this gender label at different times. The text size is in proportion to the frequency of occupational referents which were originally used with 女 *nǚ* “female” as a prefix. For the ease of reading, the prefix was omitted. The remaining 66 tokens of 女强人 *nǚ-qíáng rén* ‘strong women’ were used as a generic term, and thus were not included in Figure 3.3.



**Figure 3.3** Referent frequency of 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women’ in *People’s Daily* (1980-2021)

Figure 3.3 shows that 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women’ as a specific term referring to women of certain professions was mostly used in the 1990s and 2000s. In the 1980s, 25 labels were used to refer to women engaged in different careers. These high-frequency referents include entrepreneurs, farmers, and politicians. In the 1990s, there was a surge in using this label in official mainstream media to mainly refer to general managers, politicians, and factory directors, while secondary high-frequency referents include publishers, model workers, actors, military wives, as well as the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In the 2000s, there was still a high frequency of referents mostly referring to politicians, fictional characters, government officials, and CEOs. In the 2010s, there was a decrease in the use of this term, the referents of which primarily include government officials, professional women, and managers.

The third question asks how women labeled 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women’ are portrayed in mainstream media. Table 3.4 summarizes the description of ‘strong women’ in four



aspects in the official discourse, in which there is a divide between their career and personal life. These women are described as “hardworking,” “brave to reform”, “capable,” and “successful” in the public sphere, while they “struggle” in the private sphere because they are depicted as not being able to reconcile the conflict between their family life and work. This appears to highlight a contradiction in how these women look from the outside and how they feel on the inside. All these descriptions characterized independent strong women who achieved career success but failed to maintain a happy marriage and thus are regarded unfeminine and frustrated, which is illustrated in Example (1).

**Table 3.4** Descriptions of 女强人 *nǚ-qíánggrén* ‘strong women’ in *People’s Daily* (1980-2021)

| ‘Strong women’ | Description  |
|----------------|--|
| Public sphere  | Enterprising, hardworking, pioneering, innovative, always take heavy duties, sacrifice one’s personal interest, study hard<br>Brave, outstanding courage, have the courage to not fear hardship and dare to reform, have the courage to fight against feudal bad habits, brave enough to fight for their dreams, “Female Hero”, used to seeing the big wind and waves<br>Capable, eloquent, prosperous career, successful career, all-powerful, outstanding achievements, business is booming, in power<br>Famous, well-known, long-standing reputation, assets more than 300-thousand-yuan, enterprise with an output value of tens of millions of yuan, luxury house<br>Dealing with successful men, leading the “men’s world”, scared by men, tame a group of notorious young men |
| Private sphere | Struggling in the storms of life, have many misfortunes, never scream, never sigh, never shed tears in the face of difficulties and pressure, never shed a tear when injured, secretly shed tears, get into complicated emotional entanglements in life<br>Rather get divorced than stop working, sacrifice family happiness, abandon family and children, do not have a life, cannot strike a balance between family and career   |
| Appearance     | Lack of femininity, not feminine, tough appearance, skinny   |
| Inner world    | Frustrated, lonely, painful, ruthless, downhearted, fragile  |

Example (1) is an excerpt from an article entitled “女性重新审视并思考：事业与家庭能否较好地兼顾，鱼与熊掌能否同时兼得呢？ Women re-examining and thinking: Can career and family be well balanced, and can women have both at the same time?” from the *People's Daily* in the late 1990s, where the guest speaker and the host were discussing the definition of the label 女强人 *nǚ-qíáng rén* ‘strong women’ and the characteristics of women labeled with this term. From the viewpoint of the guest speaker, who was a female costume designer, women called *nǚ-qíáng rén* are not feminine because they are so capable that they intimidate men, and they cannot have a balance between family and career. Her viewpoints equate being capable with being unfeminine or masculine and equate women’s getting ahead in their career with having a broken marriage. These perspectives are reciprocated by the female host, who also contrasted the relative positive perception of ‘strong women’ as a form of “praise” in the 1980s with the negative perception of these women in the 1990s.

(1) 王化：如今不少女性不愿做“女强人”，虽然我无法界定“女强人”的含义，但是，它应该泛指有事业没有家庭的女人，是失去女性特征的女人。她能干但不温柔，连男人见了也害怕，或是让男人与她一争高低，从而造成了家庭与事业的对立。

Wang Hua: Nowadays, many women are unwilling to be ‘strong women.’ Although I cannot define the meaning of ‘strong women,’ it should generally refer to women who have a career but have no family and those women who have lost their femininity. She is capable but not gentle, and men are afraid of her, or she makes men compete with her, which creates a conflict between family and career.

主持人：今天，我们是否可以把不愿做“女强人”看做女性的一种自然回归呢？进入80年代，“女强人”成为人们对泼辣、能干的女性的普遍“赞誉”。但连被视为“女

强人”的女性自身也猛然间发现，事业成功了，却也付出婚姻破裂的惨重代价。——《人民日报》1997-03-05

Host: Today, can we regard our unwillingness to be ‘strong women’ as a natural return of women? In the 1980s, ‘strong women’ became a “praise” word for aggressive and capable women. But even women who are regarded as ‘strong women’ suddenly discover that they have succeeded in their careers, but they have also paid the heavy price of the breakdown of their marriages. —— *People’s Daily* 1997-03-05

Although having the morpheme 强 *qiáng* ‘strong’ in the label, ‘strong women’ are not necessarily physically strong or psychologically strong in the official discourse as shown in Examples (2) and (3) in the 2000s. The former describes the ‘strong woman’ as an emaciated person although having a successful bureaucratic career, while the latter depicts the fictional characters of ‘strong women’ as a whole, from an actor’s perspective, that they are not mentally strong enough despite a tough exterior.

(2) 她清癯的脸庞上架着一副深度近视眼镜，瘦削的身材好像一阵风就会被吹倒。她是一位公认的“女强人”，在纪委书记的岗位上工作十载成绩卓然。——《人民日报》2007-07-09

She has a pair of glasses on her skinny face, and her thin body can be blown down by a gust of wind. She is regarded as a ‘strong woman,’ who has outstanding achievements after ten years of hard work as the Secretary of the Commission for Discipline Inspection. —— *People’s Daily* 2007-07-09

(3) 杨童舒一直不大喜欢屏幕中的“女强人”形象，她们常常是在咄咄逼人的外表下，裹藏着一颗孤独脆弱的心。——《人民日报》2000-08-04

Yang Tongshu has always disliked the image of ‘strong women’ on screen. They often hide a lonely and fragile heart under their aggressive appearance. — *People’s Daily*  
2000-08-04

The last question asks whether women accept the label 女强人 *nǚ-qíángrén* ‘strong women’ reported in the official mainstream media. Examples (4) – (7) show women’s rejection of this label in different times from the mid-1980s to the late 2010s. Example (4) shows a general manager’s negative attitude toward being called a ‘strong woman’ in the 1980s. For her, this label sounds like a praise, but it is a derogatory word in disguise. Example (5) first discusses the definition of ‘strong women,’ which once again focuses on the impossibility of successful women having conjugal happiness, then describes a female leader’s rejection of this label because of the stereotypical viewpoints on women’s role conflict between their career and family. The main character in Example (5) was the Secretary of the Party Committee and the General Manager of Shenzhen Energy Corporation, the dual leadership assignment of which is commonly seen in Chinese state-owned companies. It is also noteworthy that she prefers to be a ‘capable woman’ to a ‘strong woman,’ suggesting that the two labels denote a major difference in the perception of women’s dual roles: the label ‘strong women’ indicates an irreconcilable work-family conflict, whereas the label ‘capable women’ does not have the same connotation. The rejection of this term continued in the 2010s, as shown in Example (6), an excerpt of which is from an article entitled 优秀留学归国人士“中国梦”, “The ‘Chinese Dream’ of outstanding returnees from studying abroad.” As indicated by the CEO of an IT company in Example (6), she is neither a ‘strong woman,’ nor a 弱女子 *ruò-nǚzǐ* ‘weak woman,’ the latter of which refers to women who are in frail health and thus dependent on other people in traditional Chinese society. By constating the two terms and rejecting both, the CEO shows her dissatisfaction of being

labeled or stereotyped. Likewise, the scientist in Example (7) not only disapproves of the label ‘strong women’, but also defends herself that she has “a gentle side” in her heart. The way that she differentiated her capability and decisiveness at work and her tender-hearted personality is consistent with the stereotyping of women labeled ‘strong women’ that they have a tough exterior and are unwilling to show their weaknesses.

(4) 我却已经被称为“女强人”。在褒声中也不乏贬意。——《人民日报》1984-03-08

But I have been called a ‘strong woman.’ There is no lack of derogation in the praise. —  
— *People’s Daily* 1984-03-08

(5) 事业成功的女人往往被视为冷酷无情或牺牲家庭幸福的女强人。深圳能源总公司党委书记、总经理劳德容却打心眼儿里不喜欢这个称谓，她说：“我愿做个女能人，力求事业与家庭的和谐。否则，人生就会残缺。”——《人民日报》1995-03-11

Women who succeed in their careers are often regarded as ‘strong women’ who are ruthless or willing to sacrifice their family happiness. Lao Derong, the Secretary of the Party Committee and General Manager of Shenzhen Energy Corporation, does not like this title. She said: “I would like to be a ‘capable woman’ and strive for balance between my career and family. Otherwise, my life will be crippled.” — *People’s Daily* 1995-03-11

(6) 记者：如何看“女强人”这个称呼？

“我不是女强人，但也不是弱女子。”启明星辰信息技术有限公司总裁兼首席执行官严望佳这样评价自己。——《人民日报》2013-12-17

Journalist: How do you think of the address term ‘strong woman’?

“I am not a ‘strong woman’, but I am not a ‘weak woman’ either,” Said by Yan Wangjia, the president and CEO of Qiming Xingchen Information Technology Co., Ltd.. ——

*People’s Daily* 2013-12-17

- (7) 强巴央宗：我就被人称为“女强人”，但我并不认同。与其说我是“女强人”，不如说我是有品质的女人。干练、果断只是我做事业时呈现的表象，我内心里也有温柔的一面。——《人民日报》2017-09-22

Qiangba Yangzong: I am called a ‘strong woman’, but I do not agree with it. I am not so much a ‘strong woman,’ as I am a woman of quality. Being capable and decisive is who I am at work, but I also have a gentle side in my heart. —— *People’s Daily* 2017-09-22

While Examples (4) – (7) show women’s explicit rejection of being called ‘strong women,’ Example (8) is a meta-discourse about the term ‘strong women’ in the mid-1990s by a writer, who commented on the label and pointed out the asymmetry of gendered usage of address terms in society where men and women are expected differently as social members.

- (8) 陈祖芬（报告文学作家）：大家都讲“女强人”，恰恰说明女性不够强大。出个女厂长女经理就是“女强人”，可男厂长男经理一大堆一大箩，也没人说什么。这说明社会并没有对男女同等要求。——《人民日报》1995-04-17

Chen Zufen (Reportage writer): Everyone talks about ‘strong women’, which shows that women are not strong enough. A female factory director or a female manager is a ‘strong woman,’ but there are a lot of male factory directors and male managers, and no one says anything. This shows that society does not have equal requirements for men and women. —— *People’s Daily* 1995-04-17

To sum up, 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ refers to brave, hardworking, capable, and successful women who have great leadership in certain professions traditionally limited to

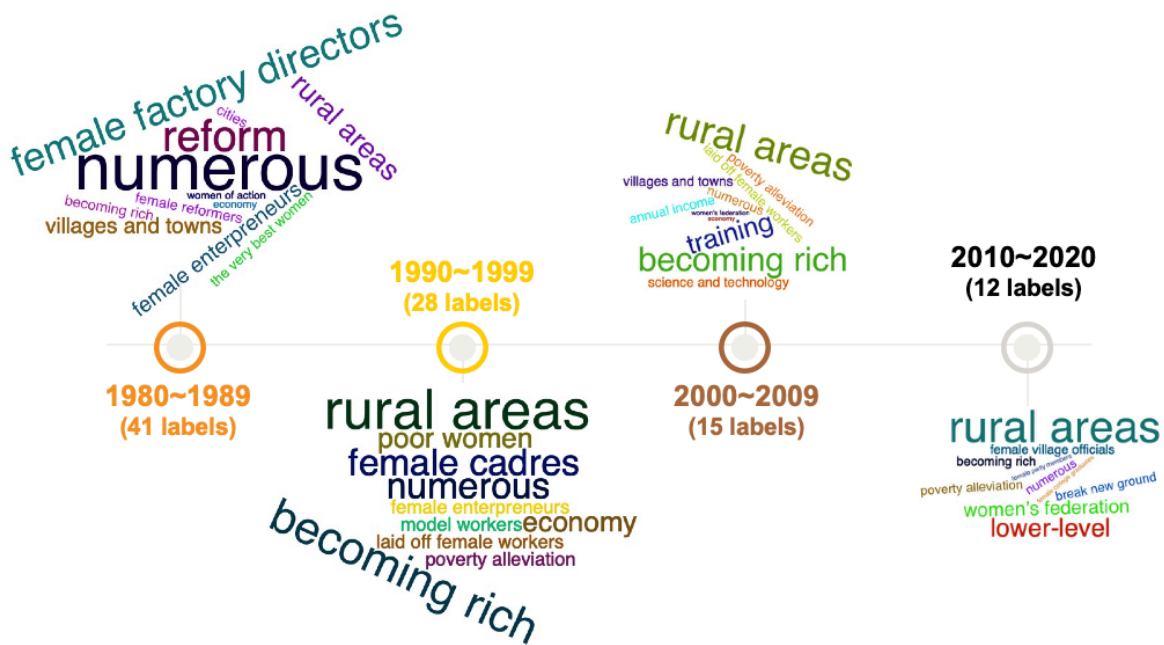
men, such as government officials, factory directors, general managers, CEOs, and scientists. This term was primarily adopted in the 1990s and 2000s and started to diminish since the 2010s in mainstream media. As a gender label, ‘strong women’ is associated with a tough and unfeminine appearance and the challenge to find balance between one’s successful career and family happiness in the official discourse. Although the meaning and the referents of this label have not changed much over nearly four decades, women’s rejection of this female gender label remains the same.

### 3.3.2.2 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’

The first two questions ask who are the women being labeled 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ and whether referents of this term have changed over time. Figure 3.4 shows the referents frequency and the keyword frequency of 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ used in *People’s Daily* between 1980 and 2021, the time duration of which was divided into four parts with an interval of about 10 years each. Along the timeline, four wordclouds were plotted to indicate the referents and the major themes of this gender label. The text size is in proportion to the word frequency.

As shown in Figure 3.4, the label 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ was mostly used in the 1980s when the Chinese economic reforms started in urban and rural areas, and then the usage gradually decreased. Unlike 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women’ used to refer to individuals, 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ is used as a collective term to describe “numerous ” or “a large number of” women. The cases where ‘capable women’ is used to refer to women in specific occupations are rare, and the referents are limited to “entrepreneurs” and “factory directors” in the 1980s, “cadres,” “model workers,” and “entrepreneurs” in the 1990s. It is also worth noting that “cities” appeared in the news articles containing 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén*

‘capable women’ in the 1980s, and that “rural areas” then became the background of news stories since the 1990s. The central themes throughout the four decades include 农村 *nóngcūn* ‘rural area,’ 脱贫 *tuōpín* ‘poverty alleviation,’ and 致富 *zhìfù* ‘becoming rich’ in achieving “common prosperity” for everyone, the ultimate goal in the primary stage of socialism with Chinese characteristics by striving to close the gap between urban and rural incomes. Proposed by Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader of Chinese market economy reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, the definition of “common prosperity” does not so much mean to have everyone become wealthy at the same time but means having a portion of people become rich first and then having the rich help the poor.



**Figure 3.4** Referent frequency and keyword frequency of 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ in *People’s Daily* (1980-2021)

The third question asks how women labeled 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ are portrayed in mainstream media. Table 3.5 lists the descriptions of women labeled with this term in four aspects. In the public sphere, there are “a large number of” *nǚ-néng rén*, who not only



have the “revolutionary” “leadership,” and the “determination to reform,” but also are “knowledgeable in science, technology, and operation.” Their occupations are similar to the professions of the ‘strong women.’ Unlike 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ who focus on their own career and become successful, media coverages of 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ focus on their achievements of “becoming rich,” “helping poverty reduction,” and “promoting moderate prosperity.”

**Table 3.5** Descriptions of 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ in *People’s Daily* (1980-2021)

| ‘Capable women’ | Description   |
|-----------------|---|
| Public sphere   | Numerous, a large number of<br>Leadership, revolutionary, determination to reform, pioneering, courageous; knowledgeable in science, technology, and operation; good in management<br>Factory directors, entrepreneurs, general managers<br>Becoming rich, helping poverty reduction, promoting moderate prosperity, helping laid-off women to be re-employed |
| Private sphere  | None  |
| Appearance      | None  |
| Inner world     | None  |

Compared with 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women,’ 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ do not have their individual faces in the state discourse because *People’s Daily* does not report on their personal life, appearance, and inner world. The reason is that the former is used to describe outstanding individuals, whereas the latter is used as a collective term in the official discourse starting from the mid-1980s as shown in Example (9).

(9) 我们相信，这次表彰会之后，随着我国建设事业和各项改革的进一步深入发展，一定会涌现出一批又一批的先进人物，涌现出更多的德才兼备的优秀女厂长、女经理、女企业家、女科学家以及其他各行各业的女状元、女能人。

We believe that after this commendation conference, with the further development of our country's construction and various reforms, we will have more outstanding women with both ability and integrity, such as female factory directors, female managers, female entrepreneurs, female scientists, and the very best women and capable women from all industries.” — *People's Daily* 1985-03-08

Example (9) was retrieved from the news article entitled “Hao Jianxiu's speech: Women's urgent demand for reforms and the reform is inseparable from women” on International Women's Day in 1985. The speech person Hao Jianxiu was the incumbent chairperson of the All-China Women's Federation at the time when she called for more ‘capable women’ to stand out as the economic reforms progressed in the 1980s. Her speech shows the morphological gendered markedness of all these professions by adding the word “female,” indicating that these jobs are supposed to be “male-dominated.” It is worth noting that being capable was not the only standard for outstanding ‘capable women.’ Women also had to have integrity or be morally correct in order to receive the commendation as female labor models. International Women's Day has also become a special date to hold a commendation conference to praise Chinese outstanding women as shown in Examples (10) and (11). Examples (10)-(13) show that the label 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ is used as a collective term to refer to a group of women, ranging from 150 to two million individuals, beginning in both urban and rural areas in the 1980s in Example (10) and then only focusing in rural areas such as towns and villages since the 1990s in Examples (11)-(13). These rural areas also include regions where

ethnic minority groups reside such as Inner Mongolia in Example (11) and the Salar ethnic community in Example (12). Example (13) is a headline regarding the action of improving farmers' technological knowledge and skills by holding professional training for a large group of 'capable women.' Although being commended, the so-called 'capable women' are de-individuated in the state discourse.

(10) 一百五十名在城乡经济改革中涌现的女能人 —— 《人民日报》 1985-03-08

150 capable women who emerged in the urban and rural economic reforms ——

*People's Daily* 1985-03-08

(11) [在内蒙古]有 2 0 0 多万名乡土女能人活跃在农村牧区的经济建设中 ——

《人民日报》 1991-03-08

There are more than 2 million capable women who are active in the economic development of rural and pastoral areas [in Inner Mongolia]. —— *People's Daily* 1991-03-08

(12) 先后受省、地、县表彰的撒拉族女能人就有 1 8 0 多人。 —— 《人民日报》

1998-09-05

There are more than 180 capable Salar women who have been commended in their province, prefecture, and county. —— *People's Daily* 1998-09-05

(13) 提高农民科学素质：对 2 万名女能人开展培训 —— 《人民日报》 2007-03-24

Improving scientific quality of farmers: Training 20,000 capable women. —— *People's Daily* 2007-03-24

Not only serving as a collective term of an honorary title, 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* 'capable women' is also used to refer to talented capable individuals who demonstrated great expertise, as shown in Example (14), and excellent leadership in boosting economic prosperity, shown in

Examples (15)-(17). Specifically, Example (14) shows the international influence of an urban elite who was awarded the title ‘capable woman’ and appointed president of a university in the 1980s when this kind of leadership appointment was predominantly taken by men. Example (15) shows that the ‘capable woman’ Yang Hongyan, one of the newly rich, is obliged to help fellow villagers who fell behind. Her story corresponds to the economic agenda of “common prosperity” in the reform era that encouraged the rich to help the poor, especially in rural areas in the 1990s (Yan 2012). Example (16) highlights the historical background in the 1990s when the central government launched the reform of state-owned enterprises, resulting in millions of workers, especially female workers being laid off in urban China (Cai 2006). The ‘capable woman’ Qin Aiying in Example (16) was one of them. However, she “became rich” by utilizing science and technology in farming, for which she “became well-known.” Her success story is congruent with Deng Xiaoping’s famous quote that “Science and technology are the primary engine for improving the productive force” in the late 1980s, upon which then-President Jiang Zemin proposed the “Strategy of invigorating China through science and education” in 1995. Women like Qin Aiying and their transformation from a laid-off worker to a rich farmer relying on science and technology emerged as paragons that represented the zeitgeist. Example (17) shows an exemplary case of private business owners providing tax revenues to help economic development. More impressively, ‘capable woman’ Zhu Shuhua, the company founder, had a large-scale business with more than 600 employees, mostly women, who had sizeable incomes and insurance benefits in the early 2000s.

- (14) 浙江医科大学女校长郑树最近获得英国剑桥大学名人中心授予的“世界女能人”、“国际上成功的领导者”的称号。郑树是我国著名肿瘤学专家。——《人民日报》1987-08-02

Zheng Shu, the female president of Zhejiang Medical University, was recently awarded the title of “World Capable Women” and “International Successful Leader” by the Celebrity Center of the University of Cambridge, UK. Zheng Shu is a famous oncologist in our country. —— *People’s Daily* 1987-08-02

- (15) 湖南省通道侗族自治县陇城乡双斗村女青年杨红艳（右二），利用打工时学到的宝石加工技术和积攒的钱，回到村里自己办起了一个加工厂，让村里的姐妹们和自己一同致富，成了远近闻名的女能人。——《人民日报》1997-04-15

Yang Hongyan, a young woman in Shuangdou Village, Longcheng Town, Tongdao Dong Autonomous County, Hunan Province, returned to the village and founded a processing factory by herself using the gem processing skills she learned and the money she earned from working, so that women in the village became rich and she became a well-known capable woman. —— *People’s Daily* 1997-04-15

- (16) 河南省下岗女工秦爱英举家离城到豫北淇县北阳乡宋庄村租地种植，短短时间即成为名扬四方的科技致富女能人。——《人民日报》1997-07-08

Qin Aiyong, a laid-off female worker in Henan Province, left the city with her family and rented farmland in Songzhuang Village, Beiyang Town, Yubei County, Henan Province. She became a well-known capable woman who quickly became rich relying on science and technology. —— *People’s Daily* 1997-07-08

- (17) 江苏江阴市陆桥镇女能人朱淑华，独资办起江阴天华纱业有限公司，今年已上缴税金二百三十多万元，六百多名职工的人均年收入超过九千元，并为职工办理了各种保险。——《人民日报》2000-12-04

Zhu Shuhua, a capable woman in Luqiao Town, Jiangyin City, Jiangsu Province, established Jiangyin Tianhua Yarn Ltd. as a sole proprietor. This year she has paid more than 2.3 million yuan in taxes, and more than 600 employees have a per capita annual income of more than 9,000 yuan. She also provided various insurance benefits for her employees. — *People's Daily* 2000-12-04

The outstanding women exemplars in Examples (15)-(17) are economically successful individuals who became new local elites in male-dominated fields in the late 1990s and early 2000s reported in the official media. However, some women who received the title ‘capable women’ attracted criticisms from their fellow villagers, as seen in the media coverage of Example (18). Pan Zhiqiao went to work outside the village, defying the traditional gender expectation that a married woman should be obedient and deferent to the authority of her husband. She was criticized for violating the patriarchal gender ideology that imposes what Rofel (1999) calls the “inside-outside” gendered dichotomy on women and keeps them from working outside the rural area. As the coverage shows, state media took issue with this ideology by commending women like Pan Zhiqiao, who eventually succeeded in becoming rich, helping other female villagers to reduce poverty, and handing profits to the state to boost economic development. This media discourse commends women like Pan Zhiqiao, who defied patriarchal gender ideology for the urgent national priority of economic growth in the early stage of economic reforms in rural areas.

- (18) 封建思想在温州也有很大势力，传统的男主外女主内的观念，仍然束缚着妇女。龙港区湖前镇西桥村有个女能人叫潘志巧，她不甘寂寞，借了五百元钱，带着孩子去安徽、湖北好几个省跑业务。有人说她不像样子，不守妇道。似乎有了孩子就应该围着锅台转。潘志巧不服，她决心办一个三八塑料编织厂……后来事业越干

越大，带动了五百户妇女致富，去年产值达八十万，流动资金二十万，上交利润四万，她的事业成功了。——《人民日报》1986-11-06

The patriarchal gender ideology that men should work outside whereas women should stay at home still constrained women in Wenzhou. There was this ‘capable woman’ named Pan Zhiqiao in Xiqiao Village, Huqian Town, Longgang District, who was not willing to stay lonely. She borrowed 500 yuan and took her children to run businesses in several provinces, such as Anhui and Hubei. Some people say that she is not decent, and that she doesn’t observe accepted female behavior. It seems that women should become housewives taking care of the family after they gave birth to children. Pan Zhiqiao refused to be like this, and she was determined to establish a plastic weaving factory...Eventually, her business got bigger and bigger, and it helped 500 women to become rich. Last year, the output value reached 800,000 yuan, the working capital was 200,000 yuan, and the profit turned over to the state was 40,000 yuan. She had a successful career. —— *People’s Daily* 1986-11-06

The official discourse not only commends these women as ‘capable women,’ but also leads them to perform and advocate for policies, such as calling for late marriage in the rural area in Example (19), an excerpt from the news article entitled 张店乡女青年晚婚晚育好处多 ‘Young women in Zhangdian Town have found there are many benefits of late marriage and delayed childbearing.’ This article was published in 1995 when the One-Child policy has been evolved from “one child per couple” in the 1980s to “late marriage, delayed childbearing, fewer births, and eugenic births” (Fudan University 2015). The official media portrayed Zhan Xianling in Example (19) as a ‘capable woman’ as well as a good role model for other rural women, demonstrating the possibility for women to become rich and the benefits of late marriage and

delayed childbearing. In the official narrative, Zhan's words support the birth-control policy made by the central government in the 1980s.

- (19) 刘营村 26 岁的展显玲在合肥学会了缝纫技术，如今自筹资金创办起缝纫店，并招收 100 名学员，这位昔日的“乡下妹”，如今成了市场上的女能人。她说：“坚持晚婚，才有充沛的精力致富，要不然，在乡下早婚生儿育女，岂不像剪了翅膀的老母鸡，再也飞不起来了！”——《人民日报》1995-04-02

Zhan Xianling, a 26-year-old resided in Liuying Village, learned sewing skills in Hefei. Now she has set up a sewing shop by raising funds and recruiting 100 students. This former “country girl” has now become a capable woman in the market. She said: “If you insist on getting married late, you will have plenty of energy to get rich. Otherwise, getting married and having children early in the countryside would be like an old hen with wings cut off who can't fly anymore!” —— *People's Daily* 1995-04-02

The last question asks whether women accept or reject the label 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ reported in the official mainstream media. In the previous session, Example (5) depicts a woman who would like to be a ‘capable woman’ rather than a ‘strong woman’ because the term ‘strong women’ is associated with the perceived unhappiness. By contrast, Example (20) shows a woman who felt ashamed when being called a ‘capable woman’ in the mid-1980s. As the report says, the term 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ has become sarcastic. Although the article did not reveal how and why the term became sarcastic, it shows the woman's discomfort and rejection of being labeled with this term.

- (20) 应《女子文学》之约，我去某厂采访一位“女能人”，没想到，好话说尽，人家就是不让写。原因是，自去年被厂里评上“女能人”之后，“女能人”三字就成了带



有挖苦、讥讽性的绰号了，领导这样叫，群众这样喊，常喊得她难以抬头。现在见我又要把“女能人”三字登在杂志上，自然要反感了。——《人民日报》1985-12-03

Asked by the magazine *Women Literature*, I went to a factory to interview a ‘capable woman.’ Unexpectedly, she was not willing be written about no matter what I said. The reason is that since she was appraised as a ‘capable woman’ last year, this term has become sarcastic. She often felt ashamed when the leaders and the masses called her this. Now that I am going to put ‘capable woman’ on the magazine, she of course feels repulsive. —— *People’s Daily* 1985-12-03

While 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ is used to describe individuals shown in Examples (14)-(20), this term is primarily utilized as an honorary title to collectively commend numerous successful women who demonstrated outstanding leadership and the ability to help economic growth and poverty alleviation in the rural area in the 1980s and 1990s. The referents of this label have not changed much over the last 40 years, but the usage has greatly reduced since the early 2000s in the official discourse.

### 3.3.2.3 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’

To examine who are the women being labeled 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ in the official media, I manually annotated the referents in the 77 news articles containing this term. Table 3.6 lists a total of 63 referents of ‘female tough guys’ with 28 types of occupations. Generic usage of the term or comments on this neologism were removed for this analysis. In Table 3.6, the most noticeable is that the term ‘female tough guys’ is most likely to refer to cadres in grassroots levels of the CCP. One major difference between the referent of ‘female tough guys’ and that of “strong/capable women” is that ‘female tough guys’ refers to women engaged in occupations that are not necessarily “leaders” as what 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong

women’ and 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ refer to. The secondary high-frequency referents include a wide range of grassroots workers such as rescue workers, textile workers, ironworkers, wielding workers, power grid workers, drainage workers, and construction workers. Other high-frequency referents are farmers, police officers, athletes, and fictional characters in recent novels, films, and television shows.

**Table 3.6** Referent frequency of 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ in *People’s Daily* (2013-2020)

| <b>Referent of 女汉子 <i>nǚ-hànzi</i> ‘female tough guys’</b> | <b>Frequency</b> |
|--|------------------|
| Grassroots cadres  | 9                |
| Workers  | 8                |
| Farmers  | 5                |
| Fictional characters                                       | 5                |
| Police officers  | 4                |
| Athletes   | 3                |
| Attendants   | 2                |
| Soldiers   | 2                |
| Scientists   | 2                |
| Military wives   | 2                |
| Entrepreneurs  | 2                |
| Actors   | 2                |
| Nurses   | 2                |
| Experts  | 1                |
| Government officials                                       | 1                |
| Telegraphers   | 1                |
| Scholars   | 1                |
| Fighter pilots   | 1                |
| Racers   | 1                |
| Technicians  | 1                |
| Managers   | 1                |
| Professors   | 1                |
| Astro engineers  | 1                |
| Chess players  | 1                |
| Assistants   | 1                |
| Engineers  | 1                |
| Doctors  | 1                |
| Producers  | 1                |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>63</b>        |

Figure 3.5 consists of visual representations of women labeled 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ in *People’s Daily* in the 2010s. These women’s occupations are rescue workers, fighter jet pilots, ironworkers, and drug law enforcement officers. All of these jobs require physical strength and are traditionally thought to be male-dominated careers. The photographs show that these women labeled ‘female tough guys’ are represented as caring and content, as in the image in the top right corner where the rescue worker gazes maternally at the child she has just rescued; or as demonstrating an elegant and unconventional demeanor as in the image of fighter jet pilots in the middle, or doing heavy duties at the railway as the ironworkers at the bottom left, or being equipped with heavy uniforms and weapons as the drug law enforcement officers at the bottom left.



**Figure 3.5** Images of 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ in *People’s Daily*

In terms of the portrayal of women labeled 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ in the official mainstream media, I manually examined descriptions of women labeled with this term and categorized them into four groups, as shown in Table 3.7. These women are described as “tough” and “capable” in the public sphere, but some of them face struggles in their private life. In terms of their appearance, there seems to be a contradiction because some of them are depicted as “feminine” whereas others are “less feminine.” No description was found regarding their inner world.

**Table 3.7** Descriptions of 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ in *People’s Daily* (2013-2020)

| <b>‘Female tough guys’</b> | <b>Descriptions</b>  |
|----------------------------|--|
| Public sphere              | <p>She can do things that men do in the farmland.</p> <p>She can carry/lift heavy things (e.g., ladders, harvested rice, 40 kg of oxygen cylinders).</p> <p>She can set up a stage and hang a curtain on her own.</p> <p>She can wear thick body armor and a helmet that weighs 3 pounds.</p> <p>She can drive a big truck.</p> <p>She can change the oxygen cylinder with a wrench.</p> <p>She can help a patient get over the bed on her own.</p> <p>Strict and serious, very brave and determined, responsible</p> <p>Fearless, and decisive</p> <p>“Tougher” than men</p> <p>Capable and independent</p> <p>She does things in a clear and efficient manner.</p> <p>Endure hardship, not afraid of fatigue</p> |
| Private sphere             | <p>She does not understand life and lack emotional warmth.</p> <p>She takes care of both family and career.</p> <p>She works in a vigorous and resolute way but feels guilty for not taking care of kids.</p>  |
| Appearance                 | <p>Both feminine and masculine</p> <p>Seems delicate, seems a little shy, big thick legs, slightly dark</p> <p>Short hair, shorter than 160 cm tall, and weighs just over 40 kg</p> <p>With a ponytail and a pretty face, it is difficult to connect her appearance with her ‘female tough guy’ character.</p>   |
| Inner world                | None   |

The next qualitative examination is about whether women accept or reject this label. Examples (21) – (25) were extracted from the news articles containing the term ‘female tough guys.’ These examples show three different attitudes toward women labeled with this term. First, Examples (21) and (22) show women’s internalization of binary gender norms and their surrender to this label. The soccer player in Example (21) not only calls herself and other teammates ‘female tough guys,’ but also uses “big thick legs” to describe themselves. Using a rhetorical question, she shows her perspective that ‘female tough guys’ are not physically attractive and thus do not go on dates. Similarly, Liu Yanhong, an ironworker, in Example (22), referred to herself as a ‘female tough guy’ in the past, whereas she perceives herself as a real “man” at the time of speaking. Again, the label ‘female tough guys’ is associated with masculine characteristics such as “getting more muscles” as Liu Yanhong said. Both women are portrayed as lamenting their personal failure because they do not fit hegemonic femininity. Second, Examples (23) and (24) show that women are proud of their perceived gender identity across gender lines. Example (23) shows that the term ‘female tough guys’ has been used by women themselves when others described them as “tough.” Similarly, Xiaobei, a recent college graduate in Example (24), also uses ‘female tough guy’ to describe herself. “Outdoor jacket,” the description of her appearance in this excerpt, also indicates that she does not match traditional expectations of femininity. This example was retrieved from the news report entitled “Why is it so difficult for girls to find a job?” with a focus on women’s voices about traditional gender bias, gender roles, and employment difficulties for female college graduates. In Xiaobei’s case, it is not that the interviewers did not have a gender bias against female job seekers, but that she was not perceived as feminine and thus she encountered less trouble of being treated unequally. Despite frustrations in her job interviews, Xiaobei jokingly referenced her “own female tough-

guy aura.” Both cases suggest that some women are trying to redeem the negative meaning of this term and that they feel proud of their perceived toughness. Third, Example (25) shows women’s strong objection to being labeled ‘female tough guys.’ The navy officer in this example explicitly disagrees with other people calling her and her colleagues ‘female tough guys,’ because it suggests that they are neither warm nor romantic. She contends that they also enjoy the same leisure activities as other women and expresses her desire to be romantically loved.

(21) 不是球队不让谈恋爱，而是谁会喜欢我们这些女汉子、大粗腿呢？ ——  
《人民日报》2015-07-10

It’s not that we are not allowed to date, but who would like to date us ‘female tough guys’ with big thick legs? —— *People’s Daily* 2015-07-10

(22) “现在都不算‘女汉子’了，已经把自己当‘汉子’了。”刘艳红笑着说，“胳膊上的肌肉也多了。”——《人民日报》2017-04-05

“I don’t think I am a ‘female tough guy.’ I already think of myself as a ‘man’.” Liu Yanhong smiled and said, “I am getting more muscles [due to my job duties].” ——  
*People’s Daily* 2017-04-05

(23) 这些年来，从“屌丝”到“女汉子”，类似的自嘲并不罕见。不是嫌我粗犷么，我自命为女汉子，一切有了合理解释。 ——《人民日报》2015-04-28

In recent years, it is uncommon to see self-mockery terms such as ‘losers’ and ‘female tough guys.’ You think I’m tough? Then I call myself a ‘female tough guy’, and everything has a reasonable explanation.” —— *People’s Daily* 2015-04-28

(24) “进入面试后，我很少遇到直接对性别相关问题直接发问的。”小北理了理自己的冲锋衣，开玩笑般地说道，“可能是我自带‘女汉子’气场吧。”——《人民日报》2016-01-05

“In the job interview, I rarely encounter direct questions related to gender issues.”

Xiaobei adjusted her outdoor jacket and said jokingly, “Maybe it’s my own ‘female tough guy’ aura.” —— *People’s Daily* 2016-01-05

(25) 谁说女兵不懂柔情？我们的爱像大海一样深沉宽广。有人把女舰员称为“女汉子”，觉得我们不懂生活、缺乏温情。其实我们也爱美，爱自拍、爱逛街、爱美食，内心渴望被照顾、被呵护、被宠爱。——《人民日报》2018-07-31

Who says female soldiers are not gentle? Our love is as deep and broad as the ocean.

Some people call female navy officers ‘female tough guys’ and think that we do not understand life and lack emotional warmth. In fact, we like dressing up, taking selfies, going shopping, and enjoying good food. We also desire to be taken care of, cared for, and pampered. —— *People’s Daily* 2018-07-31

The last inquiry is how the official discourse comments on the coinage 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys.’ As a hot word, official opinions on this term were discussed in four articles, from which I extracted Examples (26) – (29). Both Examples (26) and (27) point out that ‘female tough guy’ is a neologism or a buzzword in 2013. Example (26) evaluated this term as “glamorous” and juxtaposed it with the “Chinese Dream” promoted as the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” by the incumbent Chinese President Xi Jinping. “Chinese Dream” has been defined as the “mission statement” of the leadership and “political manifesto” for the nation’s future in the official discourse (Liu 2013), and it has also “become widespread in the official announcement”. Being able to be ranked among the terms indicating Chinese leadership’s

political ideology such as “Chinese Dream,” 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ as a neologism obtained the official approval. Example (27) further shows that this term was officially included in the top 10 neologisms by the Ministry of Education and the State Language Commission in 2014. From the official perspective, the term ‘female tough guys’ expresses a positive meaning in Example (28), which shows that the rise of this term is related to women’s “independence” and “individuality.” It also matches the needs and demands of the new era embracing “diversity” and differences. While Examples (26) – (28) highly evaluate the new label 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ Example (29) focuses on the contrast made by ‘female tough guys’ and “beautiful flowery boys” that represent masculine women and effeminate men respectively in recent years. The official discourse expresses concern about the perceived “boy crisis.” When girls demonstrate the perceived masculine behaviors and are called ‘female tough guys’, it is encouraged in the official media, whereas when boys show the perceived effeminate characteristics, it became a “social topic” and gave rise to societal concern about women’s outperforming men, indicated by the term 阴盛阳衰 *yīnshèngyángshuāi* ‘Yin predominates over Yang’ where *yin* represents women and *yang* represents men. Both ‘effeminate men’ and ‘masculine women’ cause uneasiness because these alternative gender types deviate from restrictive gender norms and the hegemonic gender politics.

(26) 没想到，网言网语也能登上大雅之堂，“点赞”、“土豪”、“女汉子”和辉煌的

“中国梦”一起成为 2013 年十大流行语 —— 《人民日报》2013-12-30

Unexpectedly, Internet languages can be glamorous. “Thumbs up”, “nouveau riche”,

‘female tough guys’ and the brilliant “Chinese Dream” have been included in the top ten

buzzwords in 2013. —— *People’s Daily* 2013-12-30



(27) 教育部、国家语委 29 日在京发布 2013 年中国语言生活状况报告……“女汉子”等获评 2013 年度十大新词语。——《人民日报》2014-05-30

The Ministry of Education and the State Language Commission released the 2013 report on the Chinese language life in Beijing ... ‘female tough guys’ was selected as one of the top ten new words in 2013. —— *People’s Daily* 2014-05-30

(28) 在张扬个性、追求自我、崇尚多元的当下，“女汉子”的兴起表达出女性独立自主、追求个性与自我的精神风貌，传递着积极的正能量。——《人民日报》

2014-04-01

In the current era of promoting individuality and advocating diversity, the term ‘female tough guys’ expresses the outlook of women’s independence, pursuit of individuality and self, and conveys positive energy. —— *People’s Daily* 2014-04-01

(29) 提起男性，许多人脑海中勾勒出的是身材高大、棱角分明的纯爷们形象。然而近年来，“花样美男”频频出现、“女汉子”成为热词。于是，“男孩危机”变成社会话题，甚至有观点称，“阴盛阳衰”已成为不争的事实。——《人民日报》2016-12-

15

Speaking of men, many people think of tall, angular, masculine men. However, in recent years, ‘beautiful flowery boys’ have emerged, and ‘female tough guys’ has become a hot term. As a result, the “boy crisis” has become a social topic. Some people even think that “Yin predominates over Yang” has become an indisputable fact. —— *People’s Daily*

2016-12-15

In summary, 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ is mostly used to label capable grassroots female workers in male-dominated fields in the official mainstream media. The

portrait of these women is relatively more positive than that of 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women’ in the official discourse. The label 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ focuses on the capability and the strong mentality of women, whereas 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women’ indicates strong ability but this term is stigmatized. The new label 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ is also highly evaluated and many women were praised as ‘female tough guys’ for their social contributions in state media. However, the irony of this kind of praise is that these women have to be reassigned to the binarized opposite gender to deserve the praise. This linguistic gender reassignment suggests that the “Chinese Dream” is a masculine project that values economic virility.

#### 3.3.2.4 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’

The first two qualitative inquiries concern who are the women being labeled 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ and how these women are described in the mainstream media. After the initial qualitative investigation, I found that 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ is mostly used as a social label to collectively refer to a group of women regarding social issues in *People’s Daily*. Thus, I combined these two questions and present the findings in Table 3.8.

**Table 3.8** Descriptions of 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ in *People’s Daily* (2007-2019)

| <b>‘Leftover women’</b> | <b>Description</b>   |
|-------------------------|--|
| Public sphere           | “Three high” (highly educated, high position, high income) group<br>Recent PhD graduates<br>Office workers<br>New generation of migrant workers  |
| Private sphere          | Relatively old, around 30 years old, single, unmarried,<br>Family conflicts, parents’ desire to marry their daughters off<br>Portrayal in films and TV series, dating game shows, Internet dating services |
| Appearance              | None   |
| Inner world             | Crisis of becoming ‘leftover women’  |

Table 3.8 shows that women labeled *shèngnǚ* face conflicts between their successful career in the public sphere and generational conflict in their personal life. Their appearance is not of interest in the official discourse, but they are depicted as having inner struggles. In addition, a new generation of migrant workers who are originally from small towns or rural areas and currently working in big cities are also labeled with this term, as seen in Example (30). This example shows that young immigrant workers in big cities without having a partner are treated as ‘leftovers’ when they return home during the Spring Festival, the occasion for the biggest family reunions in China, which also indicates generational conflicts at home. As shown in Example (31), there have been disagreements between parents who desire to marry their children off and people from the younger generation who are not romantically involved.

- (30) 他们常年在外，唯有过年时才会回家，如果在春节期间找不到对象，就意味着他们的婚事又要再推迟至少一年，很容易沦为“剩男剩女”。——《人民日报》  
2015-05-14

They are away [in the cities] all year round and only go home during the Chinese New Year. If they cannot find a partner during the Spring Festival, it means that their marriage will have to be postponed for at least another year, and they will easily become “leftover men and leftover women”. —— *People’s Daily* 2015-05-14

- (31) 年轻人结婚年龄越来越晚，婚恋难成了不少“剩男剩女”的心病，回家就会面临长辈的“逼婚”，以至于“租个女友回家过年”的荒唐事也不断出现。——《人民日报》2016-02-04

Since young people tend to get married at a later age, difficulties of getting married have become a major concern for ‘leftover men’ and ‘leftover women.’ Their parents urge them to get married as soon as possible when they visit home. That’s why ridiculous

things such as “renting a girlfriend to go home for the New Year” keep happening. ——  
*People's Daily* 2016-02-04

In addition to family conflicts, the discussion of ‘leftover women’ also revolves around social issues such as unbalanced gender ratio, late marriage, which are reflected in films and TV series. The official discourse also discussed newly emerging industries such as dating shows and online dating services. Another focus of the discussion is whether the term should be included in the latest version of the Modern Chinese Dictionary, which is related to the next question about how the official mainstream media comments on the neologism 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women.’

Unlike 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ receiving a positive evaluation from the official discourse, Examples (32) – (33) show the negative attitude toward the use of 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ and its male counterpart 剩男 *shèngnán* ‘leftover men’ in the official media. Example (32) not only depicts the demographic features of people labeled ‘leftover women’ and ‘leftover men’ (i.e., well-educated, well-paid, talented young people who are single and residing in big cities), but also identified these terms as “labels,” suggesting that labeling these young people as “leftovers” is not fair. Example (33), extracted from an article entitled 别让“语言任性”弄脏网络(关注网络语言低俗化现象) ‘Don’t let ‘language willfulness’ contaminate the Internet (Pay attention to the vulgarization of Internet language)’, explicitly points out that ‘leftover women’ and ‘leftover men’ are discriminatory and vulgar and thus are excluded from the Modern Chinese Dictionary, which also indicates the official determination to purify the Internet language. Having agreed that ‘leftover women’ is a sexist expression, Example (34) also points out that this term reflects social bias towards women who need to make extra effort to be treated equally in society. Example (34) was extracted from an article entitled 激发社会进步的她力量 ‘Her power that inspires social progress’ published on International

Women's Day when the Two Annual Plenary Sessions, People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), were held in Beijing. Having mentioned the ratio (23.4%) of women's participation in the CPPCC National Committee in 2017, this article also talks about achievements women made and sexism against women at work, calling for more support for women from the whole society.

- (32) 生活在北上广等大城市，身边不乏这样一群落单青年：学历高、收入多、人才好……事业发展快人一步，感情生活却迟迟不前。“剩男”“剩女”“必剩客”“剩斗士”……落单青年引发一次次全民大讨论的同时，也被安上一个又一个标签。——《人民日报》2014-12-05

Living in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, there is no shortage of young people who are well-educated, well-paid, talented and yet are alone... They are on the promotion fast-track, but their love life is delayed. 'Leftover men', 'leftover women', 'leftover customers' and 'leftover fighters' ... Young people who have left behind to be alone have caused great discussions. At the same time, they have also been labeled one term after another. —— *People's Daily* 2014-12-05

- (33) 作为我国语言规范的标杆《现代汉语词典》，历经改版也吸纳了诸多网络新词……同时也拒绝了“剩男”“剩女”等具有歧义或歧视色彩的词汇和一些流行但庸俗化的网络词汇。——《人民日报》2016-05-05

As the benchmark of our country's language standards, the Modern Chinese Dictionary has included many Internet neologisms. Meanwhile, it rejected ambiguous or discriminatory terms such as 'leftover men' and 'leftover women' and some other popular but vulgar Internet neologisms. —— *People's Daily* 2016-05-05

(34) 剩女这些带有性别歧视的表达，也在一定程度上映照出社会的偏见，以及女性在成长路上需要付出更多额外的努力。——《人民日报》2017-03-08

The sexist expression ‘leftover women’ reflects social bias to a certain extent and the need for women to make more efforts to grow. —— *People’s Daily* 2017-03-08

However, although admitting that ‘leftover women’ is a sexist term, the visual representations of women in the official media indicate a contradiction. Figure 3.6 shows images of women who are not labeled ‘leftovers’ on the left to promote conjugal happiness, contrasting to the loneliness of the scholar and the stress of the single professional woman as shown in the images on the right side.



**Figure 3.6** Contrastive images in *People’s Daily* articles containing ‘leftover women’

The official discourse does not report whether women who are called 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ accept this label but talks about what makes these women become the so-called

“leftovers,” as shown in Examples (35) – (37). Example (35) states from the perspective of a female PhD graduate. According to her, receiving higher education delayed her marriage, and working in a new city with a PhD degree contributes to her limited social circle. Example (36) focuses on a female graduate who has returned from study overseas. Having been exposed to family-related topics at gatherings with friends who have married and have kids, she realized that it would be hard for her to catch up with them. Example (37) talks about female migrant workers who devoted themselves to their occupational pursuits when they were younger and then found it difficult to get married when they get older. No explicit rejection of being labeled 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ was revealed in the mainstream media. From the excerpts of *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ lamenting how they missed the boat on marriage and feel pressured to marry emerges a narrative of desperation among the “three-high” women.

(35) 我读完博士就已经 30 岁了，又来到一个陌生的城市，怎么都得耽误个一两年，现在女博士学历高，交际面也窄，所以也就成了大龄“剩女”。——《人民日报》2016-04-22

I was 30 years old after I finished my PhD. Now I have come to this unfamiliar city and my marriage age will naturally be delayed for one or two years. Now female PhDs are highly educated and have small social circles, so we have become older ‘leftover women’. —— *People’s Daily* 2016-04-22

(36) “一旦落下，就很难再追上来了。”小艾的很多同学都已经结婚并且有了孩子，聚会谈论的话题也离不开家庭，这让她有了成为“剩女”的危机感。——《人民日报》2013-02-24

“Once you fall behind, it will be difficult to catch up.” Many of Xiao Ai’s classmates are already married and have children. Topics discussed at social gatherings are also about

family, which gives her a sense of crisis of becoming a ‘leftover woman’. —— *People’s Daily* 2013-02-24

(37) 她说，很多小姐妹都有“老板梦”。自然而然，结婚的年龄比上一代推迟了。她们中有一个做到分店主管的漂亮大姐，1981年生，到现在还没结婚，尽管事业成功，却成了难嫁的“剩女”。 —— 《人民日报》2013-03-19

She said that many female friends had a “boss dream”. Naturally, the age of marriage is delayed compared to the previous generation. Among them is a beautiful woman who is a branch manager. She was born in 1981 and has not yet married. Despite her successful career, she has become a ‘leftover woman’ who has a hard time marrying. —— *People’s Daily* 2013-03-19

Overall, the label 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ is used in the official media to refer to well-educated and well-paid women and migrant female workers who are unmarried at a marriageable age. Although this term is identified as a label and criticized for its discriminatory meaning and vulgar usage, these women are described in despair in the official narratives.

### 3.4 Discussion

Having quantitatively and qualitatively examined the female labels in *People’s Daily* in the post-reform era, I found that the four gender labels are all used to refer to independent capable women, but each of them has a different focus in different historical moments. The labels 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ and 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women’ are predominantly used around similar time periods (the 1980s-1990s, and 1990s-2000s, respectively), but they are not interchangeable. The reason is that the term 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ bears a relatively positive tone as an honorary title addressed in the official media, whereas the label 女



强人 *nǚ-qíángrén* ‘strong women’ is stigmatized because of the perceived irreconcilable conflicts between their career and family life. The labels 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ were coined around the same time (the late 2000s and early 2010s, respectively). The term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ was used widely in the early 2010s followed by a decline of use after the mid-2010s. The central meaning of this label focuses on independent capable women’s struggle to establish a family at marriage age. By contrast, although 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ also refers to independent strong women, it has been approved as a positive term by the state department in the mid-2010s, followed by a more widespread use in the late 2010s in the official discourse. Overall, 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ are more welcomed by the state and individuals, whereas the terms 女强人 *nǚ-qíángrén* ‘strong women’ and 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ are stigmatized because their usages indicate a negative association between women’s career and their love life. In the following, I will discuss each term and the socio-historical background of these usages.

The term 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ was created in the early years of the reform era by state media as an honorary title, showing the importance of female economic elites and their achievements for economic development whereby gender equality in employment is crucial to production and the creation of wealth in the early stage of Chinese economic reforms. The official discourse not only commended China’s female economic elites by labeling them as ‘capable women,’ but also led them to channel their “economic might, managerial capacity, and personal wealth into moral right” (Yan 2012: 354) and evoked their nationalist sentiments to help

lift the rural poor in order to reduce the widening wealth gap brought on by the economic reforms during the transitioning period.

When China entered the 1990s, the economic reforms involved a critical transition to a market economy by privatizing state-owned industry (Gu 2000). Such privatization led to appalling waves of massive layoffs from state-owned and collective enterprises in urban China, and most laid-off workers were “highly unlikely” to be re-employed by their original work units (Gu 2000: 48). Meanwhile, management found that women were more adaptable than men in the face of unemployment, whereas male laid-off workers were found to be inclined to show extreme behaviors, threatening the stability of society (Yang 2010). As a result, the nationwide socioeconomic dislocation turned out to be “gendered layoffs,” as female workers were disproportionately targeted for redundancy (Wang 2003: 164). When women bore the brunt of the consequence of economic reforms in the 1990s (Perry & Selden 2003), state discourse encouraged women to return home. For those who resisted, they were called 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women.’ Women labeled with this term were portrayed in the mainstream media as unfeminine, strong-willed on the outside, fragile on the inside, and unhappy in their family lives. The portrait of ‘strong women’ highlights the tensions between their dual role as wage workers and caregivers in a market economy (Cook & Dong 2011), reinforcing the gendered dichotomy of inside and outside – the assumption that women should work inside as homemakers and men should work outside as breadwinners (Rofel 1999). Along with this patriarchal line of thinking, although the central government mobilized women to engage in work outside home in the early stage of economic reforms, women were more likely to be assigned to do manual work, while technical and mental tasks were more likely to be assigned to men and women who are viewed to be masculine (Rofel 1999; Yang 2010). By portraying women who can do “masculine” work as

strong and unfeminine, the official discourse made the “market” a field where masculinity is more valued in the context of economic reforms. The label was rejected by Chinese female elites to challenge the patriarchal belief, or to quote Rofel’s (1999), the “gendered culture of space.”

The desired masculinity reaches its new height as a national aspiration when the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ is highly evaluated using positive descriptions in the mainstream media. The emergence of this gendered label and its state-defined connotation coincided with the formulation and promotion of the “Chinese Dream,” a concept defined as the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation by President Xi Jinping in November 2012 (*People’s Daily* 2013). Since then, “Chinese Dream” has been a “newly widespread phrase and signature ideology for the CCP,” creating the “rise of nationalism” and “domestic cohesion” (Wang 2014: 10-13). At this juncture, state discourse uses women’s image to construct national ambition by labeling women as ‘female tough guys.’ Ironically, this term is used and accepted by some women who practice self-labeling, making this label a convenient linguistic resource for the official discourse to commend not only elites but also grassroots workers. It is worth noting that grassroots workers do not necessarily have to show their leadership to be called 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys.’ They are commendable because they are willing to devote themselves to the assumed men’s job that requires physical strength, which suggests that the term ‘female tough guys’ is deployed by state discourse to enlist women as national resources to contribute to the grand goal of the “Chinese Dream.”

Women labeled 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ do not conform to the traditional femininity because they stay single and do not rely on men. The rise of using this term reflects the social trend that as women’s educational attainment increases women’s marriage comes later or urban women do not consider getting married (Merriman 2015). More importantly, the

proliferation of this derogatory label indicates the governmental concern about decreasing childbirth. Recent statistics show that the number of couples who registered marriages in China has decreased from 13.5 million in 2013 to 7.6 million in 2021, hitting the lowest level since 1986 and contributing to the country's declining fertility rate (The Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022). The decline in marriages also suggests a changing marriage culture in China. By choosing to be single or refusing to settle, highly educated marriageable women challenge the "marriage-centric culture" deep-rooted in Chinese society and pursue ideal lifestyles for themselves. However, this term compares these women with undesirable leftovers, bearing a strong insulting and offensive connotation and stoking up women's outrage. Women's voices from the grassroots language level are amplified by digital technology and have been spreading upward to influence top-down language use in state media (see Chapter IV). This label, although used by official media for over a decade, was ultimately excluded from the standard dictionary and its use has diminished over time in the mainstream media.

### 3.5 Summary

Overall, the uses of these respective female labels in state media serve the larger policy agendas and priorities in the respective stages of China's post-reform era. Since the 1980s, the use of 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* 'capable women' and 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* 'strong women' complied with the central government's urgent need for economic growth at the beginning of economic reforms and started to fade out after China's successful transition from a planned economy to a socialist market economy in the 2000s. In the new century, the use of the new label 剩女 *shèng nǚ* 'leftover women' suggests the fervent wish of the state to resolve social issues regarding decreasing marriage rate and declining birth rate. Although identified as a derogatory and sexist

label, this term kept appearing frequently in mainstream media until the late 2010s. Since the 2010s, the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ has been used to signify that masculinity is a more desired quality in achieving the “Chinese Dream.” At the same time, women use this term to refer to themselves, suggesting either internalization of the binarized gender views or their pride of the perceived “toughness.” The official discourse started to replace 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ who are exceptional leaders with 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ who are lower-level grassroots workers to commend them for their selfless contributions to China’s stability at the society level and Chinese economic power growth. All these gender labels not only categorize women, but their gendered connotations are employed to further national development priorities.

## CHAPTER IV

### GRASSROOTS WOMEN'S VOICES ON GENDER LABELING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

#### 4.1 Introduction

The rise of digital feminism in the West has sparked a global storm of protests in response to sexual harassment and structural sexism. Women's digital voices have been explored in local communities across the world (e.g., Brimacombe et al. 2018; Currier et al. 2021; Hasunuma & Shin 2019; Jouët 2018; Kim et al. 2020). Chinese women's voices on social media have also been intensely studied in recent years, especially revolving around the digital #MeToo activism as part of a global movement (e.g., Chang et al. 2018; Chen & Wang 2020; Li et al. 2021; Lin & Yang 2019; Ling & Liao 2020; Xiong & Ristivojević 2021; Yin & Sun 2019; Zeng 2019, 2020).

Despite the abundant scholarship on Chinese digital feminism, Chinese women's discursive empowerment in social media has rarely been examined except in a few studies (Han 2021; Lang 2020; Peng 2021). Peng (2021) adopted a critical discourse analysis approach to feminist activism in the WeChat posts by Mimeng, a former key opinion leader who created content to attract women followers on Chinese social media platforms. Situating the intersections of neoliberal feminism and masculinity, Peng found that Mimeng's posts emphasized women's self-reliance, promoted a mutual dependence between women and men, and constructed a feminized male ideal (e.g., men's devoted accommodation of their wives' materialistic desires) through an engaging communicative style. As Peng points out, the feminized male ideal represents a pseudo-empowerment among Mimeng's women followers because although it underscores women's autonomy, it is still embedded in the patriarchal values in which traditional gender roles are defined, and at the same time neglects institutionalized gender inequality. Lang

(2020) examined the usage patterns and social meanings of an Internet neologism *zhǐnánái* ‘straight man cancer’ on the Weibo platform – a male label coined and used by Chinese women to condemn men who harbor misogynistic views toward women. The author argues that the creation and the uses of the label demonstrate discursive empowerment of women equipped with wireless connectivity and an awakening feminist consciousness. Han (2021) used discourse analysis to examine a collection of low-profile #MeToo posts on Weibo. She found that Weibo users showed their collective concerns with and support for those who spoke out about their personal experience of sexual harassment, making the survivors’ narration more meaningful and thus contributing to a more visible discursive resistance against structural oppression. She contends that digital platforms create a “dialogic space” for feminist discursive empowerment and cultivate solidarity through listening and healing.

These studies shed light on how social media platforms either facilitate neoliberal consumerist discourse at the risk of impeding a feminist cause or accelerate the engagement of gender discourse across time and space by demonstrating how women can be empowered through linguistic innovation or empathy in the digital community. However, little is known about how social media interactions empower women to fight for gender equality over time and how trending topics ignite online discussions revealing personal and social views on gender issues. This chapter attempts to fill this research gap by combining the methods of corpus analysis, critical discourse analysis, and digital ethnography in examining cyberfeminism regarding social labeling of successful women in contemporary Chinese digital culture.

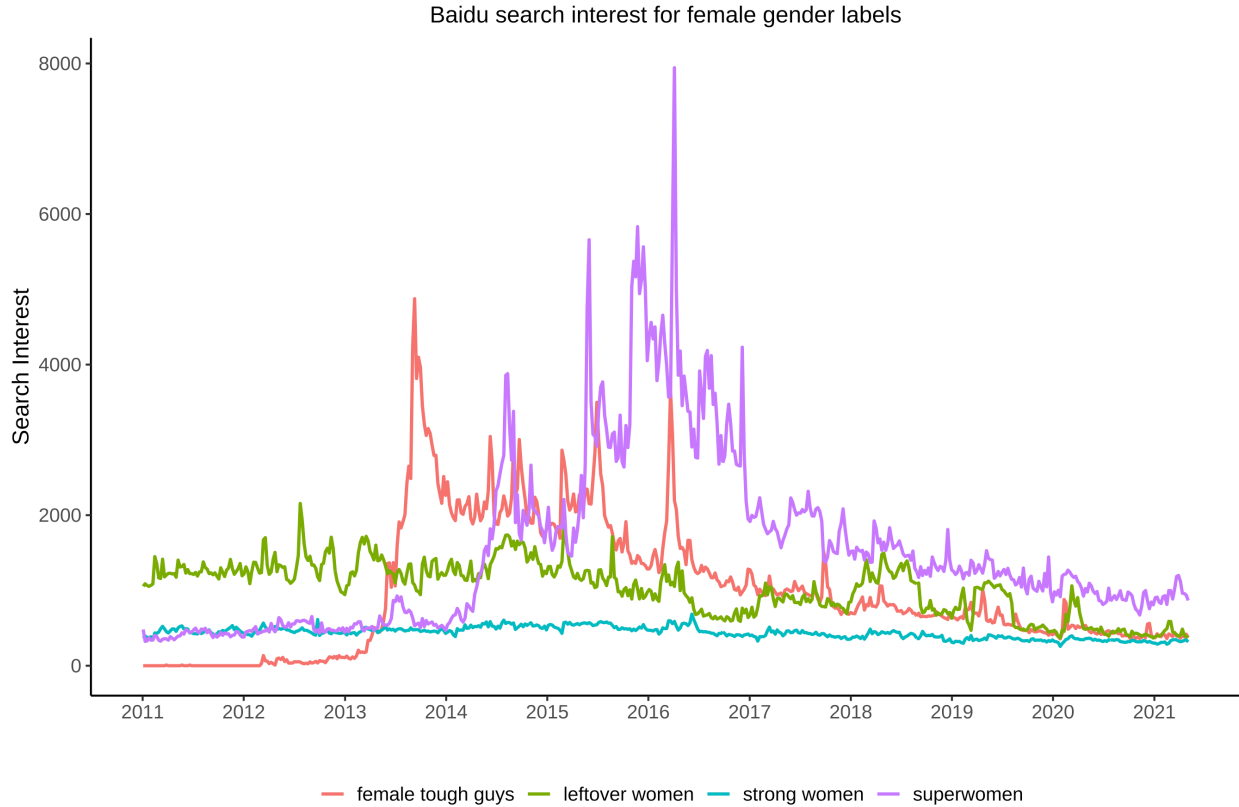
## 4.2 Data and Methods

### 4.2.1 Data

The data used in this chapter was retrieved from the microblogging platform Sina Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. To determine the time duration of data I should retrieve from Weibo, I used Baidu Index as an indicator. Baidu, the largest search engine in China, has a function called Baidu Index, which is equivalent to Google Trends. Baidu Index provides information on Baidu users' search interests for a certain term from 2011 on. Only popular keywords are included in Baidu Index, whereas words of low frequency of use or search are not available. For this chapter, I retrieved search interests for the terms examined in Chapter III, including 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* 'strong women,' 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* 'capable women,' 剩女 *shèng nǚ* 'leftover women,' and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* 'female tough guys' between 2011 and 2021 from Baidu Index. I also looked at the label 女超人 *nǚ chāo rén* 'superwomen' that emerged from the mainstream media data. However, 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* 'capable women' is not included as an entry in Baidu Index, indicating a very low frequency of search and use since 2011.

Figure 4.1 shows the search interest for the four female gender labels 'leftover women,' 'female tough guys,' 'strong women' and 'superwomen.' It is obvious to see that the search interest for 'superwomen' surpasses those of the other terms; however, after a closer examination, I found that the spikes on the timeline correspond to the release dates of the American movies and TV shows whose names include the keyword 'superwomen.' Because the term 女超人 *nǚ-chāo rén* 'superwomen' may refer to the fictional character, I excluded this term in my further examinations. The three gender labels 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* 'strong women,' 剩女 *shèng nǚ* 'leftover women,' and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* 'female tough guys' were retained for analysis.

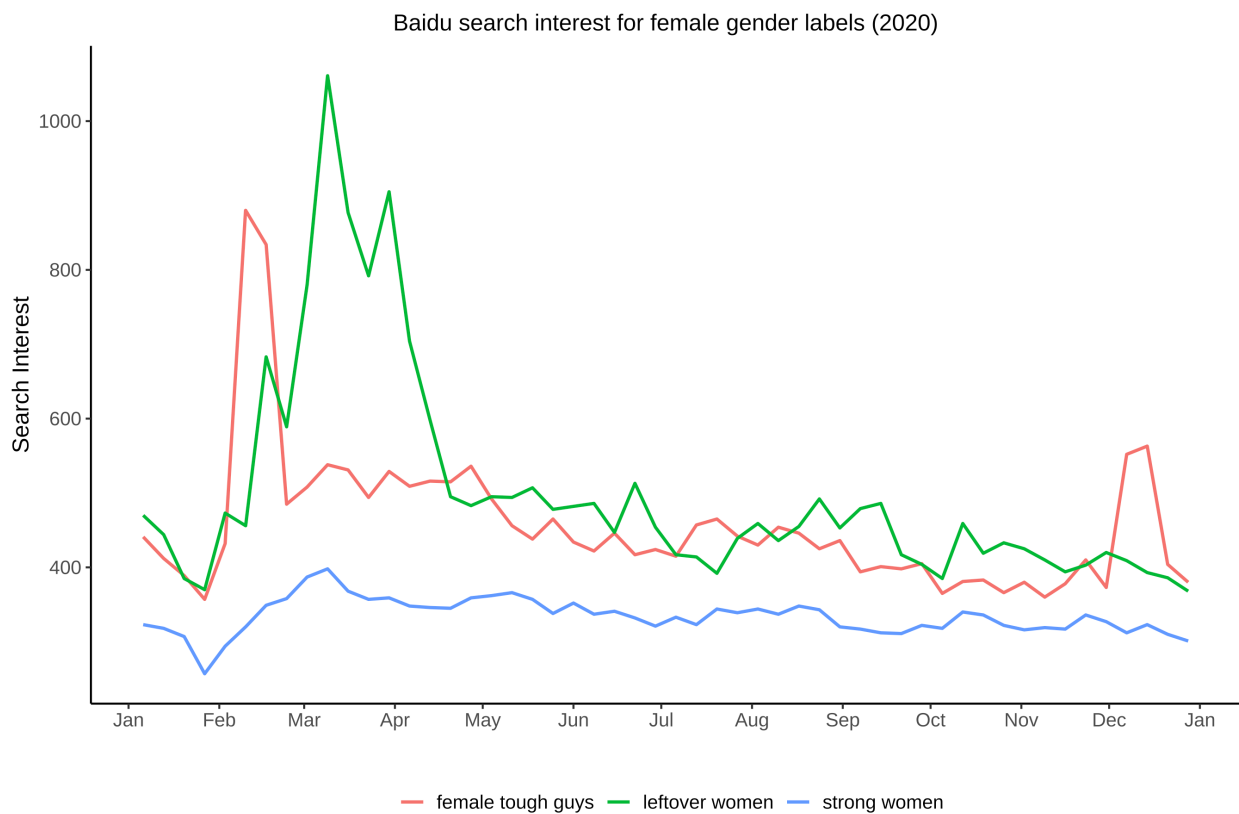




**Figure 4.1** Baidu search interest for female gender labels.

Within these three gender terms, 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women,’ and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ are both newly coined. Studies have shown that neologisms follow a rapidly rising-decaying pattern as epidemics (Jiang et al. 2021). This is consistent with the search interests in Figure 4.1, where the search interest of the non-neologism 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women’ remains stable between 2011 and 2021, and the search interests of the neologisms 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ have increased and decreased more frequently. Although the two neologisms may be expected to lose their vitality in the Chinese lexicon over time, the search interests do not completely vanish, but since 2020 have started to overlap with that of 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women.’ To take a closer look at the trend of the time series, I zoomed in on the Baidu search interest for these three

terms in 2020, as depicted in Figure 4.2. Figure 4.2 shows that the term 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women’ remains having a low level of interest with an uptick in early March, whereas 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ and 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ appear to attract more searches in Mid-February and early March, respectively. To see how these terms are used in a more recent social context, I used these time spans for keyword searching on Weibo and only included the original posts to avoid duplicates.



**Figure 4.2** Baidu search interest for female gender labels in 2020.

Table 4.1 presents the retrieval time spans, the numbers of Weibo blogposts containing the terms, and the frequency of use of these terms for the data I used to create the Weibo Corpus. Table 4.2 shows the Weibo corpus counts information.

**Table 4.1** Retrieval time span, numbers of Weibo blogposts and frequency of each term in Weibo corpus

| Gender labels                            | Retrieval time span   | Weibo blogposts | Frequency |
|--|---|-----------------|-----------|
| 女强人 <i>nǚ-qiáng rén</i> ‘strong women’   | March 2 <sup>nd</sup> – March 9 <sup>th</sup> , 2020        | 1, 399          | 1, 547    |
| 剩女 <i>shèng nǚ</i> ‘leftover women’      | March 2 <sup>nd</sup> – March 9 <sup>th</sup> , 2020        | 1, 546          | 1, 990    |
| 女汉子 <i>nǚ-hàn zi</i> ‘female tough guys’ | February 3 <sup>rd</sup> – February 10 <sup>th</sup> , 2020 | 1, 158          | 1, 251    |
| TOTAL                                    |   | 4, 103          | 4, 788    |

**Table 4.2** Weibo corpus counts information

| Category  | Counts   |
|-----------|----------|
| tokens    | 384, 967 |
| words     | 318, 449 |
| sentences | 11, 765  |

#### 4.2.2 Methods

The data was examined both quantitatively and qualitatively for this chapter. The quantitative methods include two types of corpus analysis using corpus analysis tools on Sketch Engine, while the qualitative methods include Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the Weibo posts that contain the target terms. Like the methods used in Chapter III, the corpus analysis is data-driven and bottom-up, expecting linguistic patterns to emerge as salient and frequent (Baker & Levon 2015). The CDA enables the examination of the contextual meaning of the target terms and grassroots language users’ attitudes toward the gender labels. The quantitative and qualitative methods thus complement each other.

Because this chapter focuses on synchronic language use on social media, I did not examine time series data regarding the trends of frequency of use over time. Only two types of

corpus analyses were adopted in this chapter: typical words used in the Weibo corpus and high-frequency collocations with the target terms. All the data cleansing, inspection, analysis, and visualization were realized in RStudio using R packages *tidyverse* and *ggplot2*. For the typical words analysis, I identified the unique words used in the Weibo corpus compared to the Chinese Web 2017 Simplified corpus (i.e., zhTenTen17, with a total word frequency of 4,177,802,880) as a reference corpus using Sketch Engine. This process yielded a list of multi-word terms with raw and relative frequencies of each term that occurred in the focus corpus (Weibo corpus) and the reference corpus (zhTenTen17), ranked by the scores calculated by simple math for keywords (Kilgarriff 2009) that focuses on higher-frequency words. For the collocation analysis, I examined high-frequency collocations with the target gender labels in a collocation network (Desagulier 2020). Five collocates on the left and five on the right of each target label were retained in the analysis. This process allows for the investigation of the three gender labels' individual collocates, their shared collocates, the influence of a node in the network, and the association between a label and its collocates.

For the qualitative analysis, I used both critical discourse analysis (CDA) and digital ethnography in exploring the social meaning of the three labels. The CDA enables critical interpretation and explanation of how online discourses are constructed, while the digital ethnography allows the examination of microblogging as a contextualized sociocultural practice rather than a final product of “semiotization and meaning-making” (Hou 2018; Varis 2016: 63; Varis & Hou 2020).

## 4.3 Results

### 4.3.1 Corpus analysis findings

The first corpus analysis examines the typicality of the words used in the Weibo corpus compared to a larger reference corpus Chinese Web 2017 Simplified corpus using Sketch Engine. Because COVID-19 pandemic happened during the data retrieval time span, there are many typical words related to the pandemic. Thus, this chapter presents the top 40 typical multi-word terms in the Weibo corpus ranked by score, as is shown in Table 4.3. Except for nine terms related to the pandemic such as “pandemic prevention and control” and “coronavirus” and terms closely related to the content of this social media platform such as “Weibo video” and “headlines,” Table 4.3 lists 29 terms that were identified as typical words in the Weibo corpus. Among these 29 typical multi-word terms, nearly 50% of the words are related to women. Specifically, “girls/young women,” “professional women,” and “lots of women” are generic terms referring to women. Terms such as “leftover women shame,” “single women,” and “old leftover woman” are related to the target term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women,’ whereas “strong women aura” may concern the target term 女强人 *nǚ-qíáng rén* ‘strong women.’ Terms including “little women,” “soft girls,” “a timid and lovable little woman” seem to contrast with the target term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys.’ Terms such as “same city beauties” and “dating beauties” are typically used to promote dating services for single women and men on the Internet. In contrast, only four typical terms involved men, such as “boy/young men,” “boyfriend,” “old leftover men” and one term describing the current situation of the Chinese population “more men than women.” In addition, terms such as “Perfect Partner” (the name of a TV series), “plot,” and “heroine” are associated with the discussion of TV series. The remaining typical words fall into a mixed-bag of various activities and concepts, such as “reasons for flooding the screen,” “political career,” “great help,” “check-in action,” “original family,”

“numerology,” “foreigners’ lens,” “difficult projects” and “Weiya live streaming,” the last of which refers to the blogger Weiya’s live commerce in live stream economy.

**Table 4.3** Top 40 typical terms used in the Weibo corpus

| Rank | Chinese term | English meaning                    | Freq.<br>(focus) | Freq.<br>(reference) | Relative<br>freq.<br>(focus) | Relative<br>freq.<br>(reference) | Score |
|------|--------------|------------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|
| 1    | 微博视频         | Weibo video                        | 322              | 352                  | 836.4                        | 0                                | 820   |
| 2    | 完美关系         | Perfect Partner                    | 165              | 84                   | 428.6                        | 0                                | 427.4 |
| 3    | 头条文章         | headlines                          | 69               | 1436                 | 179.2                        | 0.1                              | 165.9 |
| 4    | 剩女耻辱         | leftover women shame               | 62               | 0                    | 161.1                        | 0                                | 162.1 |
| 5    | 单身女人         | single woman                       | 61               | 1644                 | 158.5                        | 0.1                              | 145.1 |
| 6    | 疫情防控         | pandemic prevention<br>and control | 71               | 5321                 | 184.4                        | 0.3                              | 140.4 |
| 7    | 女强人气场        | strong women aura                  | 43               | 22                   | 111.7                        | 0                                | 112.5 |
| 8    | 刷屏背后         | reasons for flooding<br>the screen | 34               | 47                   | 88.3                         | 0                                | 89.1  |
| 9    | 女孩子          | girl/ young women                  | 152              | 60201                | 394.8                        | 3.6                              | 85.5  |
| 10   | 猪瘟疫情         | swine fever                        | 33               | 473                  | 85.7                         | 0                                | 84.3  |
| 11   | 小女人          | little woman                       | 67               | 19268                | 174                          | 1.2                              | 81    |
| 12   | 新型冠状         | new coronavirus                    | 32               | 1132                 | 83.1                         | 0.1                              | 78.8  |
| 13   | 政治事业         | political career                   | 30               | 224                  | 77.9                         | 0                                | 77.9  |
| 14   | 同城美女         | Same city beauties                 | 27               | 53                   | 70.1                         | 0                                | 70.9  |
| 15   | 大助力          | great help                         | 30               | 2009                 | 77.9                         | 0.1                              | 70.4  |
| 16   | 美女交友         | dating beauties                    | 27               | 338                  | 70.1                         | 0                                | 69.7  |
| 17   | 冠状病毒         | coronavirus                        | 34               | 4994                 | 88.3                         | 0.3                              | 68.7  |
| 18   | 全球疫情         | global pandemic                    | 26               | 143                  | 67.5                         | 0                                | 68    |
| 19   | 打卡行动         | check-in action                    | 23               | 6                    | 59.7                         | 0                                | 60.7  |
| 20   | 女汉子们         | female tough guys<br>[plural]      | 23               | 379                  | 59.7                         | 0                                | 59.4  |
| 21   | 男孩子          | boy/ young men                     | 34               | 9018                 | 88.3                         | 0.5                              | 57.9  |
| 22   | 战疫打卡         | pandemic war                       | 21               | 0                    | 54.6                         | 0                                | 55.6  |
| 23   | 肺炎疫情         | pneumonia pandemic                 | 21               | 322                  | 54.6                         | 0                                | 54.5  |
| 24   | 老剩女          | old leftover woman                 | 20               | 20                   | 52                           | 0                                | 52.9  |
| 25   | 新冠           | coronavirus                        | 22               | 1945                 | 57.1                         | 0.1                              | 52    |
| 26   | 软妹子          | soft girl                          | 22               | 2789                 | 57.1                         | 0.2                              | 49.8  |
| 27   | 原生家庭         | original family                    | 24               | 4615                 | 62.3                         | 0.3                              | 49.6  |
| 28   | 职业妇女         | professional women                 | 20               | 1328                 | 52                           | 0.1                              | 49    |
| 29   | 薇娅直播间        | Weiya live streaming               | 18               | 0                    | 46.8                         | 0                                | 47.8  |
| 30   | 老外镜头         | foreigners' lens                   | 18               | 7                    | 46.8                         | 0                                | 47.7  |
| 31   | 男多女少         | more men than women                | 18               | 208                  | 46.8                         | 0                                | 47.2  |

**Table 4.3, continued**

|         |                                     |    |      |      |     |      |
|---------|-------------------------------------|----|------|------|-----|------|
| 32 小鸟依人 | a timid and lovable<br>little woman | 21 | 2959 | 54.6 | 0.2 | 47.1 |
| 33 关系剧情 | plot                                | 17 | 26   | 44.2 | 0   | 45.1 |
| 34 八字命理 | numerology                          | 18 | 1007 | 46.8 | 0.1 | 45   |
| 35 男友   | boyfriend                           | 17 | 686  | 44.2 | 0   | 43.4 |
| 36 疫情困难 | pandemic difficulties               | 16 | 2    | 41.6 | 0   | 42.6 |
| 37 女人堆  | lots of women                       | 16 | 22   | 41.6 | 0   | 42.5 |
| 38 困难专项 | difficult project                   | 16 | 29   | 41.6 | 0   | 42.5 |
| 39 女主   | heroine                             | 16 | 70   | 41.6 | 0   | 42.4 |
| 40 大龄剩男 | older leftover men                  | 16 | 130  | 41.6 | 0   | 42.2 |

While Table 4.3 suggests some relevant topics revolved around the three target labels on social media, it does not reveal the association between the labels and other words in the Weibo posts. Figure 4.3 shows high frequency collocates with the three target labels in a collocation network where the female gender labels have their own collocates in each network, and they have shared collocates in the middle areas between the collocation networks. Like the collocation network (Figure 3.2) in Chapter III, the size of each node represents the log frequency of a Chinese word translated into English. The color was assigned along a heat continuum skewed to reds and yellows calculated by centrality, a measure of the influence of a node in a network. The more influential a term is, the higher score it has and the redder it is. The thickness of the edge between two nodes is calculated by the mutual information, which is a measure of the association between a word and its collocates. The thickness indicates the association strength between two words in the collocation network.

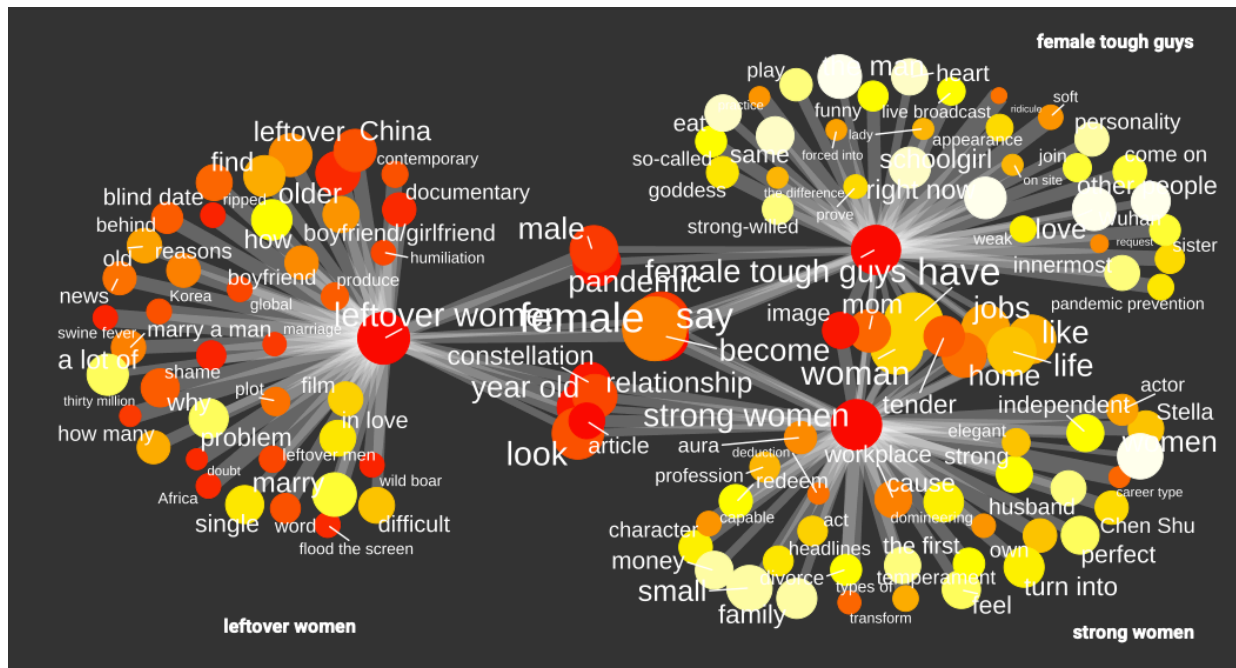


Figure 4.3 High frequency collocates with target labels in a collocation network in Weibo corpus

Figure 4.3 shows that each female gender label has a group of collocates around them in the grassroots language use on social media. Like the mainstream media language use, when grassroots language users talk about the gender label 剩女 *shèngnǚ* 'leftover women,' the high frequency collocates include “older,” “China,” “marry,” “a lot of,” “difficult,” and “single,” all of which point to the discussion on the social issue regarding the large population of unmarried young women and their love lives. The high frequency collocates around 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ include “schoolgirl,” “right now,” “love,” “personality,” “innermost,” “strong willed,” “soft,” and “goddess,” suggesting some discussions on the characteristics of these group of women who are labeled this term. Lastly, when language users talk about 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women,’ the high-frequency words associated with this label include “workplace,” “profession,” “family,” “money,” “independent,” “strong,” and “men,” indicating that discussions about ‘strong women’ are associated with their personality, career, and family.



Regarding the overlapping items, there are more shared collocates among the gender labels on social media than those on the mainstream media (Figure 3.2 in Chapter III). First, the three labels share collocates “become,” “female,” and “say.” The first shared collocate “become” indicates that having those characteristics of ‘leftover women,’ ‘female tough guys,’ and ‘strong women’ are not intrinsic to women; rather, they can choose or be forced to “become” women called by these terms. The shared collocates “female” and “say” suggest that these discourses are about women and what they say or what other people comment about them. Second, the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ shares only two collocates “pandemic” and “male/men” with 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ whereas it shares more collocates with 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ including “constellation,” “article,” “look,” “years old” and “relationship.” This result indicates that there are fewer common topics around 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ than those around 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ and 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ in social media discourse. Both 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ and 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ may face the same “relationship” issues. Lastly, the label 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ shares many collocates with 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ such as “mom,” “woman,” “job,” “home,” “life,” “like,” “tender,” and “image,” suggesting that the common topics about these two labels are related to their career and family life. These overlapping items indicate that 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ and 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ may evoke similar discourses regarding relationships, while discussions about 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ on social media may revolve around a woman’s balance between life and work.

Though examining the collocation network sheds light on what social media discourses containing these labels are about, it does not fully explain why the label ‘strong women’ shares more collocates with the other two labels, how these discourses were constructed, and what personal attitudes may be conveyed. Therefore, critical discourse analysis is needed to take context into consideration to explain the corpus findings.

#### 4.3.2 Qualitative analysis findings

The major inquiry of the qualitative analysis is to examine the social meanings of the three gender labels (i.e., ‘strong women,’ ‘leftover women,’ and ‘female tough guys’) in social media. Given the information about the top 40 typical terms in the Weibo corpus and the high-frequency collocates with the three target terms discovered in the previous section, discourse analysis in this section will determine the grassroots language users’ gender ideologies underlying their social media texts that function as a stance-taking vehicle, and the digital ethnographic analysis is adopted to trace how interactions unfold over time to better understand the process of meaning-making. To scrutinize language users’ stance-taking and interactions, the qualitative analyses also examined emoticons, images, and memes included in the original Weibo posts, whereas users’ personal information, such as Weibo ID and their profile pictures were removed for anonymity. The selection and extraction of Weibo posts were based on the findings of typical terms and high frequency collocates in corpus analysis.

##### 4.3.2.1 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’

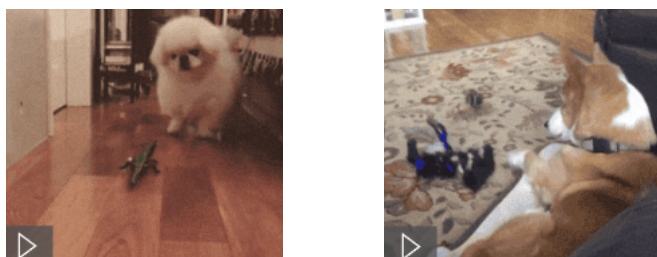
The most noticeable finding is that many Weibo posts containing the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ also mentioned another gendered term or contrasted ‘female tough guys’ with women who do not have the same traits or young men who are not viewed as masculine. Examples (38) – (39) show the contrasts using GIF animations (Figure 4.4) and

comic illustrations (Figure 4.5). Specifically, Example (38) shows how a 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guy’ is different than a 软妹子 *ruǎn-mèizi* (literally ‘soft younger sister’) ‘girly woman’ using animation memes. Only one frame of each GIF animation is shown in this example. Both types of women are represented by dogs and their reactions to a moving toy. The dog on the left represents a ‘girly woman’ who quickly steps back while a moving crocodile toy rapidly approaches her, whereas the dog on the right represents a ‘female tough guy’ who hits off the head of a transformer toy moving toward her. These memes seem to show that in the face of a new and unpleasant or challenging situation, “girly women” would be scared off whereas ‘female tough guys’ would take the initiative to fight against the difficulty. This difference suggests a gendered contrast between the traditionally defined femininity and masculinity, where the former is epitomized by timidity and the latter is associated with bravery and toughness. Similarly, Example (39) compares a ‘female tough guy’ and a ‘goddess’ using comic illustrations (Figure 4.5). Having been given a recently developed lexical meaning, 女神 *nǚshén* ‘goddess’ refers to an ideal female image that is feminine, beautiful, kind, pure, and refined. For the ease of presenting, I re-organized the layout of the illustrations from a longer image to a wider image, in which the ‘goddess’ has shorter brown hair on the left and the ‘female tough guy’ has pink hair on the right in each panel of the comic. The English translation was also added to the image. It is obvious that no matter what feelings they may have, the ‘goddess’ adopts a wide variety of expressions such as switching speech styles and showing bashfulness or dainty eyes, whereas the ‘female tough guy’ almost exclusively uses the same expletive to express her different emotions, and her facial expressions are more exaggerated. This series of differences between the so-called ‘goddess’ and ‘female tough guy’ once again points to the restrictively defined femininity and

masculinity, with the former usually being associated with careful speech styles and the latter often linked to swearing and a lack of attention to details.

(38) 这大概就是软妹子和女汉子的区别

This is probably the difference between a ‘girly girl’ and a ‘female tough guy.’



**Figure 4.4** GIF animations/memes included in the Example (38)

(39) 女汉子和女神的区别!

The differences between a ‘female tough guy’ and a ‘goddess!’



**Figure 4.5** Images included in the Example (39)

Examples (40) – (43) compare ‘female tough guys’ with people who do not share the same traits. Example (40) was posted by a self-identified male user who demeans women called ‘female tough guys’ by explicitly comparing the appearances between ‘female tough guys’ and


“the queen,” suggesting that the major differences between the two labels are due to the subjective evaluation of the appeal of female appearance. This post indicates the blogger’s view that women being masculine is fine as long as they look pretty, demonstrating a mainstream standard for female beauty defined by the male-dominated world. Example (41) was posted by a self-identified female user who calls herself a ‘female tough guy.’ The blogger also conveys the idea that girls who cannot *sājiāo* are not romantically loved and thus should fight for themselves. The act of *sājiāo* is seen as a strategic move (including pouting and whining like a spoiled child) employed by women to “deploy gender performativity” in Chinese culture (Farris 1995; Shi & Jing-Schmidt 2020). This post shows the blogger’s equable self-derision by calling herself a ‘female tough guy’ and her determination of working hard with a Green Heart Emoji.


Contrasting with the Red Heart Emoji which expresses love more fervently, the Green Heart Emoji shows a less serious attitude (Ford 2020), matching her self-mockery microblogging style. At the same time, the post shows her belief of which type of women deserve romantic love based on her observations, which in turn reflects male aesthetic appeal to innocent-looking (like a spoiled child) and delicate (as opposed to “tough”) women in the patriarchal society. Similar to Example (41), Example (42) also shows a female blogger’s observation and thinking. She contrasts ‘female tough guys’ with women described as *xiǎoniǎoyīrén* (lit. ‘little-bird-depend on-people’) ‘timid and lovable little women,’ by asking a rhetorical question and answering herself. Her post accuses men of being irresponsible and unreliable so women must become strong and are forced to act like men in the family. Although it has an accusatory tone, this post also shows the stereotyping of gender roles in family lives: men are supposed to be tough and responsible while women are expected to depend on men. The blogger may also imply that women have the potential to be strong when facing difficulties, and they can be more responsible than men.

Conveying a similar idea, Example (43) suggests that girls are forced to become masculine because boys are not masculine enough. In contrast to other examples, this post compares ‘female tough guys’ and ‘effeminate boys.’ Media representations of the effeminacy of young men in recent years have given rise to wide discussions among educators and policymakers who claimed the existence of a “masculinity crisis” in China (Baculinao 2017; May 2021).

(40) 所谓的女汉子、只不过是长得丑而已、但凡有些爷们气质的漂亮姑娘都被称为  
女王大人

The so-called ‘female tough guys’ are called this just because they look ugly. Any beautiful girl with some masculinity is called “the Queen”.

(41) 我发现会撒娇的女孩都有人爱，而像我这样的不服软还爱逞强的女汉子就该努力奋斗自己挣钱养活自己 

I noticed that girls who can sajjiao (act pouting, flirting, and whining) are loved, but that ‘female tough guys’ like me who are determined and tough should work hard to earn money to support ourselves 

(42) 为什么女汉子越来越多了呢？小鸟依人的女人都哪去了呢？那是因为她们无人可依，硬是把小鸟磨炼成了雄鹰；把一个柔弱女子逼成了女汉子，替男人维持家庭的责任。

Why are there more and more ‘female tough guys’? Where have the timid and lovable little women gone to? The reason is these women have no one to rely on, and so weak women turn into female tough guys, and they take men’s responsibilities to support their family.

(43) “男孩不男”似乎成了当下一个常见现象。无奈的姑娘们只好揭竿而起，纷纷升级成为“女汉子”。

“Boys are not masculine” seems to be a common phenomenon nowadays, so girls have no choice but to upgrade themselves to ‘female tough guys.’

While Examples (38) – (43) suggest bloggers’ personal views on patriarchal aesthetics as well as restrictive norms of masculinity and femininity by contrasting ‘female tough guys’ with another group of people, Examples (44) and (45) express the idea that women can be multifaceted in the sense that they have more than one role in the family and society. Example (44) juxtaposes ‘female tough guys’ with ‘the lady of the house,’ ‘strong women,’ and ‘goddesses,’ expressing the feminist concern that women should not be viewed as having a single identity or a fixed social role. In a similar vein, Example (45) not only calls for a stop to stereotyping women, it also encourages women to ignore social labeling, take control of their own lives, and exercise their right to self-definition and self-determination. Unlike Examples (40) – (43) that show women “must” become “tough” or strong for external reasons, Examples (44) and (45) show respect to women and inspire women to live for themselves regardless of others’ opinions.

(44) 女人，不止一面。是照护全家的女主人，也是活出真我的女汉子，更是不断超越的女强人！女神节，向面面精彩的新时代女神致敬！

Women have more than one side. She is the lady of the house who takes care of the whole family, a ‘female tough guy’ who lives her true self, and a ‘strong woman’ who continues to excel! The Goddess Festival [International Women’s Day]. Salute the wonderful goddesses of the new era!

(45) 在当代社会的今天，每个女性都拥有多重身份：母亲、妻子、女儿、软妹子、女汉子、女强人.....虽然女性早已成为一股不可忽视的社会力量，但社会上对女性种种隐形的条条框框、刻板印象却依旧存在于我们的生活中。无视社会贴于的标签，做自己人生的女主角，只有自己才是最该定义自己的人。

In contemporary society, every woman has multiple identities: mothers, wives, daughters, ‘girly women,’ ‘female tough guys,’ and ‘strong women’... Although women have long become a social force that cannot be ignored, gender stereotypes and invisible rules and regulations targeted at women still exist in our lives. Ignore the social labels and be the heroine of your life. Only you can define who you are.

Adopting a digital ethnographic approach, I looked at the most commented-on post containing ‘female tough guys’ and its most liked comments during the time under study, as is shown in Figure 4.6. The content was posted by a film blogger with a verified self-media account and 6.48 million followers at the time of retrieval. This post pertains to the Disney movie character Mulan – the legendary female warrior who defended the country against nomadic invaders – played by Liu Yifei, a Chinese celebrity famous for her elegant demeanor and thus called “fairy sister.” The post content indicates that the actor turned from a gentle “fairy” into a “handsome female tough guy,” accompanied by a Worship Emoji. The first comment reposted the GIF animation of her new character as a warrior from the blog content. The second comment posted a photo of Liu Yifei, showing the soft femininity she used to present in public. Although the blogger and the commenters contrast her ‘female tough guy’ image with her “fairy sister” image, it is evident that all of them showed their positive attitude toward this actor, suggesting that her being a ‘female tough guy’ was admirable.



**独舌影视**  
2020-2-2 已编辑

**#刘亦菲舞剑#** 刘亦菲气质不一样了，又稳又飒，仙女摇身一变女汉子，舞剑英姿不可挡👍不过疫情期间，也没人去影院看吧，还不如也在线上公开🤔



860 1053 1544

按倒序 按正序 **按热度**

**听说你也喜欢吃炸鸡:被神仙姐姐帅到了，舞剑英姿不可挡**



2020-2-2 20:12 20

小刺球晒太阳 等人 共7条回复

**小刺球晒太阳 🍷:刘亦菲以前给我一种特别温柔的感觉，但是演女侠的时候完全不一样**



2020-2-2 20:12 15

**Figure 4.6** The most reposted and most commented-on blogpost containing the term ‘female tough guys’ and the top two most-liked comments during the time under study

Post translation:

2020-2-2 re-edited:

#Liu Yifei's sword dancing# Liu Yifei's temperament is different now, steady, and valiant.

The fairy turned into a female tough guy, and the power of her sword dancing pose is

unstoppable 🤖 However, no one went to the theater to watch it due to the pandemic. It'd be

better to make it public online. 🤔

Comment translation:

1. The fairy sister is so handsome, and the bold and brave sword dancing is unstoppable

(20 likes) 2020-2-2 20:12


All 7 replies

2. Liu Yifei used to give me the impression of being very gentle, but it is completely

different when she plays a chivalrous lady (15 likes) 2020-2-2 20:12

Conversely, the blogpost in Figure 4.7 shows opposition to the use of the neologism 'female tough guys.' The blogger self-identified as a man and was also a verified writer, an illustrator, and a relationship blogger with 10.36 million followers at the time of data retrieval. In this post, the blogger criticized women for calling themselves 'female tough guys' and showed his understanding of how this term suggests women are inferior to men and thus reinforces the gender stereotypes. He expressed his metalinguistic and gender-analysis view that the term 'female tough guy' is discriminatory against women because it makes women proud of identifying themselves as men, unconsciously making masculinity the gold standard of success. Controversially, this post attracted comments from female Weibo users, one of whom received the most likes among other comments. She railed against the blogpost and justified the usage of

this term by expressing her understanding of what it means, defending against the allegation that women calling themselves ‘female tough guys’ are “catering to the patriarchal society” as is mentioned in the blogpost. At the same time, she directed her satire at the “commercial accounts,” suggesting that these accounts aim for clickbait to make profits and not for watching out for their speech content.

 **问天** 🏆  
2020-2-3

为什么男人被叫娘炮会翻脸，女人被称呼女汉子就像捡了个宝

近两年来最恶心的流行语前三名：女汉子，直男癌，绿茶婊。

各有各的性别歧视，各有各的人格压迫。

你们自己想想吧，单手拆灯泡，徒手修电脑，冷静机智不缠人，挺胸抬头有自尊，做到这些就是所谓女中汉子，巾帼须眉了？


死心吧，这种称呼根本无法带给你真正的荣耀。


在现代文明社会里，只有一个人格不健全的女人，才会把人类的优良品质统统归结为男性特质，把劣质行为全部都丢给女性承担，强化整个社会对于性别的刻板印象，并据此践踏同性，寻求异性的身份认同。

这是一种不自知的谄媚，一种无意识的自我驯服，简而言之，就是种逆向歧视病。

所以，我建议全体自豪于自己是“女汉子”的女人，统统都去刮骨换血，免得病入膏肓#女汉子是什么样# 收起

📄 132    💬 37    👍 430

 **富川骄傲是小奶团子**:一定有人说女汉子巾帼须眉了吗?? xyh真是恶心想带节奏，自己没理清楚意思怎么好意思在这大放厥词，小市民心理  
2020-2-3 04:15

 **小羊宝贝1688**:赞你!  
2020-2-3 04:27

**Figure 4.7** The blogpost posted by the blogger with the most followers and the most-liked comment during the time under study

Post translation:

2020-2-3

Why do men turn their faces when being called “sissy” and women feel like they’ve found a treasure when being called ‘female tough guys’?

The top three most disgusting buzzwords in the past several years: female tough guys, straight man cancer, and green tea slut.

Each term has its own gender discrimination, and each term shows some personality-oppression.

Think about it. If you can remove a light bulb with one hand, repair a computer, be calm and witty, and keep your chin up and have self-esteem, then you are a ‘female tough guy’, a heroine?

Give it up! This kind of address can't bring you true glory at all.

In a modern civilized society, only a woman with an unsound personality can attribute all good qualities of human beings to masculine traits and all bad characteristics to women, which strengthens the societal gender stereotypes, showing no consideration for people of the same sex and identifying themselves with the opposite sex.

This is a kind of unconscious flattery, a kind of unconscious self-regulation, in short, a kind of reverse discrimination.

Therefore, I suggest that all women who are proud of being a ‘female tough guy’, all go to shave their bones and exchange blood, so as not to get too sick to recover #what female tough guys look like#

Comment translation:

Who says ‘female tough guys’ have to be “heroines”? xyh [initials of “*yíngxiāo hào*, commercial account”] is really disgusting. How can you be not ashamed when you give a big speech before you understand what the term means? Petty philistine. (17 likes)  
2020-2-3 04:15

Replied by another user: thumbs up! 2020-2-3 04:27

The metalinguistic online discussion of the term, although containing Weibo users’ grievance, shows different perceptions of how language users understand and negotiate the meaning of ‘female tough guys’ and whether it may or may not be associated with sexism from different perspectives.

#### 4.3.2.2 女强人 *nǚ-qíáng rén* ‘strong women’

Comparisons of one gender label with another are also seen in the post containing ‘strong women.’ Example (46) was posted by a user who self-identified as a woman, labeling women with different terms simply based on the length of their hair. The term ‘goddess’ may be associated with a pure and sacred image, while “tomboys” and ‘strong women’ may be stigmatized. By juxtaposing these gender labels, this post indicates an expectation that being a woman entails having long hair, which falls into stereotypes of femininity. Example (47) was posted by a user who self-identified as a man, protesting unfair criticisms of women. At the same time, the blogger shows his understanding of those called ‘leftover women,’ which may have parallels in the meaning of gender labels ‘female PhDs’ and ‘strong women.’ Example (48) speaks up for those labeled ‘strong women’ and stands against patriarchy in which “one-sided beauty standards” for women prevail. The blogger points out the biased definition of “women’s beauty” as associated with subordination and weakness and calls for an appreciation of the “beauty” of independence.

(46) #女生短发和长发有什么区别# 长发叫女神，短发要么叫男人婆，要么是女强人。

*#Long hair vs. short hair* Long-haired girls are called ‘goddesses,’ while short-haired girls are either called *nánrén-pó* [lit. ‘man-woman,’ ‘tomboys’] or ‘strong women’.

(47) 整个社会对“剩女”单身主义的指指点点，对女博士、女强人的评头论足仍旧没有停止。

The whole society judges ‘leftover women’ who are single, and criticisms of female PhDs and ‘strong women’ have never stopped.

(48) 我以前听到过关于女强人的偏见：“她们这么强势，不懂女人是要让男人保护的，注定得不到幸福。”我觉得很不公平。正是因为“女性就该柔弱被保护才有女人味”的观念广为流传，才让女性更加陷入自卑。也让整个中国社会的女性陷入一种“美的单一标准”中。看起来低幼、柔弱、天真、没有抱负是“美”的，而忽略了对独立自信之美的肯定。

I’ve heard an unfair judgment on ‘strong women’ that “they are so strong and don’t understand that women are for men to protect, and they are destined not to be happy.” I think this is very unfair. The wide-spread notion that “women are feminine only when they are weak and can be protected” makes women even more inferior. It also reinforces the Chinese society’s “one-sided beauty standards” of women. It seems that being inferior, weak, innocent, and unambitious is “beautiful,” and that [the society] ignores the approval of the beauty of independence and self-confidence.

Figure 4.8 shows the most reposted and most commented-on post containing the term ‘strong women’ during the time under study. The content was posted by a fashion blogger, a verified account self-identified as a female model, followed by 10.07 million users on Weibo.


The nine photos in this post are women in suits, and the blog text suggests that wearing suits gives a positive impression of being a ‘strong woman.’ The most-liked comment was posted by a female user, who supported this idea by expressing her desire to wear suits, accompanied by a GIF animation of a female celebrity in a suit. It is unknown whether the content creator advertised these suits for commercial purposes or simply displayed fashion styles as a fashion blogger, but the post seems to intend to break the stereotype that only men wear suits.

 **时尚芭莎麻豆**  
2020-3-6 来自 微博 weibo.com  
女孩子穿西装!! 帅呆了~整个人都散发着女强人的气息。



1186 1140 904

按热度 按时间

 **时尚潮流控**:太帅气了,我也一直想穿这种西装套装



2020-3-6 16:59

3

女生也要强:很喜欢西装啊,真的很酷,但是不太适合我  查看图片

2020-3-6 16:59

共4条回复

**Figure 4.8** The most reposted and most commented-on post containing the term ‘strong women’ and the most-liked comment during the time under study.

Post translation:

2020-3-6

Girls wearing suits!! Super handsome ~ exuding an aura of strong women.

Comment translation:

So handsome. I always want to wear this kind of suit.

2020-3-6 16:59

Replied by another user: I like suits. Really cool but does not fit me.

2020-3-6 16:59

All 4 replies

Figure 4.9 shows the most-liked post containing the label ‘strong women,’ which was posted by a verified account, who self-identified as a man and a wedding blogger, followed by 320,000 users. The blogger also created a poll asking whether ‘strong women’ can balance their work with family life, with a girl’s cartoon image on the side of the negative answer and a boy’s cartoon image on the side of the positive answer. Not only did it receive similar votes on both sides and 30,000 likes, but the poll also attracted questions and condemnations, many of which received hundreds of likes. The top three comments are from users who self-identified as women, while the fourth comment was posted by a user self-identified as a man. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the poll and accused the blogger of being unfair in only surveying women. In the most-liked comment, the user adopted the Smile Emoji, showing a seemingly happy expression but an actual despising or annoyed attitude toward the blogger (Huang 2017). Interestingly, in her question related to men, she reversed the order of “family” and “career” in the original post with regards to women. The blogger replied to all these comments, trying to



reconcile the commenters to the necessity for more efforts made by women in both the workplace and family life. The reply to the fourth most-liked comment was also posted by a user self-identified as a man. He asked the blogger to conduct a poll on the ability to balance the work and family life of “strong men,” a term that does not exist in the Chinese lexicon, to deliver a biting satire on the blogger’s restrictive gender ideology. None of these most-liked comments explicitly accuse the blogger of being sexist, but they all took a stance to show their discontent with the blogpost and the poll.

 **婚礼主持人许多** 📍  
2020-3-8 来自 iPhone X(银色) 已编辑  
#张伟丽称女性可以很多面#张伟丽说，女性可以很多面，上得了厅堂下得了厨房，能工作也可以很顾家。这是很多人特别羡慕的。你觉得，生活中的女强人能平衡好家庭和事业吗？ #张伟丽成功卫冕#

你觉得，女强人可以平衡家庭和事业吗？

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <br>很难 | <br>可以的 |
| 1.4万   | 1.5万   |

3万人参与 投票已结束 @婚礼主持人许多创建

📄 300      💬 476      👍 3.1万



**Figure 4.9** The most-liked post containing ‘strong women’ and the top four most-liked comments

Post translation:

2020-3-8 iPhone X (silver) Re-edited:

#Zhang Weili said women can be multifaceted# Zhang Weili said that women can be multifaceted. They can go to the hall and go to the kitchen. They can work and take care of the family. This is what many people envy. Do you think that a strong woman can strike a balance between family and career?

Poll question: Do you think a strong woman can strike a balance between family and career?

“Very difficult” upvoted by 14 thousand users; “Yes they can” upvoted by 15 thousand users.

30 thousand users participated. The poll has ended.

Comment translation:

1. So, do you think men can strike a balance between career and family? 😊 (437 likes)

2020-3-8 04:36

Replied by the author: Women tend to focus on the family, compared to men.

2020-3-8 05:06

Replied by the author: This is a traditional phenomenon. That’s why I said “generally.”

2020-3-8 05:30

All 38 replies

2. Don’t offend me on International Women’s Day. Be careful, or I will scold you until your mother cannot recognize you. (268 likes)

2020-3-8 05:17

Replied by the author: Do not be so radical. I mean that women make more efforts and that being a strong woman is not easy.

2020-3-8 05:35

All 11 replies

3. Please respect women. (125 likes)

2020-03-08 04:37

Replied by the author: You are overthinking. I did not disrespect women. I was just trying to say that women put in more work and that it was harder for them to strike the balance.

2020-3-8 05:33

Replied by another user: That day

All 7 replies

4. Will you ask men this question? (118 likes)

2020-3-8 06:10

Replied by the author: I will do the same.

2020-3-8 06:12

Replied by another user: Then create a poll question and ask about strong men.

2020-3-8 20:09

All 5 replies

The Weibo blogposts containing the term ‘strong women’ either gained support from followers (Figure 4.8) or attracted criticisms from Weibo users, who suggested that women and men should be treated equally (Figure 4.9).

#### 4.3.2.3 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’

The most salient finding of the qualitative inquiry about the use of the term ‘leftover women’ on the Weibo platform is the emergence of homophonic variants of 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women.’ As shown in Examples (49) and (50), these variants include 圣女 *shèngnǚ* “sacred wise women,” 胜女 *shèngnǚ* “victorious, winsome women,” and 盛女 *shèngnǚ* “flourishing women.” Without changing the original pronunciation, Chinese women created these homophones to put a positive spin on the original derogatory term, claiming linguistic agency while challenging gender inequality.

(49) 非常不喜欢“剩女”这个词，在我眼中，只有“圣女”、“胜女”，如今又多了一个好词，“盛女”，女人只有首先给自己信心，才能光彩照人。

I really don't like the term *shèngnǚ* 'leftover women'. In my opinion, there are only *shèngnǚ* 'sacred wise women' and *shèngnǚ* 'winsome women.' Now there is another good word, *shèngnǚ* 'flourishing women.' A woman can be glorious if she has confidence in herself first.

(50) 林晓洁陈乔恩在《胜女的代价》中由“剩女”变“胜女”的完美蜕变告诉我们，职场中的女性自己可以做命运的主人！

Lin Xiao-Jie (Chen Chiao-en)'s perfect transformation from 'leftover women' to 'winsome women' in *The Price of Victory Girls* tells us that professional women can be masters of their own destiny!

Figure 4.10 shows the most-liked and the most-reposted blogpost containing 'leftover women' on Weibo during the time under study. The post was written by a self-identified female writer followed by more than four million users. It refers to a recent documentary entitled *Leftover Women* presenting unmarried Chinese women's pressure to marry young and implores the public to stop stigmatizing these women. Using the phrase "girls of failure," the blogger played with irony: society views unmarried women as unfulfilled and unhappy. The most-liked comment was posted by a blogger who self-identified as a man, agreeing with the viewpoint that getting married is a personal matter and no one else's business. A self-identified female user's comment received the second most likes, pointing out that being "strong" epitomizes desirable masculinity and unwanted femininity – the different societal expectations of men and women. At the same time, she criticized the matchmaking service employee in the documentary whose remarks represented patriarchal ideology that women should be young, pretty, and subservient to men to get male attention on the marriage market. Other users replied to and supported this

comment. In this Weibo post and its comments, both women and men expressed the idea that other people have no right to take control over these women's love lives and marriages.

 **槽值**   
2020-3-6 来自 微博 weibo.com  
对“中国剩女”的侮辱，到此为止吧

再过几天，就是妇女节了。不出意外的话，彼时朋友圈会被各种“彩虹屁”刷屏。然而，趁那天到来之前，我想先扫一扫兴致——聊聊一群“失败的女孩儿”。

失败在哪儿？纪录片《剩女》的片名，足以道尽。一群高学历、高收入、有着体面工作的女性，被自己的亲人嘲讽侮辱。原因仅仅是——她们没有按时结婚。












两个小时里记录的，是三个女孩不同的故事。但，她们的迷茫挣扎，无处可躲时的颓丧，想必许多中国女孩，都会感同身受。[#愿你被这个世界温柔以待# 收起](#)



谈心社社长  

1177 369 3890

**按热度** 按时间

-  **周玄毅** :世上很少有啥事，是只要自己想通，就能立竿见影获得幸福的，“不结婚关你屁事”就是早见的一个例子  
2020-3-6 00:31    468
- 槽值** : 没毛病!  
2020-3-6 01:07
-  **刘战战**:对男人不会说“你太强势，要柔一点”。“强势”真是双标的词，放女性身上=“母老虎”、“凶”、“嫁不出去”，放男性身上=“霸气”、“领袖气质”。一个律师的社会贡献不比婚恋所红娘大么？红娘满脑子刻板印象不自知，还教育女性改变自己讨好父权真是令人反感。讽刺的是她也是个女的。  
2020-3-6 01:02    213
- 小王子每天都要开心呀**:女人不凶会被打被杀的。一定要凶  
2020-3-6 07:05
- 萌暗香**:能去当红娘的人，也就是认可父权社会体系的人，要不然她吃不了这碗饭...你想想古代媒婆那接性...  
2020-3-6 10:37
- 共5条回复 

**Figure 4.10** The most-liked and most-reposted post containing ‘leftover women’ and the top two most liked comments

Post translation:

2020-3-6 From weibo.com

Stop the insult to the “Chinese leftover women.”

It will be International Women’s Day in a few days. WeChat posts will be full of various “rainbow farts” [Internet slang referring to flamboyant compliments] on women. However, before that day arrives, I want to talk about a group of “loser women.”

Why are they losers? The title of the documentary *Leftover Women* tells everything. A group of highly educated women with decent jobs and high income were mocked and insulted by their relatives. The reason is simple: they did not get married on time.

The documentary tells the different stories of three women in two hours. However, their confusion, struggle, and depression are felt in the same way by many Chinese women.

#May you be treated gently by this world#

Comments translation:

1. There are very few things in the world that can make you happy immediately as long as you figure it out on your own. One of the rare examples is that “Me not getting married is none of your business.” (468 likes)

2020-3-6 00:31

Replied by the author: Exactly!

2020-3-6 01:07

2. You don’t say “you are too strong, be softer” to men. “Strong” is really a double-standard word. Strong women = “tigress,” “fierce,” and “unable to marry”, whereas strong men = “dominant” and “leadership.” Isn’t the social contribution of a lawyer

greater than that of a matchmaker? The matchmaker is full of stereotypes without recognizing it, and it is really disgusting to educate women to change themselves to please patriarchy. The irony is that she is also a woman. (213 likes)

2020-3-6 01:02

Replied by another user: Women who are not strong/fierce will be beaten and killed. Women must be strong/fierce.

2020-3-6 07:05

Replied by another user: The person who can be a matchmaker is someone who agrees with the patriarchal social system, otherwise she can't do this job... Think about the ancient matchmakers' disgraceful behavior...

2020-3-6 10:37

All 5 replies

Figure 4.11 shows the second most-liked post containing 'leftover women' and its popular comments. The content was posted on International Women's Day by a self-identified male movie reviewer followed by 4.52 million users. Like the previous example in Figure 4.10, this post also talks about the documentary entitled *Leftover Women*, pointing out the patriarchal ideologies that force immense pressure on Chinese unmarried women and deprive them of the freedom to make their own life choices regarding love and marriage. In responding to the questions raised by the post, many self-identified female users commented that women should not be labeled "leftovers" and that the male-centered gender ideologies should be rooted out from contemporary society.



**壹条电影** 2020-3-8 来自 微博视频号  
 #影视宅急送# 在今天这个特别的节日里，不如看看一部“应景的”纪录片——#中国剩女#。

在80多分钟的时长内，这部影片对当下中国婚恋相亲市场、两性择偶偏好、城乡婚恋差异以及适龄未婚问题进行了不同层次的展现。

通过三位主人公对人生之路的迥异选择，让观众看到了“剩女”这个标签所根植的大众心理机制，中国人落后的婚姻观念对个体的绑架在影片中表现的淋漓尽致。

谁是剩女？谁让谁成了剩女？剩女的敌人是谁？对这些问题，这部纪录片给了我们一个可供参考的答案。 [壹条电影的微博视频 收起](#)



328 357 572

按热度 按时间

- 抹子染**:她们不叫剩女，她们只是太优秀了，没遇到合适的  
 2020-3-8 08:09 7
- 壹条电影** [回复](#):说得好  
 2020-3-9 03:28  
 共2条回复
- 尚九熙今天可爱了么**:中国的择偶问题一直都存在，以前的观念也存在  
 2020-3-8 07:47 16
- 不爱吃肉的就是我**:这个真的不容忽视  
 2020-3-8 08:07
- 博文迷**:时代会变化的  
 2020-3-8 07:51  
 共6条回复
- 旺仔牛奶好酸啊**:谁是剩女，当代社会谁都不能说谁是剩女  
 2020-3-8 07:44 18
- sakuramx** [回复](#):对呀，很多人不愿意的  
 2020-3-8 07:56
- 田憨憨喜欢喝旺仔牛奶**:说得好，毕竟现在女性都有自己的权利了  
 2020-3-8 07:46  
 共6条回复

**Figure 4.11** The second most-liked post containing ‘leftover women’ and the most popular comments

Post translation:

2020-3-8 07:27 From Weibo Video

#Movie Home Delivery# Today is a special day [International Women's Day]. We should watch an "appropriate" documentary -- #Chinese Leftover Women.

Within the time span of 80 minutes, this film presents the current Chinese marriage and dating market, men and women's preferences for choosing a spouse, differences in marriage and love between urban and rural areas, and the issue of being unmarried at a marriageable age.

Through the different life choices made by the three protagonists, the audience sees the public psychology rooted in the label of 'leftover women.' That individuals are kidnapped by the outdated ideologies of marriage is vividly shown in the film.

Who are the leftover women? Who makes whom become a leftover woman? Who are the enemies of the leftover women? This documentary gives us an answer to these questions.

The bloggers' Weibo video.

Comments translation:

1. They are not leftover women. They are just too outstanding, and they haven't found the right person. (7 likes)

2020-3-8 08:09

Replied by the author: Well said.

2020-3-9 03:28

All 2 replies

2. The problems of spouse selection always exist in China. The old concept also exists. (16 likes)

2020-3-8 07:47

Replied by another user: This is really nonnegligible.

2020-3-8 08:07

Replied by another user: The era will change.

2020-3-8 07:51

All 6 replies

3. Who are leftover women? Nobody should be called a leftover woman in contemporary society. (18 likes)

2020-3-8 07:44

Replied by another user: Right. Many people are not willing to [be called leftover women].

2020-3-8 07:56

Replied by another user: Well said. Women [have] their own rights now after all.

2020-3-8 07:46

All 6 replies

These blogposts and comments not only received massive attention from other Weibo users but also voiced the concerns, criticisms, and objections of grassroots language users – mostly women – who call out patriarchy at the societal level and call for gender equality and greater democratization of individual decisions on their personal matters. It is also worth noting that some self-identified male users, although not as numerous as female users, also participated in the microblogging movement to advocate for feminist values and ideologies.

#### 4.4 Discussion

The findings on social media show that women demonstrated their discursive empowerment through a community of practice in a timely and collective way. The time stamps on comments and replies in the examples exhibit the immediacy of interactions between bloggers and commenters and between commenters and users upvoting comments they agree with. These “digital traces,” to use the words of Varis (2016: 63), offer a lens of grassroots language users’ varying attitudes and stances upon the meaning-making of the gender labels. Meanwhile, the social media platform and its proprietary algorithms function as an acceleration of everyday communications in the digital environments, allowing these interactions to take place instantly and effectively within the digital community of practice.

This community of practice suggests that Chinese women’s linguistic initiatives and actions at the grassroots level challenge the hegemonic meaning developed in the mainstream sociocultural context. For example, state media constantly constructs a stigmatizing image of successful women, calling them ‘strong women’ in the public sphere and bringing public attention to their personal failures in the private sphere as they do not meet the criteria of a good wife or a good mother (see Chapter III). This biased gender view and restrictive gender norms were manifested in the poll asking whether “a strong woman can achieve life-work balance” by a verified Weibo account, which quickly attracted Weibo users who explicitly repudiated this poll and left scathing comments on the blog poster’s assumed gender stereotypes. Feminists’ collective action in social media has not only strengthened solidarity among women but also drew in the support of some men in raising a unanimous voice against structural sexism including gender categorization and gender stereotypes.

Another example revolves around the derogatory label ‘leftover women,’ which has been used in the mainstream media for a decade since its coinage, shaming well-educated unmarried women because they refuse to conform to traditional gender norms (see Chapter III). However, this state narrative could not be further from the women’s own self-images. The defiant Weibo posts highlight the triumph of the powerful homophones of ‘leftover women,’ e.g., ‘winsome women,’ ‘sacred, wise women,’ and ‘flourishing women,’ which are linguistic innovations standing in paradigmatic relationship with ‘leftover women.’ These homophones have significant political meanings because they reveal women’s self-determination and their act of defiance against the official gendering of women. Through the lexical self-invention, women show their grassroots discursive intervention of state-sanctioned gender discourse. Not only do women who are labeled “leftovers” engage in discursive intervention, but other grassroots language users in social media also raise their objection to the pejorative labeling, express their solidarity with these women, and plead for a halt to demeaning these women. The voices protesting linguistic sexism against women at the grassroots language level have been amplified by digital technology and social media platforms, suggesting feminist collective resistance against the state gender ideology. As the frequency of the official use of ‘leftover women’ has diminished over time, it is very possible that the grassroots feminist voices have been progressively spreading upward into the mainstream media, pressuring state media to recognize the linguistic sexism embodied in this gendered term. Although this linguistic change has not entirely changed the biased social perceptions of women labeled ‘leftovers’ (see Chapter V), it has witnessed a concerted effort by high-profile and grassroots feminists through their linguistic activism in online communities. When it comes to ‘female tough guys,’ the findings show a more complex picture of Chinese digital feminism. On the one hand, women’s supporting of the image of ‘female tough guys’ and

“handsome strong women” shows that they attempt to negotiate or redefine the conventional meaning of “beauty” and diversify the traditional views of femininity through expressing their fondness for chivalrous women and androgynous dressing styles. Women also articulate that they no longer tolerate society treating them as having a unitary and fixed social role. Instead, they claim their own identity as free, autonomous, and independent individuals. The meaning-making process allows and embraces diverse possibilities of femininity and individuality. On the other hand, some female Weibo users adopt the term ‘female tough guys’ to describe themselves not with a sense of pride but with a tone of self-pitying, castigating themselves for not being feminine enough or blaming the harsh reality that forces them to become tough. Meanwhile, some women contrasted the perceived unfemininity of ‘female tough guys’ and the perceived hyper-femininity of women labeled other terms such as ‘soft girls’ and ‘goddesses,’ and some women verbalized their strong opposition to those who pointed out the linguistic sexism embedded in this term. These voices manifest that the patriarchal ideology is still deeply entrenched in society. The power of patriarchal gender constructions lies in the way that they are internalized by women themselves.

#### 4.5 Summary

This chapter examines grassroots voices, mostly those of women, revolving around female gender labeling on the social media platform Weibo using corpus linguistics techniques, digital ethnography, and critical discourse analysis. The social media findings suggest the complexities of Chinese cyberfeminism. Women’s voices at the grassroots level in social media demonstrate different levels of gender awareness and feminist awakening. Some women are empowered to speak out against systematic oppression and resist patriarchal injustice, whereas

others face obstacles to recognizing and realizing gender inequality implanted in everyday life when women's choices clash with social expectations. These barriers are yet to be overcome.

## CHAPTER V

### SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF FEMALE LABELS AND WOMEN LABELED WITH THESE TERMS

#### 5.1 Introduction

Chapter I reviewed relevant findings in anthropological and sociological studies, media studies, and gender studies of women who are labeled with gendered terms. This Chapter provides sociolinguistic evidence of how gender labels are used by Chinese native speakers and how women labeled with these terms are perceived in Chinese-speaking communities.

The existing literature provides some empirical data on the social interpretation of the labels 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ and 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ and women labeled with these terms (Chen 2012; Li & Lu 2016; Luo 2018), but little is known about the social meaning of the label 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ and social perceptions of women labeled with this term. Chen (2012) used a questionnaire to investigate the social understanding of 剩女 *shèngnǚ* by various demographics and made several discoveries. First, respondents who have heard of the term ‘leftover women’ were limited to young professional people residing in the urban area. Most of them reported that they had heard of this term from the Internet. Second, most of the respondents answered that *shèngnǚ* was a term referring to unmarried women above 26 years of age with at least a master’s degree and a high monthly salary. Third, respondents showed different understandings of and attitudes toward *shèngnǚ*. Women and men in the “three high” category (higher income, higher education, higher age) were more likely to positively approve the 剩女话语 *shèngnǚ huàyǔ* ‘*shèngnǚ* discourse’ because they reported that women who were labeled with this term were successful and independent. Respondents who were single were more likely to hold a neutral stance, reporting that the



‘*shèngnǚ* discourse’ was an objective description of unmarried women with a relatively old age. Lastly, men were more likely than women to negatively interpret the ‘*shèngnǚ* discourse’ and thus approve the ‘*shèngnǚ* discourse.’ The first two findings contributed to our knowledge of where the label was used and how people interpreted the meaning of the label a decade ago, but the third finding is confusing. By using ‘*shèngnǚ* discourse,’ Chen did not make clear whether it referred to this particular linguistic term or women who were labeled with this term, which caused confusion of the two concepts in both the questionnaire and the analysis.

In contrast to Chen (2012), Luo (2018) distinguished the two concepts in her thesis to study self-stigma of *shèngnǚ* from a psychological perspective. Using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, Luo (2018) found that the social attitudes toward women labeled *shèngnǚ* were related to the social acceptance of the label. Those who accepted this linguistic label tended to express a more negative attitude toward the so-called ‘leftover women’, attributing their “leftover” status to their personal failures including perceived pickiness and lack of physical attractiveness. By contrast, participants who rejected this label were more likely to show a positive attitude toward women labeled *shèngnǚ*. Luo’s (2018) study shed light on how the social interpretation of a negative label is associated with varying attitudes toward women labeled with the term. However, what remains unknown is how this association may be varied among different demographics. To fill this gap, this chapter provides a more nuanced understanding of how sociolinguistic variables such as age, gender, and level of education may influence social perceptions of women labeled with this term.

Regarding the label 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ Li and Lu (2016) explored social perceptions of women labeled with this term using a survey. They found that gender, age, social status, education level, and region all affected social acceptance of women labeled *nǚ-*

*hànzi*. Specifically, women compared to men, the older generation (aged 56-65) compared to the younger generation, wage earners, postgraduates compared to high school and college graduates, and people from northern and eastern coastal areas compared to those from southern parts of China were more likely to think highly of women labeled as *nǚ-hànzi*. Furthermore, significant proportions of both men and women tended to associate the so-called *nǚ-hànzi* with an outgoing personality, independence, and greater tolerance, though more men than women tended to evaluate *nǚ-hànzi* as having a masculine appearance and an androgenous fashion style. In terms of the connotational interpretation of the term, Li and Lu (2016) surveyed college students in 2014 and 2015 and compared the findings between the two years. They found that students were more likely to think of it as a positive term than a negative term in both years, but compared to 2014, fewer female students would use this term to mock themselves and more female students felt proud when using the term to refer to themselves in 2015. They attributed this change to a growing gender awareness among college students. Because this study only surveyed college students regarding the usage and interpretation of the term within two years, it left several questions unanswered: (1) How do people other than college students use and perceive this linguistic term? (2) How do social perceptions of the label and women labeled with the term differ among demographics? (3) Can social perceptions of gender labels in the 2020s tell us anything about gender awareness at the societal level?

Chinese society has changed rapidly during the intervening years since these studies were conducted. Thus, a fresh look at the social perception of gender labeling is warranted in the new era. To address the research gap and questions mentioned above, this chapter focuses on the three gender labels (i.e., 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women,’ 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ and 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’) in a sociolinguistic survey to explore the uses and

perceptions of the labels and to understand the sociocultural values embedded in the perception of gender labeling practices among various demographics.

## 5.2 Data and Methods

To elicit response data on the self-reported experience of the three female labels (i.e., 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women,’ 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ and 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’)<sup>1</sup>, an anonymous online survey was designed using *Qualtrics* (see Appendix A for survey in original Chinese and English translation). In addition to demographic information including gender, age, and level of education, the survey collected responses to the following five questions about the respondents’ self-reported encounters, uses, affective valences, and subjective perceptions of the female labels:

- (1) How often do you hear or see the terms?
- (2) On what occasion do you encounter the terms?
- (3) How often do you use the terms?
- (4) Do you think the terms are positive, neutral, or negative?
- (5) Please use three to five words to describe women labeled with these expressions in terms of their appearance, personality, career, marriage, family, etc.

To collect perception data, I used snowball-sampling by sharing the survey link with native Chinese speakers in my social network via WeChat and Douban. These respondents then further distributed the link to native speakers of Chinese in their social networks. A total of 410 consented responses were collected of which 102 were incomplete and were excluded from the

---

<sup>1</sup> Note that the term *nǚ-néng rén* “capable women” was not included due to the low frequency of encounters and usages reported in a pilot questionnaire surveying twenty respondents.

analysis. Table 5.1 shows a summary of the remaining 308 valid responses by age, gender, and education level.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 5.1** Survey data by gender, age, and education level

|              | Female     | Male       | TOTAL      |              | Female     | Male       | TOTAL      |
|--------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 18-29        | 117        | 44         | 161        | High school  | 11         | 19         | 30         |
| 30-39        | 33         | 74         | 107        | University   | 98         | 70         | 168        |
| 40-49        | 7          | 11         | 18         | Postgraduate | 60         | 50         | 117        |
| 50 or above  | 12         | 10         | 22         | <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>169</b> | <b>139</b> | <b>308</b> |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>169</b> | <b>139</b> | <b>308</b> |              |            |            |            |

For questions (1) “frequency of encounters,” (3) “frequency of usages,” and (4) “affective valence,” chi-square independence tests were first performed to detect whether there was a statistically significant association between these variables and the three sociolinguistic variables including age, gender, and education level. For those significant statistical results, an ordinal logistic regression model was then built to predict whether there was an interaction between the three independent sociolinguistic factors and the observed dependent data. Then these results were visualized using *RStudio*. Because question (2) “venues for encounters” allowed multiple answers to be selected, percentage data was visualized and analyzed. Question (5) “subjective perception of women labeled with these terms” involved both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Specifically, a preliminary analysis was conducted to parse the reported descriptions and to check the frequency of descriptive terms provided by the participants. The frequency data then served as a clue for the most perceivable aspects of the so-called ‘strong women,’ ‘female tough guys,’ and ‘leftover women.’ To provide a more nuanced understanding of the connection between the semantics of the labels and the perceptions of women labeled with these terms, a qualitative analysis was conducted for each label. Statistical results of self-reported affective

<sup>2</sup> In the gender category, “prefer not to say” was an option in addition to female and male but was not selected by any of the respondents.

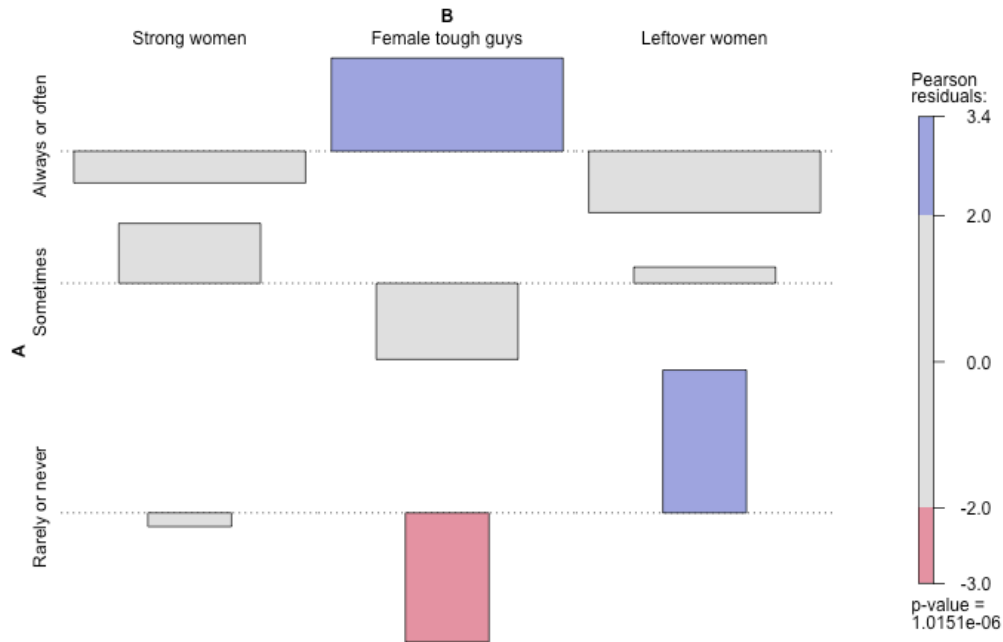
valence were used as an indication of whether the subjective descriptions should be qualitatively examined across gender, age, or levels of education. This process involved a manual examination of lexical or phrasal variations of descriptions of the most noticeable aspects provided by the initial frequency analysis. Then the proportion data of these categories was examined across sociolinguistic groups.

### 5.3 Results

#### 5.3.1 Reported frequency of encounters

The first question asks how often respondents encounter the three terms. Survey results show that more than half of respondents reported that they have often or always heard of these terms in general, indicating that these labels are influential in daily language use.

A chi-square independence test detected that reported frequency of encounters were unevenly distributed in the sample ( $X^2(4, N = 924) = 33.35, p < 0.0001$ ). Figure 5.1 shows the residuals of each category where blue indicates that the observed value is higher than the expected value and red indicates that the observed value is lower than the expected value. Overall, the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ was significantly more likely to be always or often encountered and significantly less likely to be rarely or never encountered, whereas the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ was significantly more likely to be rarely or never encountered.



**Figure 5.1** Graphical contingency table of residuals of overall reported frequency of encounters

Chi-square tests of independence were performed to examine the associations between the three sociolinguistic variables (i.e., gender, age, and education levels) and reported frequency of encounters of the three terms (i.e., 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women,’ 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ and 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’), respectively. A *p*-value less than 0.05 indicates statistical significance. Table 5.2 shows that no significant association was found between age and reported frequency of encountering 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women’ ( $X^2(6, N = 308) = 5.98, p = 0.43$ ), 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ ( $X^2(6, N = 308) = 10.15, p = 0.12$ ), and 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ ( $X^2(6, N = 308) = 3.69, p = 0.72$ ). However, gender and education levels were found to be significantly associated with the reported frequency of encounters.

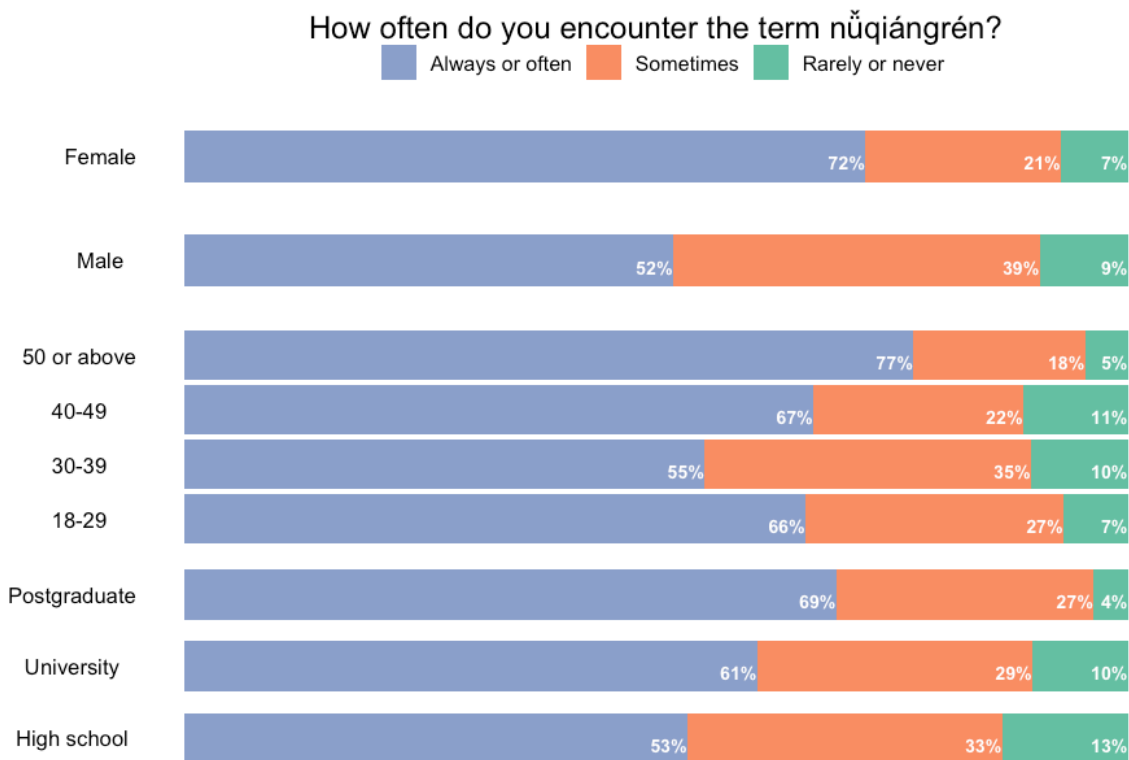
**Table 5.2** Chi-square analysis of reported frequency of encountering the three terms

|  | Gender<br>( <i>df</i> = 2) | Age<br>( <i>df</i> = 6) | Education<br>( <i>df</i> = 4) |
|--|----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
|--|----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|

|                          | $\chi^2$ | $p$  | significance | $\chi^2$ | $p$  | significance | $\chi^2$ | $p$  | significance |
|--------------------------|----------|------|--------------|----------|------|--------------|----------|------|--------------|
| <i>Strong women</i>      | 14.20    | 0.00 | ***          | 5.98     | 0.43 | ns           | 6.10     | 0.19 | ns           |
| <i>Female tough guys</i> | 5.99     | 0.05 | *            | 10.15    | 0.12 | ns           | 11.30    | 0.02 | *            |
| <i>Leftover women</i>    | 2.43     | 0.30 | ns           | 3.69     | 0.72 | ns           | 13.33    | 0.01 | **           |

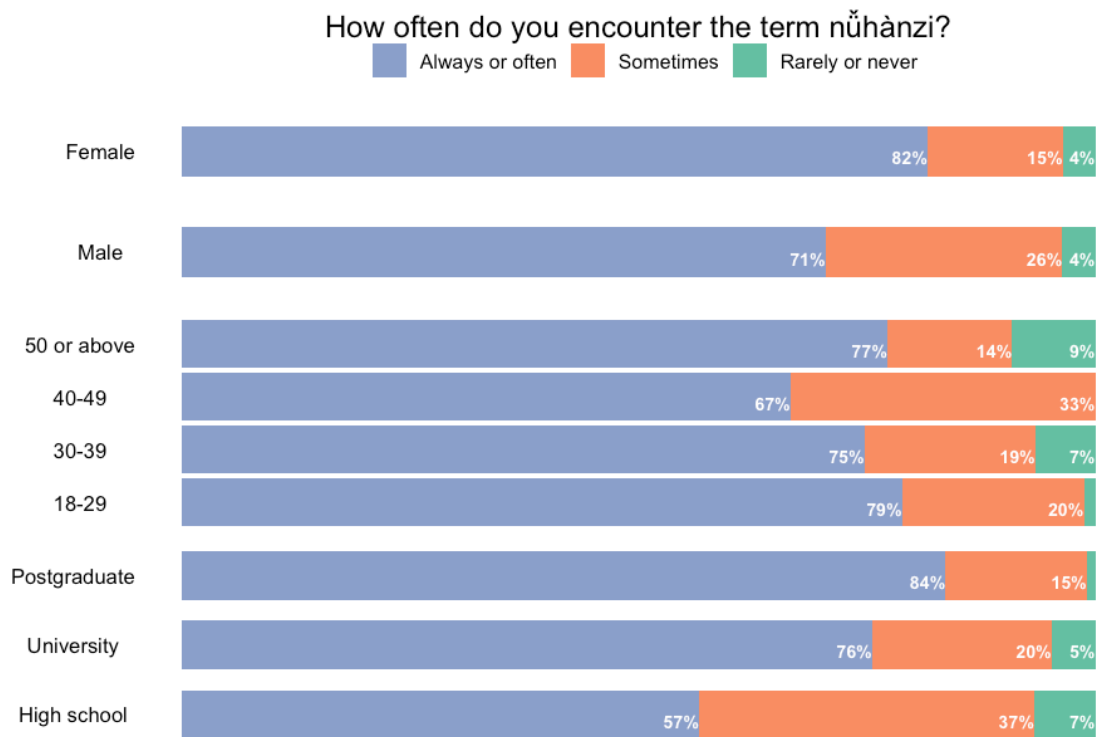
ns: not significant, \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.0001$

First, there was a statistically significant association between gender and the reported frequency of encountering 女强人 *nǚ-qíáng rén* ‘strong women’ ( $X^2(2, N = 308) = 14.20, p < 0.001$ ). Women were significantly more likely to report encountering the term than men, as shown in the proportions of frequency categories across gender groups in Figure 5.2. Although participants who received higher education reported encountering the term more frequently, there was no significant relationship between education and frequency of encountering 女强人 *nǚ-qíáng rén* ‘strong women’ ( $X^2(4, N = 308) = 6.10, p = 0.19$ ).



**Figure 5.2** Reported frequency of encountering the term 女强人 *nǚ-qíáng rén* ‘strong women’

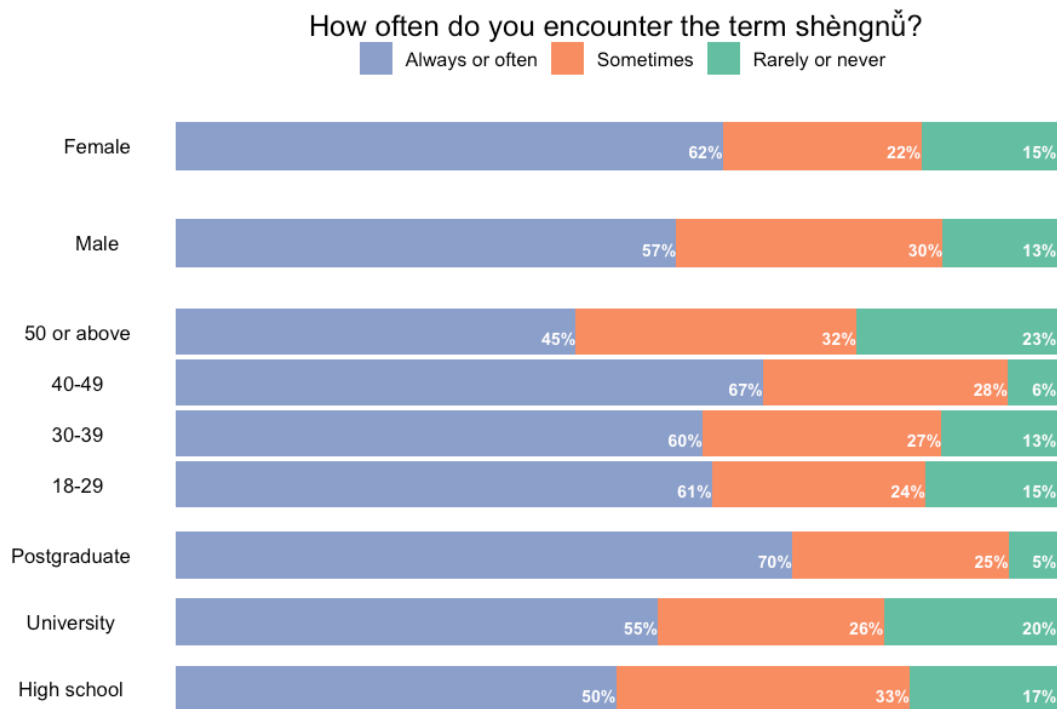
Second, there was a statistically significant association between gender and the reported frequency of encountering the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ ( $X^2(2, N = 308) = 5.99, p = 0.05$ ). Compared to men, women were considerably more likely to encounter the term. In addition, there was a statistically significant association between education level and reported frequency of encountering the term ( $X^2(2, N = 308) = 11.30 p = 0.02$ ). Specifically, significantly more postgraduates reported encountering this term than high school graduates. Figure 5.3 visualizes the proportions of frequency categories across the three sociolinguistic variables, respectively.



**Figure 5.3** Reported frequency of encountering the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’



Third, there was a statistically significant relationship between levels of education and reported frequency of encountering the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ ( $X^2(4, N = 308) = 13.33$   $p = 0.01$ ). Compared to university graduates and high school graduates, postgraduates were significantly more likely to report encountering this term. Figure 5.4 shows the proportions of frequency categories across gender, age, and education levels for the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women.’

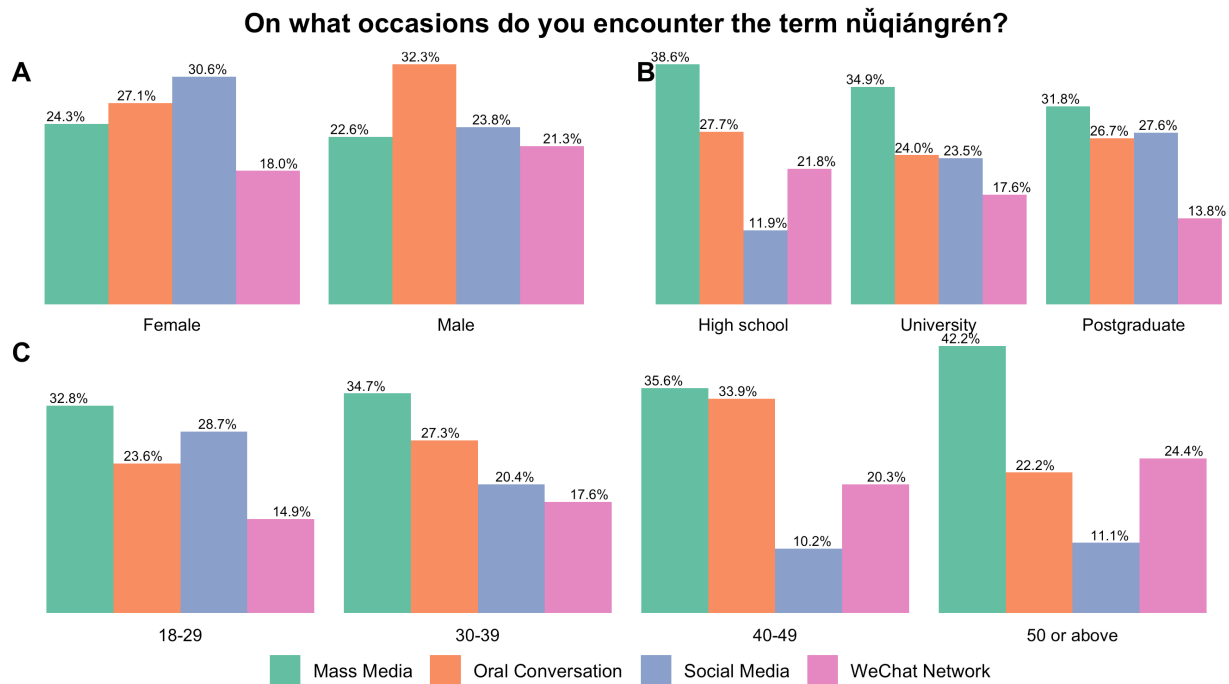


**Figure 5.4** Reported frequency of encountering the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’

### 5.3.2. Where were the terms encountered?

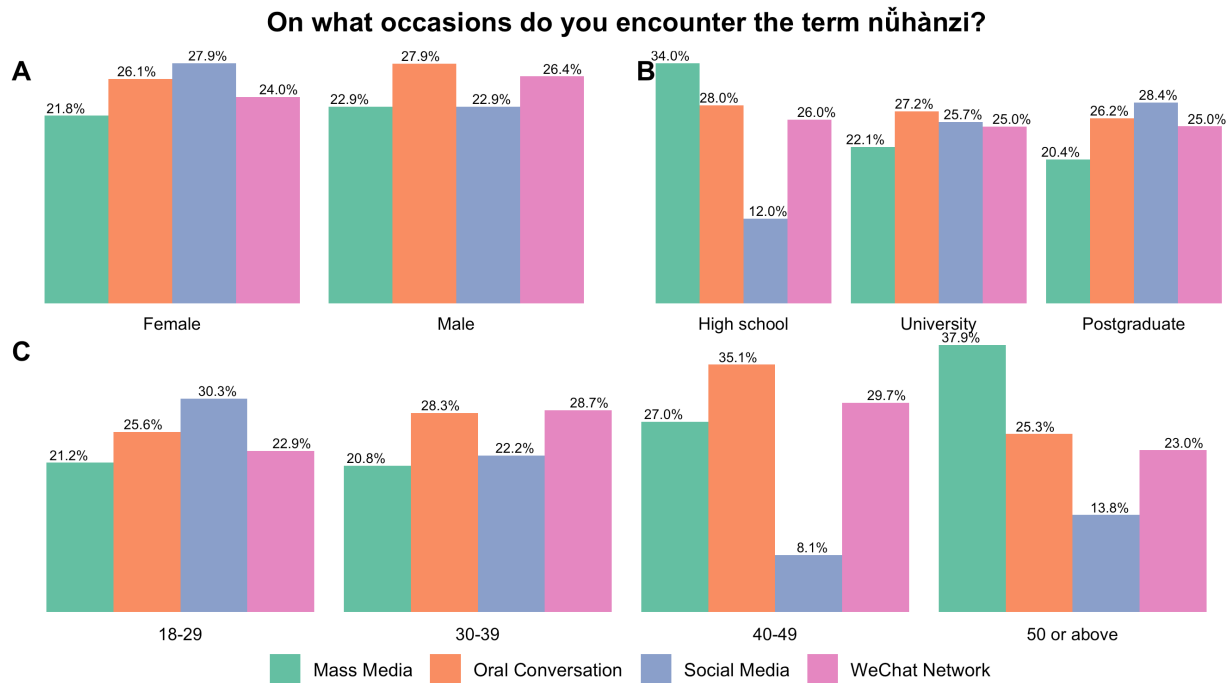
For this question, five options were provided for respondents to choose from: newspaper/books, TV/entertainment shows/movies, WeChat for social networking, other social media platforms (e.g., Weibo), and oral conversation. In my analysis, I combined the first two categories into “Mass Media” and kept the other three categories, and thus four types of occasions remained.

As shown in Figure 5.5 (A), the most frequently reported place of encountering the term 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women’ was Social Media for women and Oral Conversation for men. However, across education and age groups, Mass Media was most frequently selected as the venue for encounters, as shown in Figure 5.5 (B) and (C).



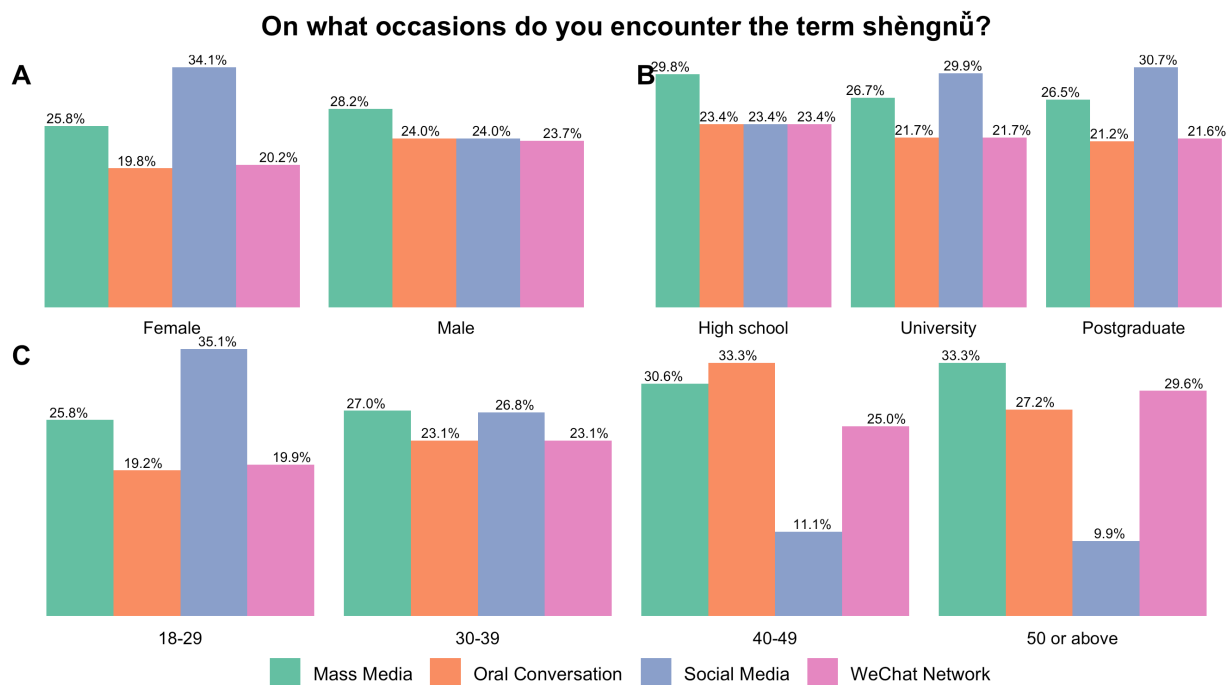
**Figure 5.5** Venues for encountering the term 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women’ across gender, education-level, and age groups

Similar to 女强人 *nǚ-qiáng rén* ‘strong women,’ the most frequently reported venue for encountering the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hàn zi* ‘female tough guys’ was Social Media for women and Oral Conversation for men, as shown in Figure 5.6 (A). As the level of education increases, shown in Figure 5.6 (B), Mass Media was less often selected whereas Social Media was more often selected for venues for encounters. Across age groups, Social Media received the highest ratings from the youngest group, while Mass Media received the highest ratings from the oldest group. A larger proportion of respondents aged 30-39 and 40-49 selected WeChat Network and Oral Conversation, respectively, as shown in Figure 5.6 (C).



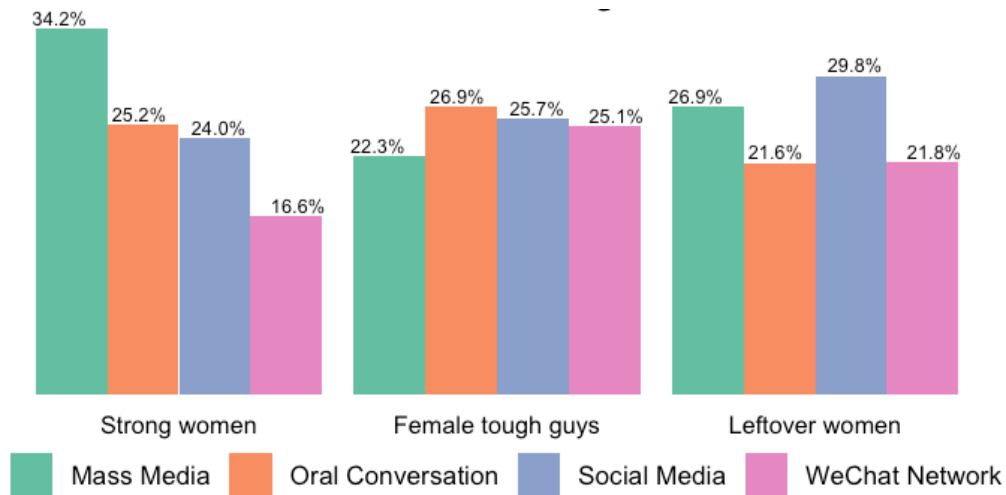
**Figure 5.6** Venues for encountering the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ across gender, education-level, and age groups

Regarding encounters of the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women,’ as shown in Figure 5.7 (A) - (C), Social Media was more frequently selected by women, university and postgraduate groups, and the 18-29 age group, while Mass Media was more frequently chosen by men, the high school group, as well as the 50 or above group. As indicated in Figure 5.7 (C), Mass Media and Social Media received similar ratings from the 30-39 age group, and Oral Conversation received the highest rating from the 40-49 age group.



**Figure 5.7** Venues for encountering the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ across gender, education-level, and age groups

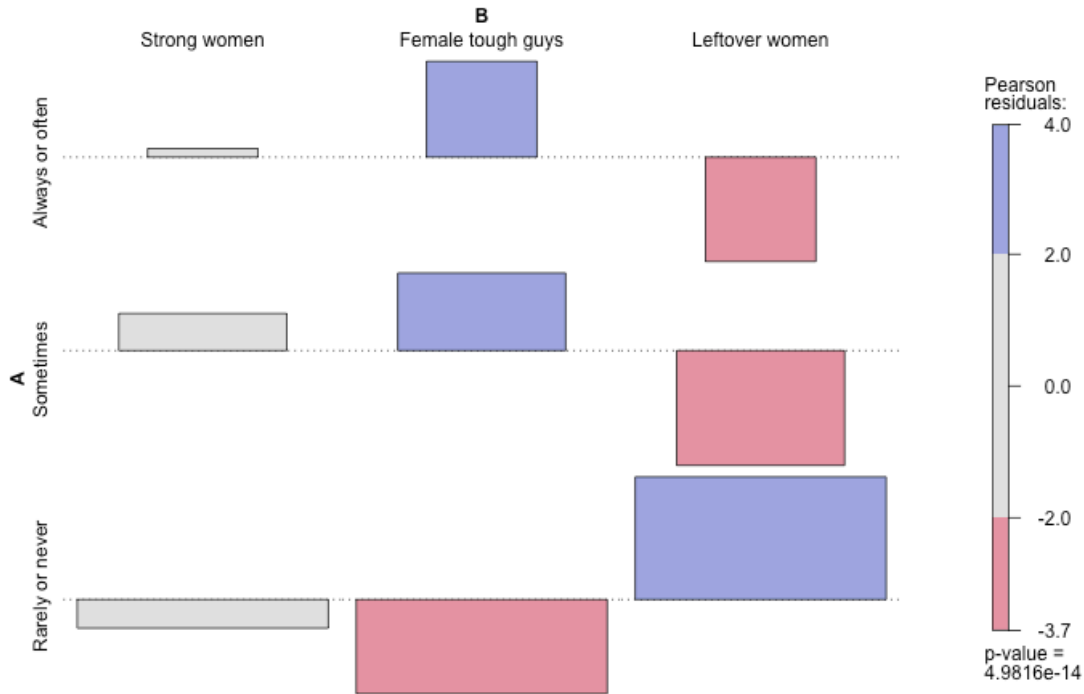
Overall, as shown in Figure 5.8, Mass Media was the most frequently selected media venue for encountering the term 女强人 *nǚ-qiángrén* ‘strong women,’ while Social Media was the most frequently reported media venue for encountering the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women.’ As to the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ Oral Conversation was the most frequently reported occasion of encounter, closely followed by Social Media and WeChat Network.



**Figure 5.8** Venues for encountering the three terms

### 5.3.3 Reported frequency of use

Reports on frequency of using the three terms were unevenly distributed in the sample ( $X^2(4, N = 924) = 68.38, p < 0.0001$ ). As is shown in Figure 5.9, the number of respondents that reported at least sometimes using the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ is significantly greater than expected, whereas the numbers of respondents who reported at least sometimes using the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ is significantly lower than expected. Accordingly, the number of respondents who reported rarely or never using the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ is significantly lower than expected, while the numbers of respondents who reported rarely or never using the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ is significantly higher than expected.



**Figure 5.9** Graphical contingency table of residuals of overall reported frequency of use

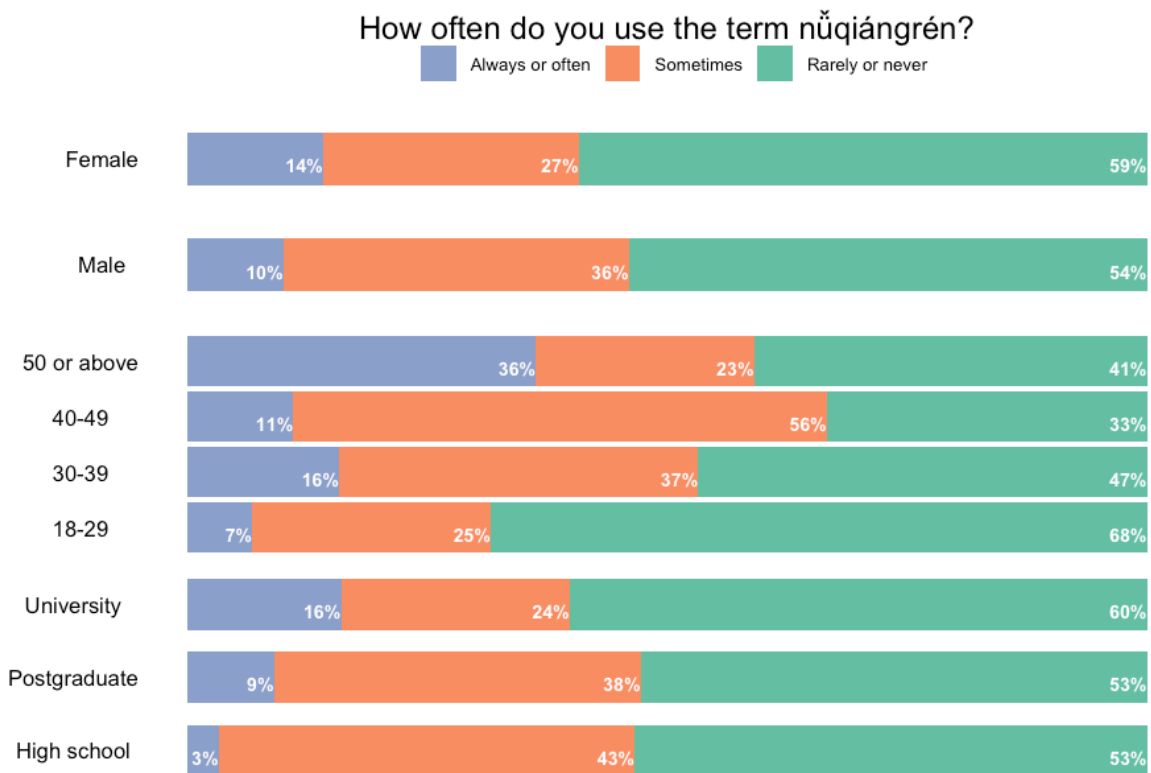
To assess the relationships between the three sociolinguistic variables (i.e., gender, age, and education levels) and individual usage of the three terms (i.e., 女强人 *nǚ-qíángǎn* ‘strong women,’ 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ and 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’), chi-square independence tests were performed. Table 5.3 shows that gender, age, and education levels were found to have varying levels of significant associations with the reported frequency of usage.

**Table 5.3** Chi-square analysis of reported frequency of using the three terms

|                          | Gender<br>( <i>df</i> = 2) |          |              | Age<br>( <i>df</i> = 6) |          |              | Education<br>( <i>df</i> = 4) |          |              |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|----------|--------------|-------------------------|----------|--------------|-------------------------------|----------|--------------|
|                          | $\chi^2$                   | <i>p</i> | significance | $\chi^2$                | <i>p</i> | significance | $\chi^2$                      | <i>p</i> | significance |
| <i>Strong women</i>      | 3.58                       | 0.17     | ns           | 31.15                   | 0.00     | ****         | 11.65                         | 0.02     | *            |
| <i>Female tough guys</i> | 7.21                       | 0.03     | *            | 15.74                   | 0.02     | *            | 7.42                          | 0.12     | ns           |
| <i>Leftover women</i>    | 6.68                       | 0.04     | *            | 18.17                   | 0.01     | **           | 2.74                          | 0.60     | ns           |

ns: not significant, \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.0001$

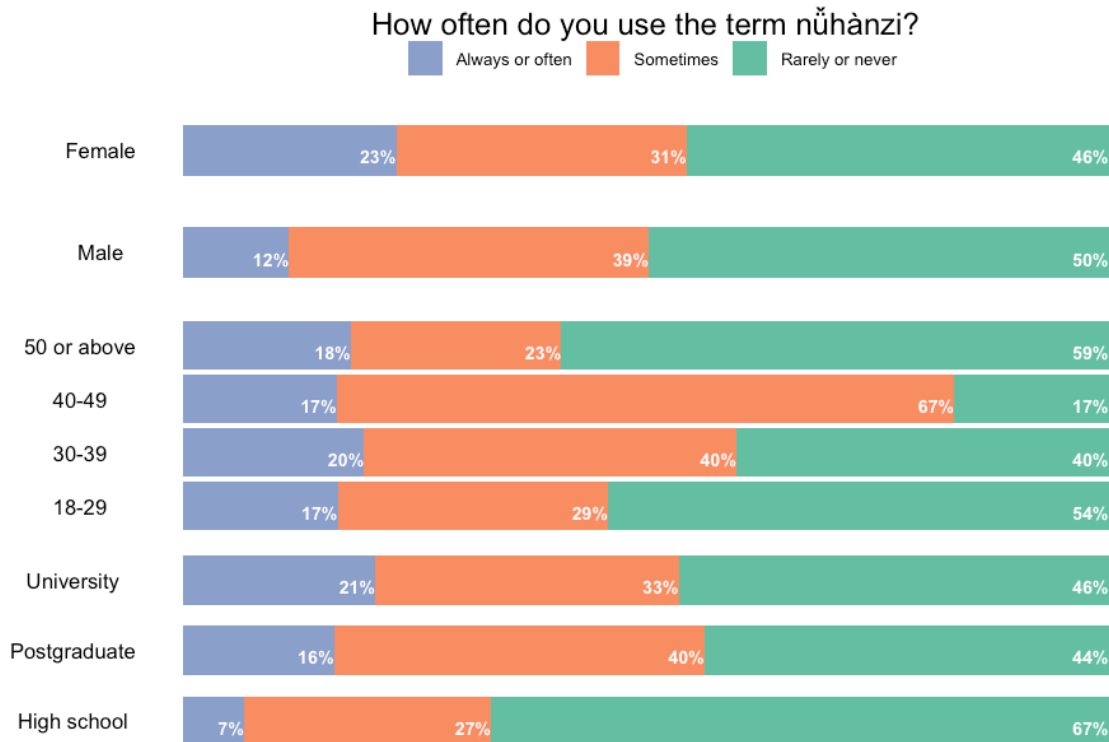
For the term 女强人 *nǚ-qíángrén* ‘strong women,’ there was no significant association between gender and reported individual usage ( $X^2(2, N = 308) = 3.58, p = 0.17$ ). However, there was a statistically significant relationship between age and reported individual usage ( $X^2(6, N = 308) = 31.35, p < 0.0001$ ). Specifically, respondents aged 50 or above were significantly more likely to report often or always using this term than other age groups, as shown in Figure 5.10. In addition, there was a statistically significant relationship between education and reported frequency of using the term ( $X^2(4, N = 308) = 11.65, p = 0.02$ ). University graduates were significantly more likely to report often or always using the term than the other two education-level groups.



**Figure 5.10** Reported frequency of using the term 女强人 *nǚ-qíángrén* ‘strong women’

Regarding the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ there was a significant relationship between gender and reported individual usage ( $X^2(2, N = 308) = 7.21, p = 0.03$ ).

Women were significantly more likely to report often or always use the term, as shown in Figure 5.11. There was also a statistically significant association between age and reported frequency of using this term ( $X^2(6, N = 308) = 15.74, p = 0.02$ ). Specifically, the 40-49 group was significantly more likely to report sometimes using this term than other age groups. Although there was a larger proportion of university graduates who reported that they at least often used the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ no significant association was detected between education levels and reported individual usage of the term ( $X^2(4, N = 308) = 7.42, p = 0.12$ ).



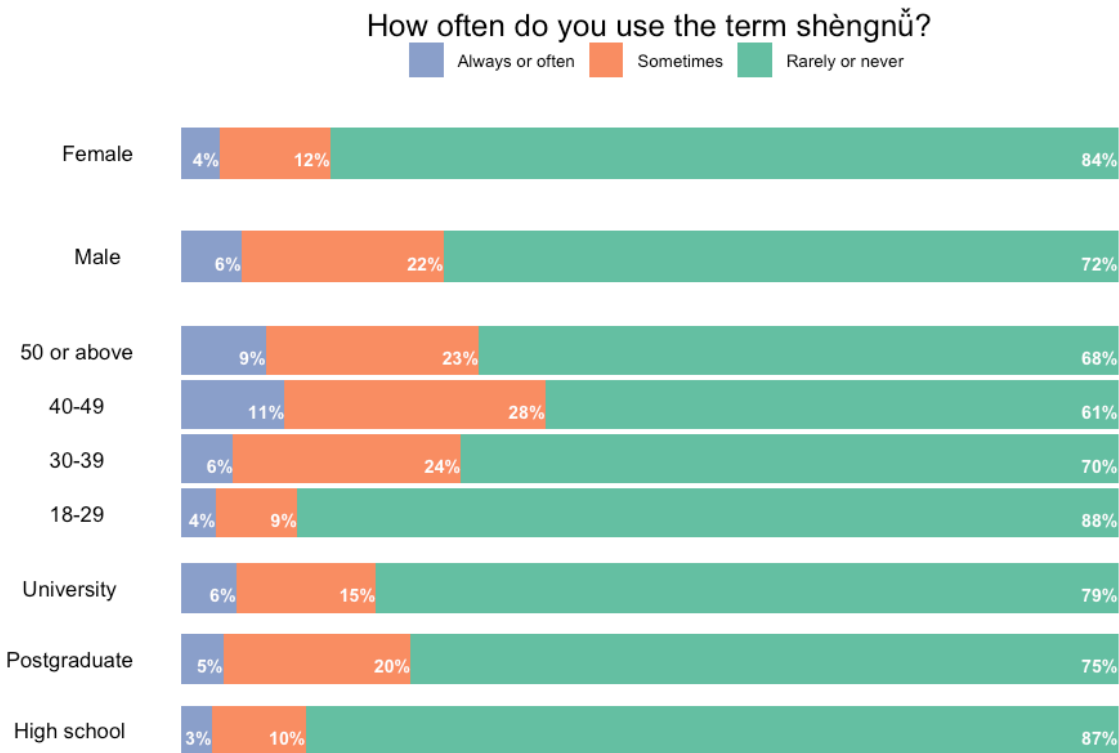
**Figure 5.11** Reported frequency of using the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’

Lastly, there was a statistically significant association between gender and reported frequency of using the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ ( $X^2(2, N = 308) = 6.68, p = 0.04$ ).

Women were significantly more likely than men to report rarely using the term, as shown in



Figure 5.12. There was also a statistically significant association between age and reported frequency of using 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ ( $X^2(6, N = 308) = 18.17, p = 0.01$ ). The 18-29 age group was significantly more likely to report rarely using the term. A smaller proportion of postgraduates (75%) reported rarely using the term than university graduates (79%) and high school graduates (87%), but there was no significant association between education levels and reported individual usage of the term ( $X^2(4, N = 308) = 2.74, p = 0.60$ ).



**Figure 5.12** Reported frequency of using the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’

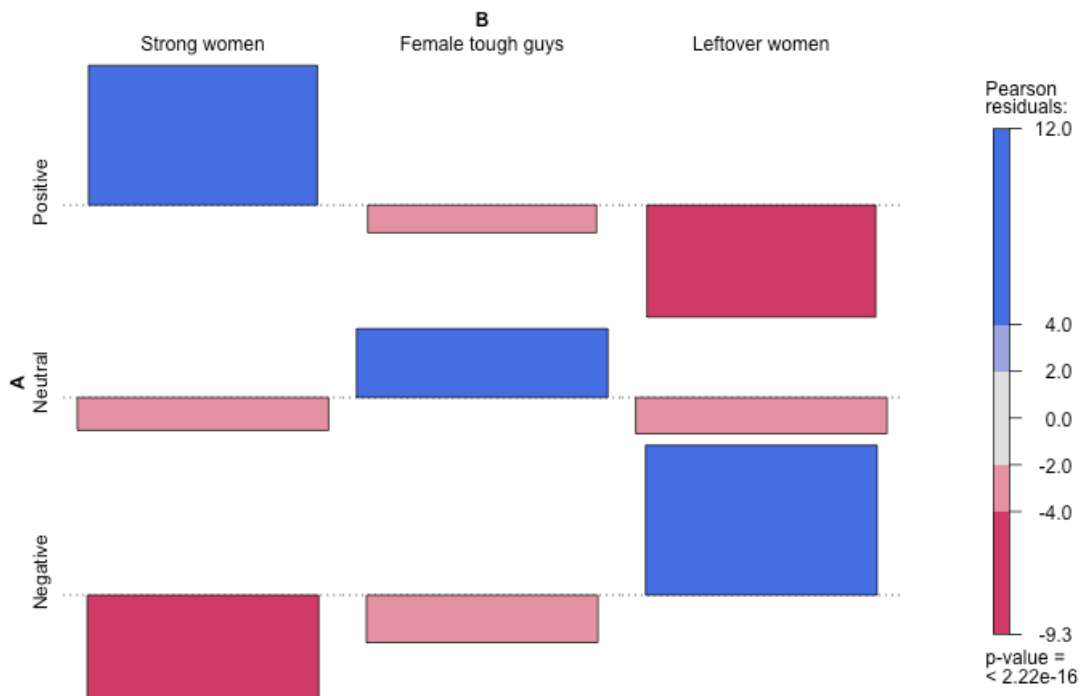
However, a significant two-way interaction between levels of education and age was predicted by an ordered logistic regression model ( $\chi^2(6, N = 308) = 13.22, p = 0.03$ ).

Respondents in the 18-29 group with university and postgraduate education were more likely to report that they rarely or never used the term and they were less likely to sometimes use the term, compared to other age groups with the same levels of education. The 40-49 and 50 or above

groups with a postgraduate education were more likely to report that they sometimes used the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ than other age groups with the same level of education. High school graduates aged 50 or above were more likely to report that they rarely or never used the term than their younger counterparts with the same level of education.

### 5.3.4 Reported affective valence

This question asks whether respondents think the three terms are positive, neutral, or negative. Reports on affective valence of the three terms were unevenly distributed in the sample ( $X^2(4, N = 924) = 512.76, p < 0.0001$ ). Overall, respondents were significantly more likely to rate the term 女强人 *nǚ-qíángǎn* ‘strong women’ positive, the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ neutral, and the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ negative, as shown in Figure 5.13.



**Figure 5.13** Graphical contingency table of residuals of overall reported affective valence

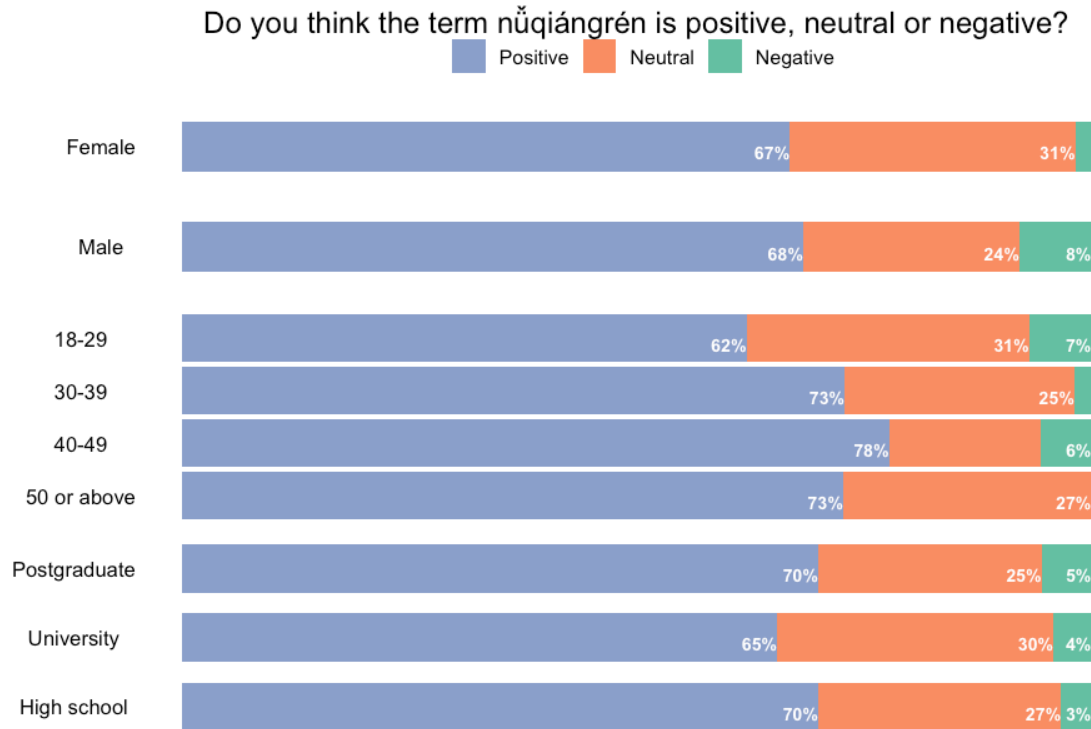
To gain a more nuanced understanding of whether there is an association between reported affective valence and sociolinguistic variables (i.e., gender, age, and education level), chi-square of independence tests were performed. Table 5.4 shows that there are varying significance levels of associations between the variables.

**Table 5.4** Chi-square analysis of reported affective valence of the three terms

|                          | Gender<br>( <i>df</i> = 2) |          |              | Age<br>( <i>df</i> = 6) |          |              | Education<br>( <i>df</i> = 4) |          |              |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|----------|--------------|-------------------------|----------|--------------|-------------------------------|----------|--------------|
|                          | $\chi^2$                   | <i>p</i> | significance | $\chi^2$                | <i>p</i> | significance | $\chi^2$                      | <i>p</i> | significance |
| <i>Strong women</i>      | 7.93                       | 0.02     | *            | 7.77                    | 0.26     | ns           | 1.40                          | 0.84     | ns           |
| <i>Female tough guys</i> | 3.73                       | 0.16     | ns           | 35.46                   | 0.00     | ****         | 19.41                         | 0.00     | ***          |
| <i>Leftover women</i>    | 9.70                       | 0.01     | **           | 77.36                   | 0.00     | ****         | 20.18                         | 0.00     | ***          |

ns: not significant, \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.0001$

First, a statistically significant association was found between gender and reported affective valence of the term 女强人 *nǚ-qíáng rén* ‘strong women’ ( $X^2(2, N = 308) = 7.93, p = 0.02$ ). Men were significantly more likely to report that they considered this term negative, whereas women were significantly more likely to report that they perceived this term as neutral. Although a smaller proportion of respondents aged 18-29 rated this expression as positive than other age groups, as shown in Figure 5.14, there was no significant relationship between age and reported affective valence of this term ( $X^2(6, N = 308) = 7.77, p = 0.26$ ). Likewise, education level was not significantly associated with reported sentimental perception of the term ( $X^2(4, N = 308) = 1.40, p = 0.84$ ).

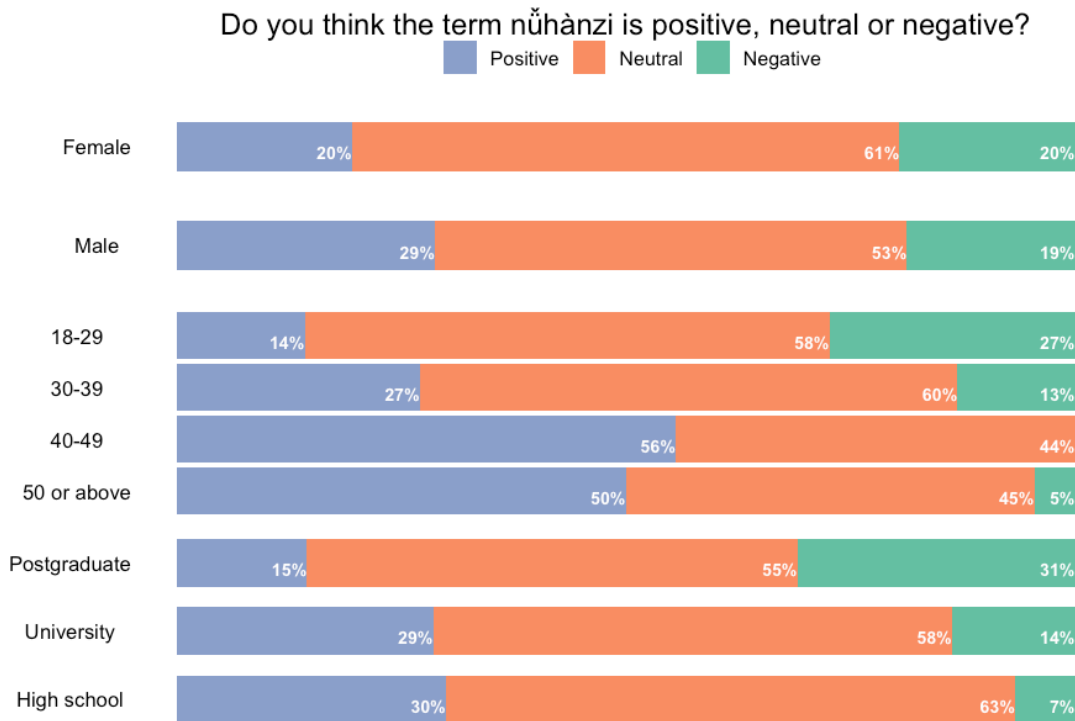


**Figure 5.14** Reported affective valence of the term 女强人 *nǚ-qíángrén* ‘strong women’

However, a significant two-way interaction between level of education and gender was predicted by an ordered logistic regression model ( $\chi^2(2, N = 308) = 8.80, p = 0.01$ ). Specifically, women with high school education as well as men with university and postgraduate education were more likely to report that 女强人 *nǚ-qíángrén* ‘strong women’ was a positive term, whereas women who received university and postgraduate education and men with a high school education were more likely to report that it was a neutral term.

Regarding the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ men were more likely to report that it was a positive term, as shown in Figure 5.15, but no significant relationship was found between gender and reported affective valence. However, there was a significant association between age and reported affective valence ( $X^2(6, N = 308) = 35.46, p < 0.0001$ ). Specifically, the 18-29 group was significantly more likely to perceive this term as negative, whereas the 40-

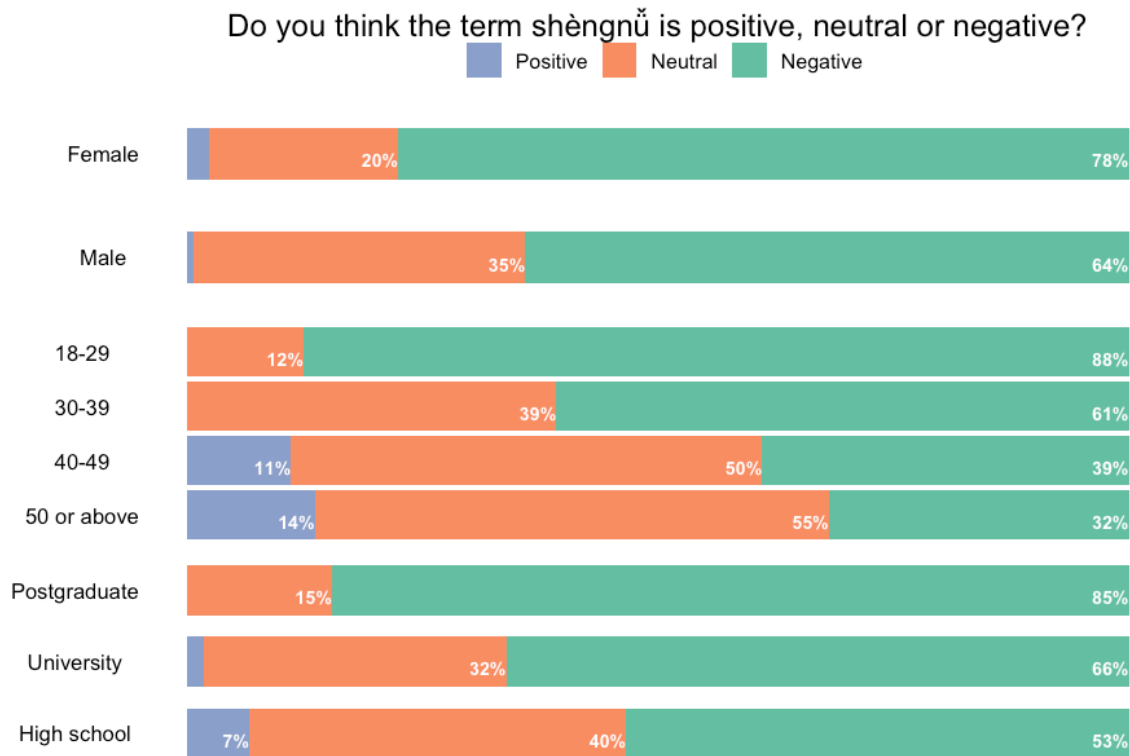
49 and 50 or above groups were significantly more likely to consider this term positive. In addition, education level was also found to have a statistically significant association with reported affective valence ( $X^2(4, N = 308) = 19.94, p < 0.001$ ). Postgraduates were significantly more likely to rate 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ as a negative term compared to university and high school graduates.



**Figure 5.15** Reported affective valence of the term 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’

In terms of the expression 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women,’ statistically significant associations were found between reported affective valence and gender ( $X^2(2, N = 308) = 9.70, p = 0.01$ ), age ( $X^2(6, N = 308) = 77.36, p < 0.0001$ ), and education level ( $X^2(4, N = 308) = 20.18, p < 0.001$ ). First, women were significantly more likely to consider it as a negative term, whereas men were significantly more likely to consider it neutral. Second, as shown in Figure 5.16, no respondents aged between 18 and 39 perceived the term positive, and the 18-29 group was significantly more likely to rate it as a negative term. In contrast, the 40-49 and 50 or above

groups were significantly more likely to consider this term neutral, and respondents aged 50 or above were significantly less likely to perceive it as a negative term. Regarding levels of education, no postgraduate found this term positive, and they were significantly more likely to perceive this term as negative, whereas high school graduates were significantly less likely to report that 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ was a negative term.



**Figure 5.16** Reported affective valence of the term 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’

In addition, a significant two-way interaction between level of education and age was predicted by an ordered logistic regression model ( $\chi^2(6, N = 308) = 21.65, p = 0.001$ ). The 18-29 group with all levels of education and the 30-39 group with postgraduate education were more likely to consider 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ as a negative term, while the 50 or above group with a university education, the 40 or above groups with a postgraduate education, as

well as the 30-39 group with a high school education were more likely to perceive this term neutral.

### 5.3.5 Subjective descriptions

The last three questions ask participants to use three to five words to describe women labeled 女强人 *nǚ-qíángrén* ‘strong women,’ 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ and 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ in terms of their appearance, personality, career, marriage, and family, respectively. Table 5.5 shows high-frequency words or phrases that are used to describe ‘strong women’ among the total 398 unduplicated descriptive terms. Some of the terms have similar meanings, such as 能力强 ‘strong ability,’ 工作能力强 ‘capable of work,’ 能干 ‘capable’ and 有能力 ‘have (strong) ability.’ Other variants that only appear once in the reported descriptions, such as 工作能力很强 ‘very capable of doing work’, are not included in these initial frequency counts. Nonetheless, this preliminary analysis indicates that seven aspects were mentioned more frequently than others, including personality, ability, career, position/income, independence, courage, and marriage.

**Table 5.5** High-frequency descriptive terms for 女强人 *nǚ-qíángrén* ‘strong women’

| Rank | Description | English translation            | Frequency |
|------|-------------|--------------------------------|-----------|
| 1    | (性格)强势      | strong personality             | 68        |
| 2    | 干练          | capable                        | 54        |
| 3    | (工作)能力强     | capable (of work)              | 47        |
| 4    | 独立          | independent                    | 40        |
| 5    | 能干          | capable                        | 19        |
| 6    | 雷厉风行        | act immediately and resolutely | 13        |
| 7    | 事业有成        | career successful              | 10        |
| 7    | 工作狂         | workaholic                     | 10        |
| 7    | 经济独立        | financially independent        | 10        |
| 10   | 坚强          | mentally strong                | 9         |
| 10   | 果断          | decisive                       | 9         |

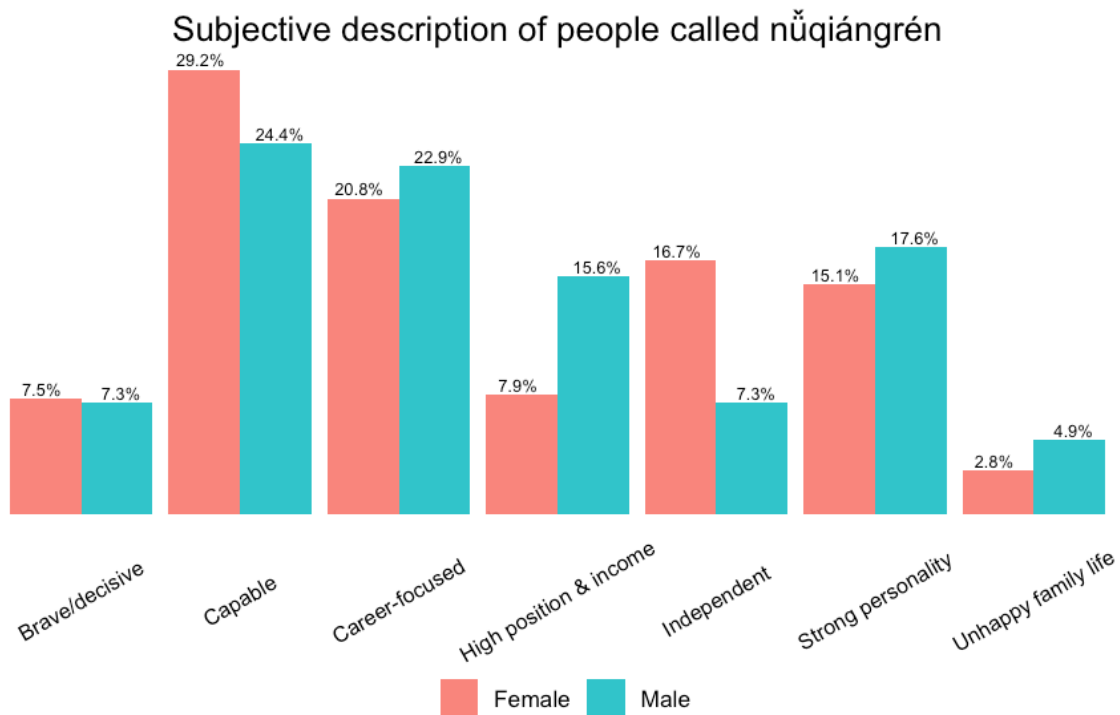
**Table 5.5**, continued

|    |      |                       |   |
|----|------|-----------------------|---|
| 12 | 事业成功 | career successful     | 8 |
| 12 | 有能力  | have (strong) ability | 8 |
| 12 | 高收入  | high income           | 8 |
| 15 | 白领   | white collar          | 7 |
| 15 | 事业心强 | devoted to career     | 7 |
| 15 | 成功   | successful            | 7 |
| 15 | 精明   | clever                | 7 |

Because there was a significant association between gender and reported affective valence of the term 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women,’ as reported in the previous section 5.3.4, subjective evaluations of these seven aspects were examined across gender groups. Unlike the initial frequency check, this examination included all variants with similar meanings that point to these seven aspects. As shown in Figure 5.17, the most seen descriptions for *nǚ-qióng rén* are “capable,” “career-focused,” and “strong character.” Although there are smaller differences in mention rates (< 5%) between women and men, a larger proportion of women described *nǚ-qióng rén* as “capable” (e.g., 有能力 ‘have ability,’ 干练 ‘intelligent and worldly-wise,’ and 工作能力好 ‘capable of doing work’), whereas a marginally greater proportion of men mentioned that *nǚ-qióng rén* are “career-focused” (e.g. 工作狂 ‘workaholic,’ 事业心强 ‘wholeheartedly focus on career,’ 事业型 ‘professional women,’ and 专注于事业 ‘career-focused’) and that *nǚ-qióng rén* have “strong character” (e.g., 性格强势 ‘strong personality,’ 强硬 ‘toughness,’ 个性强 ‘marked individuality,’ and 性格刚毅 ‘steady and strong-willed character’). Larger discrepancies (> 5%) were found when women and men described *nǚ-qióng rén* in terms of their independence, position, and income. Women were more likely to indicate that *nǚ-qióng rén* are “independent” (e.g., 经济独立 ‘financially independent,’ 自主/有主见 ‘have their own ideas’), whereas men were more likely to indicate that *nǚ-qióng rén* have a



“high position” and earn a “high income” (e.g., 女上司 ‘female boss,’ 女高管 ‘female superior,’ 女老板 ‘female business owner,’ 富有 ‘rich,’ and 年薪 50 万 ‘500k annual income’). Both men and women have similar mention rates of “brave” and “decisive” (e.g., 果断 ‘decisive,’ 勇敢 ‘brave,’ 果敢 ‘courageous and resolute’), but men were more likely to mention that *nǚ-qióng rén* are either single or they do not have a happy marriage life, indicated by phrases such as 未婚 ‘single,’ 不婚不育 ‘no marriage no kids,’ 一心工作无暇顾及家庭 ‘too busy with work to take care of family,’ 绝大多数女强人婚姻都不幸 ‘most *nǚ-qióng rén* have unfortunate marriages.’



**Figure 5.17** Subjective descriptions of women labeled 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women’ by gender

Among the unduplicated 406 descriptions of women labeled 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ 20 descriptive terms were more frequently mentioned than others, as seen in Table 5.6. This initial frequency check does not include all lexical variations with similar meanings, but it provides a brief glimpse at the most perceived characteristics of women called ‘female

tough guys,’ which were categorized into seven groups: independence, easygoing character, physical strength, courage, capability, strong personality, and masculinity.

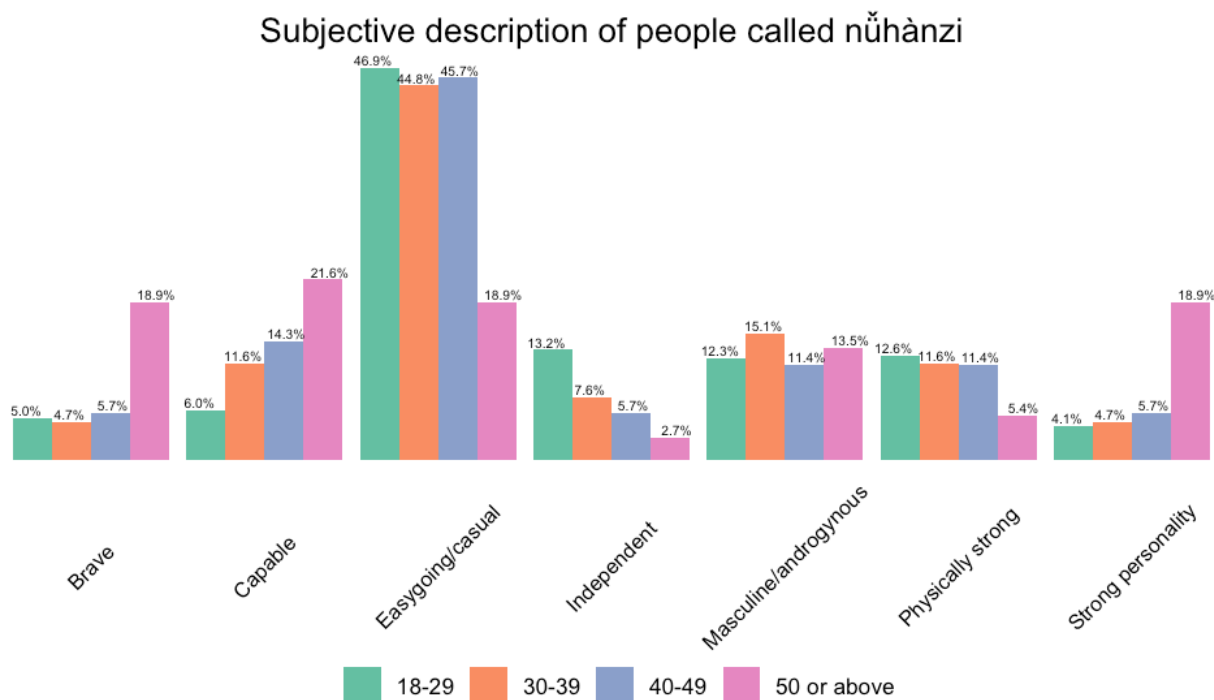
**Table 5.6** High-frequency descriptive terms for 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’

| Rank | Description | English translation                | Frequency |
|------|-------------|------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1    | 独立          | independent                        | 46        |
| 2    | 大大咧咧        | casual in manner                   | 39        |
| 3    | 不拘小节        | not care about small things        | 23        |
| 4    | 开朗          | easygoing and optimistic           | 21        |
| 5    | 力气大         | physically strong                  | 18        |
| 6    | 坚强          | mentally strong                    | 17        |
| 8    | 外向          | extroverted                        | 14        |
| 8    | 直爽          | candid                             | 14        |
| 9    | 能干          | capable                            | 12        |
| 10   | 豪爽          | straightforward and forthright     | 11        |
| 12   | 强壮          | physically strong                  | 9         |
| 12   | 能力强         | strong ability                     | 9         |
| 14   | 性格开朗        | easygoing and optimistic character | 8         |
| 14   | 勇敢          | brave                              | 8         |
| 15   | 中性          | androgynous                        | 7         |
| 19   | 强势          | strong character                   | 6         |
| 19   | 活泼          | lively                             | 6         |
| 19   | 大方          | generous                           | 6         |
| 19   | 风风火火        | hustling and bustling              | 6         |
| 20   | 男性化         | masculine                          | 5         |

As indicated in the previous section 5.3.4, there was a statistically significant association between age and reported affective valence. To see how different age groups perceive women labeled 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ differently, all reported descriptive terms were examined across age groups. In the examination, all lexical variants pointing to these seven categories were manually annotated and counted. As shown in Figure 5.18, the most perceivable characteristics of ‘female tough guys’ for the three younger age groups is their easygoing or casual character (e.g., 大大咧咧 ‘casual in manner,’ 开朗 ‘easygoing and optimistic,’ 随性

‘casual,’ 善于社交 ‘social,’ and 性格好 ‘good personality’). Respondents in 50 or above age group were more likely to indicate that *nǚ-hànzi* are capable (e.g., 比较能干 ‘comparatively capable,’ 无所不能 ‘omnipotent,’ and 干活干在前面 ‘take initiative to do work’), the mention rate of which increases with age. By contrast, the mention rates of *nǚ-hànzi* being “independent” (e.g., 独立 ‘independent,’ 自强自立 ‘strive to be stronger and self-supporting,’ and 自力更生 ‘self-reliant’) shows an opposite trend, with the youngest age group mentioning this term the most and the oldest age group mentioning it the least. In addition, all age groups have a similar proportion of describing *nǚ-hànzi* as “masculine” or “androgynous,” using different types of variations. For example, the 18-29 age group used terms such as the English word “man,” 爷们 ‘(colloquial address terms of) men,’ 没有女人味 ‘not feminine,’ and 偏中性 ‘relatively androgynous’. The 30-39 and 40-49 age groups described *nǚ-hànzi* as 外貌像男生 ‘masculine appearance’, 穿着男性化 ‘masculine clothing style’, and 做与男人一样的事情 ‘do men’s jobs.’ The 50 or above age group mentioned that *nǚ-hànzi* are 比男人还男人 ‘more masculine than men,’ 和一般的女同志不一样 ‘different than other female comrades,’ and 举止男性化 ‘masculine behavior.’ Additionally, all age groups perceive women called *nǚ-hànzi* as physically strong (e.g., 力气大 ‘larger physical strength,’ 强壮 ‘sturdy build,’ 体力好 ‘full of physical strength,’ and 虎背熊腰 ‘powerful build (lit. tiger-back-bear-waist)’), with the oldest age group having a lower mention rate. Lastly, for the perceived characteristics of “brave” and “strong personality,” the three younger age groups have similar mention rates, which are lower than those of other perceived aspects within groups, whereas their older counterpart has a larger proportion of descriptions in the “brave” category (e.g., 不怕小偷 ‘not afraid of thieves,’ 不怕流氓 ‘not afraid of hooligans,’ 不胆怯 ‘courageous,’ 在公共场所有的人有困难或者有坏人她主

动冲到前 ‘she takes the initiative to deal with difficulties or bad people in public’) as well as in the “strong personality” category (e.g., 泼辣 ‘fierce and tough,’ 比较凶悍的女人 ‘ferocious women,’ and 豪横 ‘despotic and bullying’).



**Figure 5.18** Subjective descriptions of women labeled 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ by age

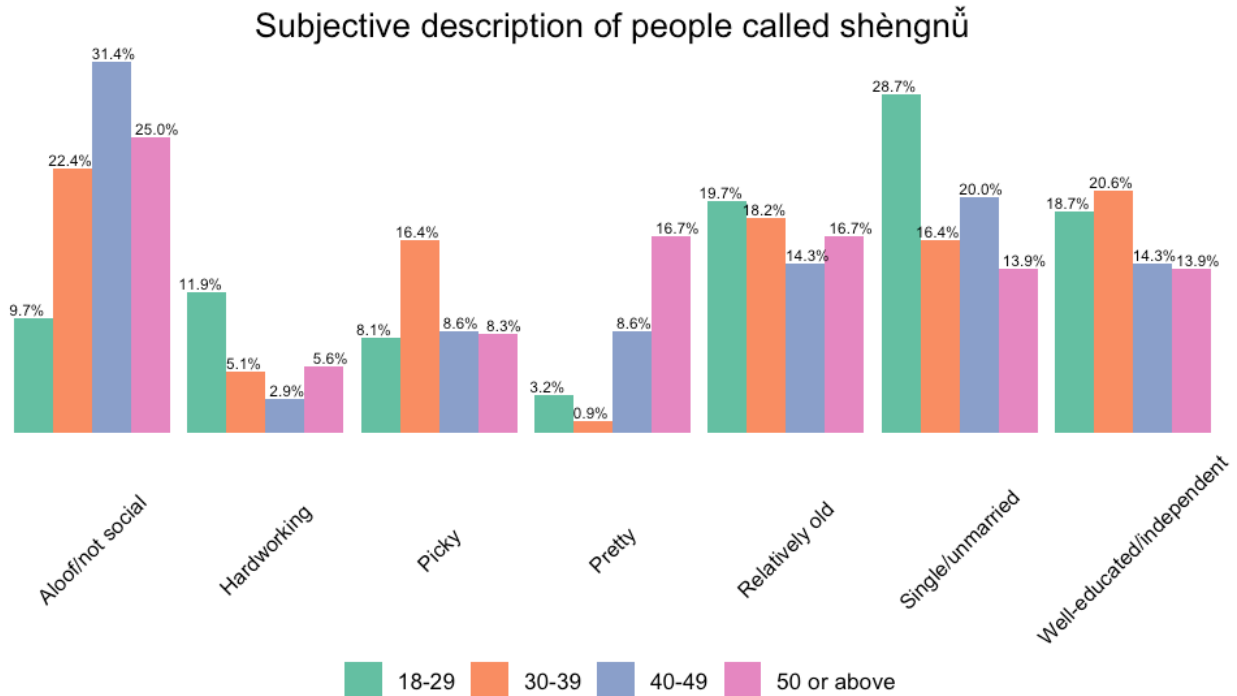
A total of 461 descriptive terms were collected for the perception of women who are labeled 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women.’ Table 5.7 shows the top 20 terms used for subjective descriptions where many expressions indicate similar meanings. This preliminary frequency analysis clarified the aspects that are more likely to be perceived by respondents. These perceived aspects of the so-called ‘leftover women’ include age, marriage status, education, appearance, career, personality, and criteria for future partners.

**Table 5.7** High-frequency descriptive terms for 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’

| Rank | Description | English translation     | Frequency |
|------|-------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| 1    | 大龄          | relatively old          | 47        |
| 2    | 未婚          | unmarried               | 36        |
| 3    | 独立          | independent             | 26        |
| 4    | 单身          | single                  | 24        |
| 5    | 年龄大         | older age               | 15        |
| 6    | 挑剔          | picky                   | 13        |
| 7    | 高学历         | well-educated           | 9         |
| 9    | 自由          | free                    | 8         |
| 9    | 内向          | introverted             | 8         |
| 10   | 眼光高         | high standard (for men) | 7         |
| 12   | 长相一般        | average appearance      | 6         |
| 12   | 能力强         | strong ability          | 6         |
| 15   | 漂亮          | pretty                  | 5         |
| 15   | 大龄未婚        | older age and unmarried | 5         |
| 15   | 要求高         | high standard (for men) | 5         |
| 20   | 学历高         | highly educated         | 4         |
| 20   | 高收入         | high income             | 4         |
| 20   | 不将就         | unyielding              | 4         |
| 20   | 年龄偏大        | relatively old          | 4         |
| 20   | 孤僻          | unsociable and asocial  | 4         |

In the previous section 5.3.4, all three sociolinguistic variables were found to be significantly associated with the reported affective valence. Because the significance level of the relationship between age and reported affective valence is higher than the other two, descriptive terms were manually examined across age groups to understand how different age groups differently perceive women referred to as ‘leftover women’ differently. Figure 5.19 shows the proportion data across four age groups in terms of the seven most noticeable perception categories. It is evident that most categories have a larger discrepancy (> 6%) across age groups except for the description of “relatively old,” indicated by the expressions such as 大龄, 年龄大, 年纪大, 岁数大, and 高龄. More substantial divergence of mention rates across age groups was

found in the other six categories. First, respondents from the older generation (40 or above) were more likely to mention that *shèngnǚ* have “personality issues” (e.g., 性格有问题 ‘problematic personality,’ 性格差 ‘bad personality,’ 孤僻 ‘unsociable and eccentric,’ 高傲 ‘haughty,’ 冷淡 ‘aloof,’ 不懂与人分享 ‘do not know how to share,’ and 脾气不好 ‘ill-tempered’), whereas the younger generation (18-39) was more likely to mention that *shèngnǚ* are “well-educated” (e.g., 高学历 ‘received higher education,’ 优秀 ‘outstanding,’ 高知 ‘highly intelligent,’ 优质 ‘good quality,’ and 素质高 ‘high quality’) and ‘independent’ (e.g., 独立 ‘independent,’ and 要强 ‘eager to outdo others’). Second, the youngest age group described *shèngnǚ* as “single or unmarried” (e.g., 未婚 ‘unmarried,’ 嫁不出 ‘unable to get married,’ 不婚主义 ‘stay unmarried,’ and 没有情感生活 ‘no love life’) and “hardworking” (e.g., 加班 ‘work overtime,’ 奋斗 ‘striving,’ 工作努力 ‘work hard,’ 有事业心 ‘focused on career’) more frequently than their older counterparts, while respondents from the 30-39 age group were more likely to indicate that *shèngnǚ* are “picky” about their future partners (e.g., 眼光挑剔 ‘high expectations and picky,’ 标准高 ‘high standard,’ and 不妥协 ‘uncompromising’). Lastly, the largest dissimilarity (15.8%) was found in terms of the perceived appearance of *shèngnǚ*. The older generation was more likely to perceive *shèngnǚ* as “pretty” (e.g., 美貌 ‘beautiful appearance,’ 美丽 ‘beautiful,’ 美女 ‘beauty,’ and 外貌比较好 ‘better appearance’), whereas the younger generation not only had a lower tendency of similar perceptions, but also had the opposite evaluations, indicated by the expressions such as 长相一般 ‘average appearance,’ 外貌不出众 ‘mediocre appearance,’ 低颜值 ‘low-level of appearance,’ and 丑 ‘ugly.’



**Figure 5.19** Subjective descriptions of women labeled 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ by age

To summarize, the qualitative and quantitative analyses of subjective descriptions show that women labeled with these terms are perceived differently across gender or age groups. First, the overall subjective perception of *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women’ suggests that both gender groups view the so-called ‘strong women’ as capable, career-focused, tough, and courageous; however, men paid more attention to these women’s higher social status and “incomplete/unfortunate” family life, while women took more notice of these women’s self-sufficiency. Second, respondents aged 18 to 49 were more likely to notice the “positive” character of women called *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys,’ but respondents aged 50 or above paid more attention to their capability, courage, and “strong” personality. Lastly, different generations perceive different aspects of women labeled *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women,’ with older generations paying more attention to their “bad” personality and “good” appearance, and younger generation noticing more of their “higher” education, “unmarried” status, and “hardworking” spirit. All

generations seem to perceive these women as “relatively old,” but people aged 30-39 took more notice of their perceived “high standards” in spouse selection.

## 5.4 Discussion

The survey results demonstrate that sociolinguistic factors such as gender, education, and age can individually or jointly have a statistically moderate to a significant effect on encounters, usages, and affective valences of these gendered terms as well as social perceptions of women labeled with these terms. What accounts for these findings? In this section, I will discuss how these factors reveal the interplay between language use and social reality concerning the gender labeling practice.

### 5.4.1 Gender and social labeling

The survey findings show that gender is significantly associated with the gender labeling of successful women in terms of frequency of encountering, frequency of usage, the affective valence of the terms, and social perceptions of women labeled with these terms. First, compared to men, women were significantly more likely to report that they have always or often heard of the labels ‘strong women’ and ‘female tough guys.’ Second, men were significantly more likely than their female counterparts to report that they use the label ‘leftover women’ at least sometimes. Third, men and women showed opposite patterns in rating the affective valence of the labels ‘strong women’ and ‘leftover women’. More specifically, men were significantly more likely to perceive ‘strong women’ as a negative term, whereas women tended to think of it as a neutral term. Women were significantly more likely to rate ‘leftover women’ a negative term, while men tended to perceive it as neutral. Lastly, in terms of the subjective evaluations of women labeled ‘strong women,’ more men than women mentioned their social status and family life, but more women than men mentioned their financial independence.



How do we understand the first finding that women were significantly more likely to report hearing or seeing the labels ‘strong women’ and ‘female tough guy’ than men? One obvious possibility is these terms are more likely to be used when and where women are around, whether the women themselves or other women were subject to the labeling. Similarly, women may be more likely to engage with media discourses that are particularly concerned with women and their marital decisions, especially when their decision to remain unmarried is newsworthy. Another possibility is that women may pay greater attention than men to the social labeling of successful women, and thus they are more likely to remember and report encountering these terms. In any case, the finding suggests women are more likely to be exposed to the problematization of singledom. It is true that both labels describe women demonstrating capability, independence, and leadership, highlighting the “strong” ability of these women, or comparing them with “tough” men. However, these qualities are socially perceived as masculine in the public sphere. As such they send the message to women that you cannot be capable and feminine at the same time, which creates challenges for women in pursuing leadership roles (Billing & Alvesson 2000). Psychologists have also shown that when men and women have similar leadership and capability, women are considered less favorably than men in the workplace (e.g., Eagly & Karau 2002). In contemporary China, barriers to successful hiring and promoting still prevail among women. One example is that some job postings specified “men only” or “men preferred,” discriminating against women in employment (Stauffer 2018). Other job advertisements require women to have certain physical traits (e.g., weight, height, voice, appearance), indicating a great extent of sexually objectifying women (Stauffer 2018). These social and organizational obstacles aggravate existing gender inequality and make women more aware of the social labeling of successful women.

Women's disadvantages in pursuing career goals and achieving self-realization seem to be decreasing as their education level increases. However, highly educated professional women are classified into a more derogatory group – 'leftover women' – as long as they have not fulfilled their socially preferred roles as wives and mothers. This prevalent notion of a fixed female identity as a wife and a mother neglects all other aspects of a woman as an autonomous individual in a male-dominating society. The patriarchal perspective is well attested in the finding that men were significantly more likely than women to use the term 'leftover women.' Recall that a new generation of Chinese women are striving for gender equality and voicing their arising gender awareness on social media, criticizing the pejorative label 'leftover women,' and creating homophones of *shèngnǚ* to reclaim their self-governing identity (see Chapter IV). However, the social reality that men are more likely to label well-educated capable women seems to display a male backlash against feminists' journey of awakening. Although it was found in Chapter IV that some users self-identified as men support feminism on social media, the social hurdles for women to achieve gender egalitarianism are yet to be overcome.

The male perspective is further manifested in the substantial divergence between men and women in terms of the affective valence of 'strong women' and 'leftover women.' Men were significantly more likely to perceive 'strong women' as a negative term and 'leftover women' as a neutral term, whereas women significantly tend to consider 'strong women' neutral and 'leftover women' negative. The disagreement further continues in the subjective evaluations on 'strong women' between women and men. Women paid more attention to these women's self-determination and economic independence, while men tended to emphasize that these women have a high social status and high income but an "incomplete" family. These findings shed explanatory light on the underlying gender ideologies across gender groups. That 'strong

women' was more likely to be perceived as a neutral term for women and a negative term for men does not suggest that men rather than women realize that it is a sexist term but reveals male and female viewpoints of the ideal womanhood. From a man's perspective, women's focus on their careers may increase their financial independence and social status, but they at the same time have lost their opportunity to pursue conjugal happiness. Following this thinking, career women who do not have marriages are perceived as less happy women who live an isolated and miserable life no matter how wealthy they are. In other words, the positive association between getting married and being happy for women still prevails among Chinese men. Women, on the other hand, may understand more about some successful women's predicament in which they have to navigate between being a professional woman and a perfect mother and thus show their positive evaluation or admiration of 'strong women' who can earn self-autonomy without judging their family life as much as men. Compared to men, women also showed more understanding of women facing the dilemma of choosing between career development and family commitment, respecting women who do not get married, and thus perceiving 'leftover women' as a negative label.

#### 5.4.2 Age and social labeling

The findings show that age is a key factor impacting the usage and affective valence of the labels as well as the subjective evaluations of women labeled with these terms. First, compared to the younger generation, the older generation was significantly more likely to report that they use the label 'strong women.' Second, the older generation was significantly more likely to perceive 'female tough guys' as a positive term and 'leftover women' as a neutral term compared to their younger counterparts. Third, the older generation and the younger generation held contrasting attitudes toward women labeled 'female tough guys' and 'leftover women.'

More people from the older generation mentioned the perceived strong personality of the so-called ‘female tough guys’ and the perceived personality issues of the so-called ‘leftover women.’ In contrast to this negative view, more people from the younger generation tended to associate women labeled with these two terms with positive characteristics.

One of the major findings is that the term ‘strong women’ was reported significantly more likely to be used by the older generation than the younger generation. It is evident that the older generation aged 50 and above were the pillar of the newly opened society and the freshly reformed market economy in the 1980s when the expression ‘strong women’ was first employed to praise independent capable women for their ability to contribute to economic growth in the official mainstream media (see Chapter III). It is possible that some of the appreciation for strong and capable women can be traced back to their collective memory during the Cultural Revolution when the term *tiě-gūniang* 铁姑娘 ‘iron girl’ was used in state media to mobilize women’s labor force. This socio-historical context and the current finding suggest that the official media language use has an enduring impact on ordinary language use among people who lived through the public campaign of the reform era. Relying on effective linguistic labeling, official gender ideology is not only part of the collective memory of entire generations, but it also shapes public opinions of and attitudes toward successful women. The one-sided narratives of how these women sacrificed their marriage and family life for their career ambitions and achievements in mainstream media had a strong impact on how successful women were perceived in the public eye. These successful women may not be labeled with the same term ‘strong women’ in the new era, but they are continuously faced with neological social labeling such as ‘female tough guys’ and ‘leftover women.’ This is because the biased gender views that women are expected to be gentle, fragile, less ambitious, and less capable than men are still prevalent in today’s China, and

the patriarchal ideology conveyed by the mainstream media is responsible for this persistent sexist perspective.

There seems to be a contradiction in terms of the results of reported affective valence and subjective evaluations of women labeled ‘female tough guy’ and ‘leftover women’ across different age groups. On the one hand, the older generation was significantly more likely to think that ‘female tough guy’ is a positive term and ‘leftover women’ is a neutral term compared to their younger counterparts. On the other hand, more people from the older generation negatively evaluated women labeled ‘female tough guys’ as having a strong personality (e.g., “aggressive” and “fierce”) and women labeled ‘leftover women’ as being “picky” or having a “problematic personality,” whereas the younger generation paid more attention to the positive traits of women labeled with these terms such as independence and assiduousness. The apparent contradiction between the meaning of these gendered labels and the social evaluations of women labeled with the terms exactly exhibits how different levels of gender awareness reflect varying attitudes toward sexist language use. A lack of awareness of gendered labeling endorses a more tolerant attitude toward linguistic sexism, which not only allows sexist labeling of women but also turns a blind eye to the existing structural sexism against women. The social practice of labeling women as ‘guys’ is a linguistic reassignment of women’s gender. Considering this reassignment as positive suggests the belief that women showing supposedly masculine characteristics deserve praise, corroborating the ideological tenets embedded in state-sanctioned gender discourse as shown in Chapter III. In this sense, these findings of generational differences provide circumstantial evidence that top-down gender ideology has penetrating power that filters into the minds of masses of Chinese people, especially among the older generation.

Meanwhile, these generational discrepancies indicate a perceptible change in terms of the viewpoints on marriage and idealized femininity in Chinese society. Women had a long history of institutional discrimination and social oppression when an arbitrary and compulsory marriage system prevailed in feudalist China (Xu & Whyte 1990; Luo & Hao 2007). Since the promulgation of the New Marriage Law in 1950, the number of arranged and contracted marriages has been greatly reduced, making free-choice marriages possible for Chinese women (Chen 1985). Despite the shift away from traditional arranged marriages and the increasing freedom of spouse choice, a case study found that 60% of women were introduced to their husbands between 1977 and 1987 through informal matchmaking, whereby most “matchmakers” were their peers instead of their parents (Xu & Whyte 1990). These women were found more satisfied with their marriage than those in traditional arranged marriages (Xu & Whyte 1990), but the data suggests that women from previous generations might still have faced barriers for freely seeking their ideal husbands, having been restricted by traditional gender roles that women are not expected to initiate a romantic relationship but to have matchmakers who help them along the path to embark on their journey of marriage at a marriageable age. The matchmaking culture had been passed down from generation to generation in China until well-educated urban millennial women stopped showing interest in conventional marriages or refused to settle for mediocre men, leaving their parents and people from older generations bewildered about their unconventional choices. In not following the social scripts observed by their parent generation who internalized patriarchal ideologies, these women are faced with vitriolic remarks made by the older generation blaming them for being single, characterizing them as “having personality problems,” “being unsocial,” or “too picky in the marriage market.” Although such comments are also seen among the younger generation in the survey finding, more young people than their

older counterparts were able to recognize these women's efforts for education attainment, professional development, and personal autonomy.

In addition to the negative descriptions of women labeled 'leftovers,' what the older generation dislikes about women labeled 'female tough guy' mirrors the ideal womanhood defined by patriarchal orders and heteronormativity. Those who hold this view of womanhood frown at women who behave "unfemininely" and "domineering". However, in the eye of the younger generation, these women's cheerful dispositions and sociable characters are the most perceivable features, suggesting nascent gender diversities and a higher acceptance of diverse performative acts among the new generation of Chinese people.

#### 5.4.3 Level of education and social labeling

The survey findings show that education levels are associated with the social labeling of successful women in China, although the significance levels were lower than that of gender and age. First, survey participants with higher education levels were significantly more likely to encounter the labels 'leftover women' and 'female tough guys,' and they were also more likely to consider these two terms negative. Second, respondents with a college degree were significantly more likely to use the term 'strong women' than those with a high school degree. Third, levels of education were also found to interact with age to have an impact on usage frequency and affective valence of the labels. Specifically, younger people who received postgraduate education were significantly less likely to use the term 'leftover women' and significantly more likely to consider this term negative.

These findings are not surprising. The three terms targeted in the survey are all used to describe competent professional women, and higher education is considered important to develop competencies (e.g., Velasco et al. 2014). Higher education has long been considered a

venue for preparing students for professional capability since the notion of “education for capability” was publicized in the 1980’s capability movement by the Royal Society of Arts in London (RSA 1981; Stephenson 1998). In the context of post-reform China, women with higher education levels were found to have a lower unemployment rate in urban areas (Wu & Zhou 2015). This association by no means indicates the “hierarchical order of higher education entails higher competencies” (Massing & Schneider 2017: 1) but suggests that people who received higher education may have more opportunities to be exposed to professional fields where well-educated, capable, and competent women work, the demographic group of which is often labeled ‘leftover women’ and ‘female tough guys.’ Although the whole society still holds a patriarchal view that these women do not conform to stereotypical gender roles or traditional gender norms, the survey responses from younger people with higher education levels suggest a generational change in perceiving successful women in today’s China, reflected in their recognition of the negativity of these linguistic labels and their low frequency of using these terms.

That the higher frequency of using ‘strong women’ is found among university graduates than high-school graduates seems to contradict the explanation in the previous paragraph. However, this finding in return illustrates the neutralization and de-problematization of using the problematic sexist term ‘strong women’ as a commendation in mainstream media since the 1980s. As reported by survey participants, the Mass Media including news, TV shows, and movies were selected as the most common venues for encountering this term. Without noting that this term has a patriarchal indication that strong people are supposed to be men because the term 男强人 *nán-qiáng rén* ‘strong men’ does not exist in the Chinese lexicon, the general public has long been exposed to the institutionalized gendered discourse through enduring language use in the mass media. Due to the constant effort made by state-censored media, grassroots language



users not only internalized patriarchal gender ideologies but also practice linguistic sexism even among those who received higher education in their daily life. This finding suggests that education levels may have an ineluctable association with social labeling, but top-down hierarchical gender politics seems to be more influential in shaping public opinions and thus make this association far more complex.

### 5.5 Summary

Using a sociolinguistic survey, this chapter explores grassroots language users' encounters and usages of gender labels ('strong women,' 'female tough guys,' and 'leftover women'), their metalinguistic awareness of evaluating the semantic affective valence of these terms, and their perceptions of women labeled with these terms. Statistical analysis and qualitative analysis were conducted to analyze the sociolinguistic data. The findings show that sociolinguistic variables including gender, age, and level of education may individually or jointly have an impact on the social labeling of successful women in the current Chinese context, from which the intersectionality of these factors, the complexity of social realities, and the socio-historical background of social changes are discussed.

## CHAPTER VI

### LABELS WOMEN GIVE MEN

#### 6.1 Social labeling and gender-linked derogatory terms

Social labeling practices provide insights into gender practices, which include what, how, and when we call one another and how we identify ourselves and others. To quote McConnell-Ginet's (2003: 69), "social labeling practices offer a window on the construction of gendered identities and social relations in social practice." Gendered social labeling relies on aggregate participation of people who engage in some mutual endeavor, which is known as "Community of Practice" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1999; Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999). In communities of practice, members do not only share values and interests but also share resources, such as linguistic repertoires that serve various social purposes. Led by mutual engagement, the joint enterprise of members of a community of practice produces memberships including gender identity. As a global social category, gender is not only constructed through local speech communities but also through virtual communities created by new media technologies.

Since Lakoff's (1975) seminal work *Language and Woman's Place*, there have been numerous studies of derogatory terms used to label women (e.g., Felmlee et al. 2020; Grossman & Tucker 1997; Jing-Schmidt & Peng 2018; Mavin 2008). Many of these studies found that the gendered labels often contain sexual allusions including gendered insults and obscenity. Only a few studies explored derogatory terms used by women to refer to men (e.g., Baker 1975; Risch 1987; James 1998). Risch (1987) interviewed forty-four female university students about derogatory terms they and their friends use to refer to men and recorded the frequency of usage. Fifty variant terms emerged from the naturally occurring interview data, which were grouped

into eight categories: birth (e.g., *son of a bitch*), ass (e.g., *asshole*), head (e.g., *jockhead*), dick (e.g., *prick*), boys (e.g., *mama's boy*), animal (e.g., *stud*), meat (e.g., *piece of meat*), and other (*whore, slut*). Interestingly, except for the “meat” category for which the respondents reported a similar number of uses to that of their friends’ uses, all other categories had a higher frequency of self-reported usage than reported friends’ usage. The total frequency of terms they reported using was also significantly higher than the total frequency of terms their friends used. The results suggest that college-age females use derogatory names for males and are not shy about doing so. Risch’s research challenges the sociolinguistic assumption that women are more likely to use standard speech form than men and suggests that the standard and non-standard variation might be a difference between public versus private discourses, not so much as a difference in speech patterns between men versus women.

James (1998) studied gender-linked derogatory terms in English for both men and women. Among the observed seven categories of male-referential terms, James found that the category of “sexual behavior offensive to women” was used primarily by women to indicate a man who is a sexual predator, a man with only sex on his mind, or a man who cheats on his significant other. Female perspectives are also reflected in some demeaning terms, including terms for unattractive or fat men (e.g., *doughboy, crater face*), terms for attractive men (e.g., *hotty, hunk*), and a term for “worthless man, no use other than sex” (e.g., *sperm donor*). According to James (1998: 409), although these terms show the way women evaluate men in terms of men’s conformity to women’s needs, “female-biased terms for men are unable to act as sanctions on male behavior in the way that male-biased terms for women can act as sanctions on women’s behavior.” Like Risch (1987), James (1998) also found that some words were used in a gender-neutral way, such as *slut*. However, when it is used to refer to a man, it does not have the

same power as when it is used to refer to a woman. James (1998: 413) also contests, “While women through their own use of these derogatory terms do appear to accept to a larger extent the definition of masculinity and femininity, they also resist it in some ways, in particular through the creation and use of derogatory terms for men which reflect a female viewpoint.” This observation is also true in the contemporary Chinese context in which women label men using derogatory terms such as *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat.’

## 6.2 ‘Straight man cancer’ and ‘little fresh meat’

‘Straight man cancer’ and ‘little fresh meat’ are two gendered terms in Chinese that have been recently coined to refer to men. In this section, I first introduce the backgrounds of the two terms and then summarize recent studies on this research topic.

直男癌, *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ first appeared in Chinese social networks in June 2014. This expression refers to outspoken misogyny and judgmental language that belittles women (Lang 2020). It was not widely used until an incident involving a famous Chinese scholar who posted that “women are beautiful only when they are feeding babies and doing housework” on Weibo, a blogpost platform in China. This post prompted public outrage where the majority of female commenters labeled the author *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ to show their high level of discontent and the extent to which they were offended. The British newspaper *The Telegraph* reported this incident and equated *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ with a western sobriquet ‘male chauvinist pig’ on March 13, 2015 (Steinfeld 2015). After this incident, language users, especially females, often adopt this term to show their contempt for misogyny and toxic masculinity. According to *Baidu Index*, a Chinese version of Google Trends, the search of *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ reached a peak in 2016 with a weekly search of nearly 20,000 times.

小鲜肉, *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ appeared in Chinese social networks in 2014. This term has its origin in referring to young male celebrities in South Korea (Li 2020). Later its use extended to describing young men, mostly celebrities, in their late teens to early twenties whose traits may include a youthful appearance, a fair complexion, physical attractiveness, and a slim to average build. The debut of the use of *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ was found in 康熙來了 *Kangsi Coming*, a famous Taiwanese talk show, in 2009 when a female emcee addressed a male celebrity as *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat.’ In this TV show, she explicitly used words such as ‘tasty’, ‘tender’, ‘fresh’ and ‘juicy’ to explain the meaning of this expression. She also showed her excitement of seeing what she called *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ and commented that their age should not be older than 20.

The history of appreciating ‘little fresh meat’ can be traced back to when Korean and Japanese effeminate male idols became an overnight sensation in East-Asian popular culture (Jung 2009). These celebrities are what Louie (2012) called “feminine boys” whose “soft masculinity” is fancied by many female fans (Jung 2009). These bands feature cute boys who are in stark comparison to men with masculine features such as aggressiveness and sexual dominance. The Korean term 꽃미남 ‘flowery pretty boy’ describes their pretty appearances, smooth fair skin, and a feminine manner (Jung 2009). The Japanese counterpart 草食男子 ‘herbivorous men’ (literally, ‘grass-eating men’) highlights their gentleness, quietness, and softness (Louie 2012). The Chinese term 小鲜肉 ‘little fresh meat’ is a more straightforward expression calling attention to their younger age, cuteness, and the freshness of youth. It is found that the numeral classifier 枚 *méi*, which is supposed to mark physically small referents, is used as an innovative human classifier to label words such as *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat,’ thus reinforcing the cuteness culture in the Chinese digital world (Shi & Jing-Schmidt 2020).

As new coinages, *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ have drawn attention from researchers regarding the linguistic mechanisms (Guan 2018, Li 2017, Liu 2016) and social trends underlying the creation and use of the terms (Liu 2015, Liu 2017). Concerning the expression *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer,’ Liu (2016) argues that the creation of *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ is based on an analogy that views cancer as a fearsome disease and that pluralism, feminism and consumerism facilitate the use of this expression. Liu (2017) enumerated several contexts in which *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ is used to accuse men of their disrespect and disparaging tone to women. She argues that the adoption of *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ shows women’s voices in gender discourse and their resistance to the patriarchal gender order. However, without sufficient data or a clearly defined theoretical framework, Liu (2016) and Liu (2017) did not provide enough evidence to support their arguments. Using corpus linguistic data, Guan (2018) analyzed syntactic structures, pragmatic functions, and cognitive mechanisms of “disease terms” such as *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer.’ While Guan contends that the targeted terms have a strong derogatory connotation and have a metaphorical and metonymical basis, she has neglected the sociocultural aspects of the language use. In terms of *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’, Liu (2015) argues that this expression has lost its linguistic meaning and is used as a special linguistic symbol with an aesthetic appreciation of certain appearances. Liu (2015) points to social dynamics reflected by the trendy term, but she did not present any data to facilitate the delivery of the arguments. Li (2017) and Tian (2017) used linguistic examples from news headlines to illustrate how ‘meat’ from the source domain is mapped onto ‘human’ in the target domain from a cognitive linguistic perspective. They also linked the use of *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ to women’s new aesthetic attention to younger

handsome men. However, they failed to show the way this term is used by grassroots language users due to the lack of naturally occurring linguistic data.

To summarize, the research topics related to these neologisms were either explored from a linguistic perspective, lacking a sociolinguistic point of view that connects linguistic phenomena to social changes in a larger sociocultural context, or are investigated from a social semiotic perspective, with an absence of authentic linguistic and perception data to support their arguments. Although some studies have associated language use with social dynamics (e.g., Li 2017, Tian 2017), they have not provided sufficient naturally occurring linguistic data or surveyed language users about their subjective perceptions of the neologism use. In addition, no research was found to compare these two contrasting expressions in terms of attitudinal stances and socio-emotions they evoke and how women's differential attitudes to the two terms and their referents reflect changing gender dynamic and women's place in gender discourse. Given this research gap, this chapter focuses on the two gendered neologisms *zhínán-ái* 'straight man cancer' and *xiǎo-xiānròu* 'little fresh meat' using corpus linguistic data and subjective survey data to gain insights into social changes in gender relations reflected by the labels in public gender discourse.

### 6.3 Data and Methods

This chapter integrates naturally occurring linguistic data from Weibo and subjective data from a survey. The corpus data allows the examination of how language users adopt these neologized metaphors in the context, what high-frequency collocations may appear with them, and what these collocations can tell us about the language use. However, because *zhínán-ái* 'straight man cancer' and *xiǎo-xiānròu* 'little fresh meat' are trendy terms used by certain language users, the corpus data may have a limited size and may not be able to capture all

characteristics associated with the use of the two terms. Thus, I collected subjective data to complement this limitation of the corpus data in the form of a perception survey (see Appendix B). The subjective data can shed light on how language users perceive the social meanings and emotions indicated by the two terms.

### 6.3.1 The Weibo blogpost datasets

The corpus data was retrieved from Weibo, the Chinese counterpart of Twitter. I used the Weibo microblogging platform because it has a vast number of language users engaging in discussions of shared interests and concerns, which offers the public access to the most authentic language use and the trendiest topics in the online communities.

I first conducted the advanced search on Weibo for the keywords *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ to collect blogposts between February 10<sup>th</sup> and February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020. In this searching process, I only included the original posts to avoid duplicated Weibo posts. I then used ScrapeStorm, an AI-powered visual web scraping tool, to download a total number of 1206 unduplicated blogposts containing *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and a total number of 1119 unduplicated blogposts containing *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ to create two datasets. The usernames, profile pictures and other personal identifying information were removed for anonymity, whereas the content of the blogposts including texts and emojis were retained for further analysis.

### 6.3.2 Corpus data analysis method

The two datasets obtained from Weibo were analyzed in three steps. First, I used the CUCBst system developed by the National Broadcast Media Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center at the Communication University of China (<http://ling.cuc.edu.cn/cucseg/>) for word segmentation of the blogposts. This process helped identify the boundaries between



words used in the blogposts. I noticed that the segmentation process was not entirely accurate due to the novelty of this language use. For example, *zhínán-ái* was identified as three separate words instead of one word. Therefore, I also conducted manual segmentation and annotation to overcome this deficiency.

Second, I imported the processed datasets into AntConc (Version 3.5.8), a corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis, for collocation analysis. I used ‘regex’ (regular expression) for *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ to see what words were used before and after the target expressions. Based on my observation, the most immediate collocates are mostly pronouns and adverbs. Thus, I retained five words to the left and five words to the right of the two target terms to obtain a fuller picture of this linguistic innovation in the two datasets. This process yielded a total number of 12060 collocate tokens and 2281 collocate types for the dataset of *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer,’ and a total number of 11190 collocate tokens and 2411 collocate types for the dataset of *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat.’ The two collocate lists were ordered by total frequency and by frequency of the words on the left and right of the search terms.

Lastly, I conducted corpus analysis for the high frequency collocates revealing the blogpost authors’ attitudinal stances related to the two target terms in each dataset. Because content words such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives are more likely to reflect language users’ subjective feelings and thoughts than function words, I annotated content words in the collocate lists. Given that some verbs (e.g., have, get) can be affectively neutral (Liu et al. 2003), I excluded verbs in the collocational analysis. I then examined the first 100 high frequency adjectival and nominal collocates in each dataset and visualized them in comparison word clouds using packages *wordcloud* and *reshape2* in RStudio (version 1.1.463).

### 6.3.3 Survey on language user perceptions

The target terms are likely to be created by Chinese women and are most likely to be used by Chinese women to refer to certain groups of men. For this reason, I designed an online survey using Qualtrics and distributed it only to female Mandarin Chinese native speakers in Mainland China to elicit subjective data on female perceptions on males labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat.’

According to *Baidu Index*, *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ are used the least by people who are over 50 years old (0.47% for *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and 1.94% for *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’). Thus, I only surveyed females whose ages were between 18 and 49. As claimed by the official report “Women and Men in Chinese society – facts and data” issued by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2019), the average age of first marriage for Chinese women was 25.7 in 2017. Given that married women may experience changes in family structures and perceptions on gender roles in family life (Choi & Chen 2006, Thompson & Walker 1989), I used the age 26 as the demarcation of age groups for the survey: 18-26 and 27-49. 204 Chinese female native speakers voluntarily participated in this anonymous survey. Out of these 204 responses collected with consent, 193 responses were valid. I removed 9 responses with incomplete answers. The valid data fall into the two age groups: 18-26 ( $n = 96$ ) and 27-49 ( $n = 97$ ). In addition to demographic questions, the survey covered the following five areas:

- (1) Affective valence evaluations of the two terms (positive, negative, neutral).
- (2) Preferences for men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ (like a great deal, like a moderate amount, neither like nor dislike, dislike a moderate amount, dislike a great deal).

- (3) Frequency of encountering men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ in reality (always, most of the time, sometimes, rarely, almost never, never)
- (4) Perceived characteristics of men tagged *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ on appearances, clothing styles, occupations, outlooks on relationships, and family lives (open-ended question).
- (5) Perceptions of men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ on gender roles in the family (open-ended question).

6.4 Results

6.4.1 Corpus analysis results

Figures 6.1 compare the top 100 high-frequency adjectives and nouns around *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ (red) and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ (blue). In the word clouds, the size of a word’s text is in proportion to its frequency in the datasets.

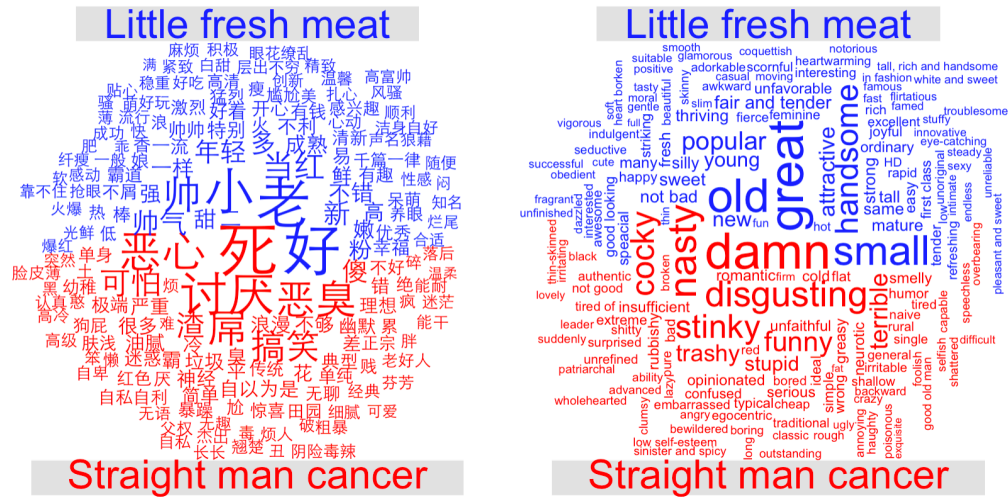
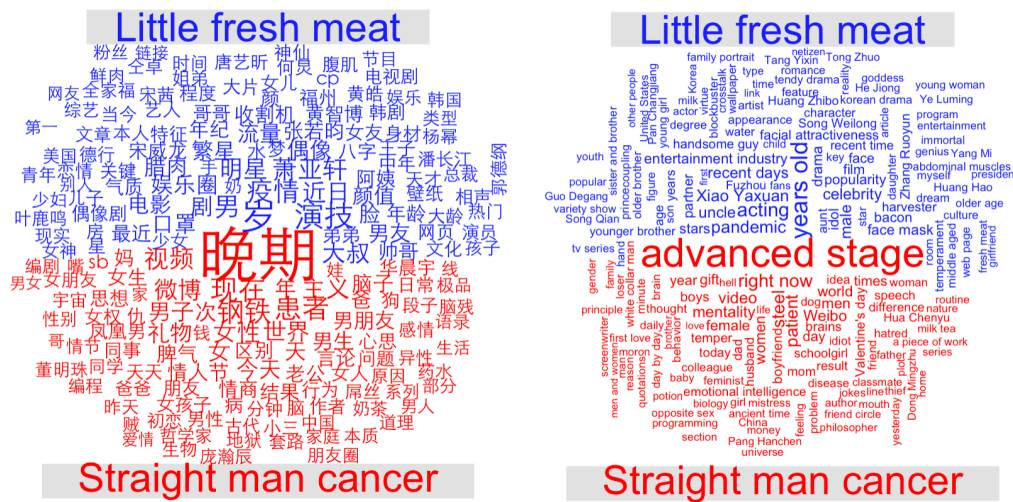


Figure 6.1 High-frequency adjective collocates with ‘straight man cancer’ and ‘little fresh meat’ (Left panel, original words; right panel, English translation.)

Figure 6.1 shows a striking contrast between adjectives collocating with *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and adjectives collocating with *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ in terms of

affective valence. The former are generally negative, while the latter are generally positive. High-frequency collocates of *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ are *hǎo* ‘good,’ *lǎo* ‘old’, *xiǎo* ‘young/little’, *shuài* ‘handsome’, *dānghóng* ‘popular’, *niánqīng* ‘young’, *xīn* ‘new’. The top adjective collocate of *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ is *sǐ* ‘die/dead,’ which is also used as an intensifier to show anger and is similar to the English taboo intensifiers such as ‘damn’ and ‘fucking.’ Other high-frequency collocates include *tǎoyàn* ‘obnoxious’, *ěxīn* ‘disgusting’, *èchòu* ‘stinky’, *gǎoxiào* ‘ridiculous’, *kěpà* ‘terrible’ and *zhā* ‘scum’. The wide disparity indicates that language users’ attitudes toward these two groups of people are poles apart. Language users take a more positive stance toward *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ but make a more negative accusation against *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer.’



**Figure 6.2** High-frequency noun collocates with ‘straight man cancer’ and ‘little fresh meat’ (Left panel, original words; right panel, English translation.)

Figure 6.2 shows that *wǎnqī* ‘advanced stage,’ as the top noun collocation with *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer,’ greatly outnumbers the frequency of other collocates. Other high-frequency noun collocations include *huànzhě* ‘patient’, *nǚxìng* ‘female,’ *nánzǐ* ‘male’, *lǎogōng* ‘husband,’ *nán-péngyǒu* ‘boyfriend.’ The indication of these nouns is twofold. First, it shows that language users have developed a core metaphorical theme around ‘cancer,’ where ‘advanced

cancer’ and ‘patient’ also emerge in the discourse to construct this consistent metaphor theme. Second, it is likely that language users associate *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ with gender-related topics such as gender roles in relationships and family lives. The term *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ has nominal collocates, such as *sui* ‘age’, *yǎnji* ‘acting skills’, *míngxīng*, ‘stars/celebrities’, *yìqíng* ‘pandemic,’ *XiāoYàxuān*, the name of a female celebrity, and *yúlèquān* ‘entertainment industry’. This result indicates that language users tend to talk about the ages of *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ and that topics involving *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ mainly revolve around celebrities. The two groups of noun collocations suggest that men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ are more familiar to language users than men labeled *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ in daily life.

Overall, the corpus analysis shows that the term *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ is more likely to be used with words showing emotional negativity, whereas collocates of the term *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ are relatively positive.

#### 6.4.2 Discourse analysis of Weibo posts

The word clouds are useful in providing a general sense of the semantic tendency of collocates, but they are not able to show the context in which the gender labels are used. To show how male labels *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ are used in contexts and what meanings they indicate, I extracted four blogposts containing the target terms and their high-frequency collocates from corpus findings then performed discourse analysis.

Examples (51) – (53) show women’s contempt for their perceived characteristics of *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer,’ while example (54) shows a man’s bewilderment of this language use. Example (51) demonstrates a female blog poster’s negative comment on men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer.’ This author uses negative words ‘selfish,’ ‘disgusting,’

‘no empathy’, ‘stinky’ to express her intolerance to men who make judgments on feminism and feminists. She explicitly distinguishes the difference between *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *zhínán* ‘straight males’ and clarifies that her annoyance is caused by men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ rather than straight men. Likewise, example (52) shows a female blogger’s frustration and discontent with men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ in relationships. She makes suggestions for her female peers that they should avoid being in a relationship with *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ because the advanced cancer is incurable, and this could cause madness on the part of women. Example (53) also shows aversion and indignation from a female blogger who perceives the so-called *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ as self-righteous and incompetent. Example (54) was posted by a male user who shows confusion about what his wife calls him, ‘advanced straight man cancer,’ asking whether it is a positive or a negative comment.

(51) 直男癌真是这世界上最自私最恶心罪[最]没有同理心的恶臭生物（骂的是直男癌，不是直男，直男癌和直男是完全不同的两种生物哈）这也不提他们搞的什么真女权假女权鉴定，什么你是田园女权，谁谁谁才是真正的女权 balabala

*Straight man cancer* is one of the most selfish, disgusting, stinking creatures without empathy in the world ([I am scolding] *straight man cancer*, not straight men. *Straight man cancer* and straight man are two different species). Not to mention what they’re doing with identification of real feminism and fake feminism, such as “you are a pastoral [fake] feminist” and “XXX is a real feminist”, balabala.

(52) 各位姐妹千万不要和直男癌晚期的人谈恋爱，真的是没救，会被气疯掉！

Girls don’t date guys who are *straight man cancer* at an advanced stage. It’s incurable. They’ll drive you nuts!

(53) 最讨厌那种明明自己能力不够又觉得自己吊炸天谁也不如我聪明自以为是其实狗屁不是的死直男癌。

[I] really hate that kind of damn *straight man cancer* who are obviously incapable but smug about themselves and think themselves the best and the smartest. They are in fact inferior to bullshit.

(54) 我媳妇说我是典型的“直男癌晚期” 我想问问这是夸我还是骂我？

My wife said I was a typical “*straight man cancer* at an advanced stage” and I wanted to ask if that was a compliment or a curse?

Example (55) – (58) show language users’ comments on the younger age and attractiveness of men labeled *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘*little fresh meat*’ on Weibo. Examples (55) and (56) were posted by female users. The blogger of Example (55) addresses herself as an ‘old aunt’ who enjoys young male celebrities’ acting. She compares her age with younger actors’ age and highlights the age difference in her post. Example (56) shows the blogger’s enthusiasm for *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘*little fresh meat*’ and her fantasies about dreaming of them at night. Example (57) was posted by a male user who refers to himself as a *little-fresh-meat* freshman four years ago and an *old-cured-meat* senior now. Along with the blogpost, he attaches two pictures of himself in 2016 and 2020. Although he is not a celebrity, he thinks of himself as having had the perceived qualities of *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘*little fresh meat*’ four years ago. For him, the fleeting four years have changed his appearance and made him no longer young but as old as *lǎo-lànròu* ‘*old-cured meat*.’ The term *lǎo-lànròu* ‘*old-cured meat*’, as an opposite coinage to *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘*little fresh meat*,’ refers to older men who are talented at acting or mature and knowledgeable. While this blogpost only involves self-perceived changing characteristics, it highlights the evanescence of being labeled as *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘*little fresh meat*.’ Example (58) writes about a 40-year-old female celebrity who

dates young handsome guys in their 20s. The post is not be able to represent all women's opinions of dating younger men, but it shows some women's affection for the younger age, attractiveness, and harmless appearances of men.

(55) 小鲜肉们演的真不错，老阿姨都看着感动

Those *little fresh meat* acted really good. Even old aunts [like me] were touched.

(56) [噢耶] 睡前刷十遍小鲜肉今晚就能梦到他们

[Oh yeah] Watching *little fresh meat* 10 times before bed can make me dream of them tonight.

(57) 2016 → 2020 好像没啥变化的呢，哦不，变化的应该是从大一小鲜肉变成了大四老腊肉

2016 → 2020 Nothing has changed. Oh no, it should be that [I] changed from a *little-fresh-meat* freshman into an *old-cured-meat* senior.

(58) 萧亚轩的吸小鲜肉体质真的是让当代少女羡慕不已，无论是 20 岁，还是 30 岁，还是 40 岁，她的男朋友都是 20 岁超帅小鲜肉

Xiao Yaxuan's attractiveness to *little fresh meat* really makes contemporary girls envy a lot. No matter whether she is 20, 30 or 40 years old, her boyfriends are always super handsome *little fresh meat* in their 20s.

Within the theoretical framework of conceptual metaphor theories (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), *ái* 'CANCER', as the source domain, is mapped onto the BEHAVIOR of outspoken misogyny and chauvinism in the target domain. This metaphor also evokes a blended space where the FEELING against men's misogyny and male chauvinism is as dreadful and destructive as people's negative feelings of cancer. The feeling comes from the embodied perception of cancer as an undesirable and incurable disease. By mapping the difficulty of curing cancer onto



the challenge of eradicating misogynistic remarks and beliefs, this cancer metaphor successfully evokes women's exasperation with men who hold the supposed superiority over women. The creation of *zhínán-ái* 'straight man cancer' is motivated by the metaphorical concept that MISOGYNY IS CANCER. On the contrary, FRESH MEAT, as the source domain of *xiǎo-xiānròu* 'little fresh meat', is perceived as more desirable. The fondness of delectable food in the source domain is mapped onto the affection for the YOUNGER AGE and PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS in the target domain. The YOUNGER AGE is highlighted by the explicit modifier *xiǎo* 'little.' This metaphorical expression also evokes a blended space that involves the pleasant and positive FEELINGS toward younger handsome men, which also comes from the embodied experience of tasting fresh and tender meat.

#### 6.4.3 Language user perceptions

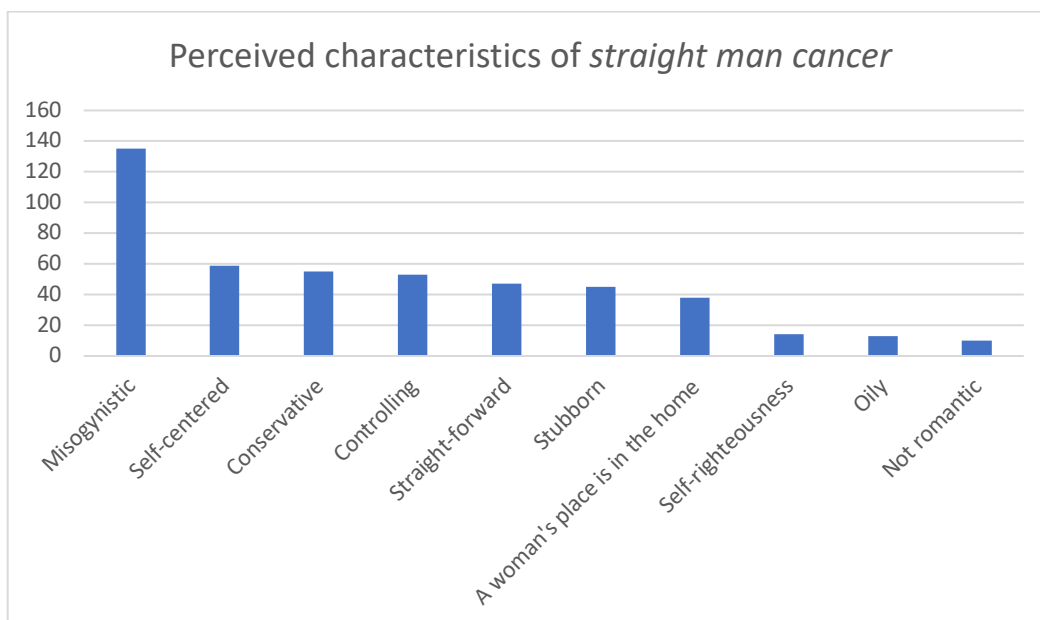
The survey results yielded important insights into language user perceptions of the use of the two terms and men labeled *zhínán-ái* 'straight man cancer' and *xiǎo-xiānròu* 'little fresh meat.' First, answers of affective valence evaluations show that the expression *zhínán-ái* 'straight man cancer' is perceived as significantly more negative than the expression *xiǎo-xiānròu* 'little fresh meat' ( $X^2(1, N = 193) = 168.62, p < .001$ ). No significant relationships across age groups were found. This result corresponds to the polarity of the high-frequent occurring collocates with the two terms in the corpus analysis findings.

Second, the preferences for those labeled *zhínán-ái* 'straight man cancer' and *xiǎo-xiānròu* 'little fresh meat' show an opposite tendency. A Chi-squared test was performed to examine the relationship between the categorical data of positive and negative preferences for men labeled with the two terms. The relationship between these variables was significant  $X^2(1, N = 193) = 108.23, p < .001$ , suggesting that female perception of men labeled *xiǎo-xiānròu*

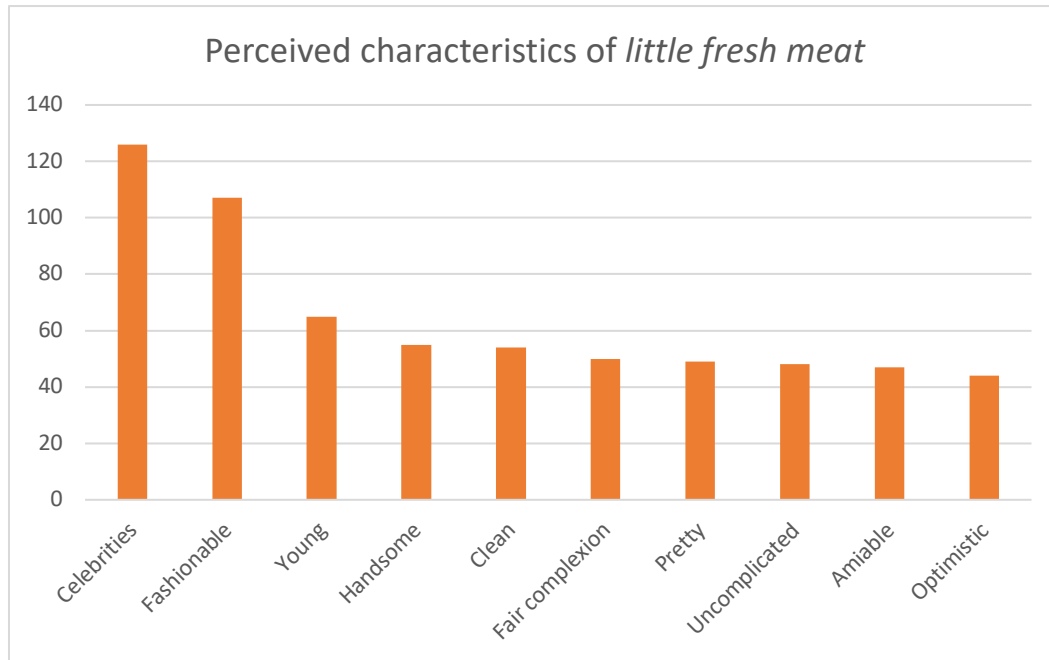
‘little fresh meat’ is significantly more positive than their perception of men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer.’ No significant relationships were detected across age groups.

Third, responses to the survey questions regarding the frequency of encountering men labeled ‘straight man cancer’ and ‘little fresh meat’ in reality reveal that men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ is significantly more often seen than men labeled *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ in language users’ real life ( $t = 2.604, p < .01$ ). Again, age was not a factor impacting on encounters of men labeled with these terms in real life.

The fourth focus of the survey is Chinese women’s perception of men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ using open-ended questions. Figure 6.3 and Figure 6.4 show a comparison of the perceived characteristics of men labeled with the terms. Both figures include the top ten high-frequency descriptive comments on each group of men. The results reveal that perceptions of *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ are more related to the men’s internal personal traits such as personalities and their viewpoints of gender roles, whereas perceptions of *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ are more associated with men’s occupations, appearances, and clothing styles.



**Figure 6.3** Perceived characteristics of men labeled ‘straight man cancer’



**Figure 6.4** Perceived characteristics of men labeled ‘little fresh meat’

Specifically, men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ are more likely to be perceived as ‘misogynistic,’ which includes answers such as ‘women’s inferiority to men,’ ‘objectification of women,’ ‘sexist attitude toward women,’ ‘showing no respect to women,’ and ‘women should accept men’s advice without questioning.’ The answers also reflect the men’s perceived views on relationships and family lives. For example, these descriptions include that they are ‘controlling,’ ‘not romantic,’ and they hold the ‘conservative’ belief that ‘a woman’s place is in the home.’ The way they conduct themselves in society is also perceived as ‘self-centered,’ ‘straight-forward,’ ‘stubborn (inflexible)’ and believe themselves are morally good and correct (‘self-righteousness’). Although 69.9% of the responses indicate that the concept of ‘straight man cancer’ has nothing to do with their occupations, appearances, or clothing styles, 13 participants associated them with *yóuni* ‘oily.’ As a neologism that appeared in the Chinese cyber lexicon in 2017, *yóuni* ‘oily’ refers to middle-aged men who are careless about their appearance and have a

slovenly way of speaking. Their personal traits may also include being over-weight, untidiness and rudeness. By contrast, the appearances of men labeled *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ are perceived as ‘young,’ ‘handsome,’ and ‘clean with fair complexion.’ More than 25% of the participants used lexical variants of the word ‘pretty’ (including *qīngxiù*, *jùnxìu*, *jùnměi*, and *màoměi*) to describe this group of men. 65.3% of the responses indicated ‘celebrities’ as these men’s occupation, and 55.4% of the participants mentioned ‘fashionable’ clothing styles. Responses to the perceived personality of ‘little fresh meat’ include ‘uncomplicated,’ ‘amiable,’ and ‘optimistic,’ among which ‘uncomplicated’ and ‘amiable’ are opposite to the perceived ‘controlling’ personality of men labeled ‘straight man cancer.’ Overall, men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ are perceived as much more negative than men labeled *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ in appearances, personalities, and gender beliefs.

The last part of the survey asked female language users’ perceptions of men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ on gender roles in family relationships. Participants answered from their perceived perspectives of man labeled ‘straight man cancer’ that (a) women should do most or all of the housework (91.7%), (b) men’s social status is higher than women’s (91.3%), (c) men make decisions in the family (86.6%), (d) women should take care of children (86.4%), (e) men should receive more education than women (82.2%), and (f) men should manage marital financial matters (73.2%). These answers explain why men labeled *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ is perceived as ‘misogynistic,’ ‘conservative,’ and ‘controlling’ by the female participants.

Overall, the results reveal that language users perceive *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ as a negative expression and show distaste for men labeled with this term. Women encounter and know such men in real life. They are someone’s boyfriends and husbands, and their views and

actions have real impact on women. By contrast, language users perceive *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ as a more positive expression and show fondness for men labeled with this term. Women have positive evaluations of the external and internal traits of men labeled *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’. However, these young men generally belong in the world of entertainment and women admire them from afar. In addition, women’s reported perceptions of familial gender roles from the perspectives of men labeled ‘straight man cancer’ also indicate that women have been aware of the unequal social expectations of men and women in marital relationships.

## 6.5 Discussion

The corpus data and survey data provide converging evidence that *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ is used to express women’s collective revulsion against misogynistic acts and sexist remarks by men, whereas *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ is used to convey women’s fondness for harmless young men. The social meaning of ‘straight man cancer’ is consistent with James’s (1998) observation that women resist the traditional definition of masculinity and femininity through the creation and use of derogatory words for men. The usage of the term ‘little fresh meat’ indicates female language users’ yearning for a refreshing alternative of masculinity. However, Risch’s (1987) argument that *meat* is derogatory still holds true because this term objectifies and demeans men, despite the finding that women like what this term refers to.

Neologisms reveal changes in social reality (Jing-Schmidt & Hsieh 2019). As newly coined gendered labels, *zhínán-ái* ‘straight man cancer’ and *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ provide a window into social dimensions of public gender discourse. The two labels place men with antithetical characteristics into two opposing categories. By boiling numerous perceived characteristics of men down to two succinct terms, Chinese female language users pour their abhorrence and adoration to the fullest and the utmost through their linguistic behavior in digital

social practice. Although not capturing all characteristics of men, these terms categorize men and reflect female language users' contrary views and emotions toward men labeled with these terms. Through the categorization, the new labels quickly draw massive attention and social support from people who share the same social perceptions, which in turn renders them a favorable tool for evoking collective emotions when society continues to grapple with gender relations in changing sociocultural contexts (Jing-Schmidt 2007, 2008; Jing-Schmidt & Peng 2017; Shi & Jing-Schmidt 2020; Lang & Jing-Schmidt, forthcoming).

I argue that the labeling practice challenges gender stereotypes and hegemonic masculinity, through which Chinese women claim agency and empowerment; meanwhile, the terms reveal objectification of men. This social practice is facilitated by technological innovation and the development of online social network websites, accelerating a new and complex gender dynamic in public gender discourse.

Using 'straight men' in the label, Chinese women challenge the entrenched gender stereotypes in heterosexual relationships and marriages. In traditional heterosexual coupling and marriages, women are primary caregivers and homemakers, whereas men are breadwinners. Heterosexuality renders female power dependent on men and affords men to wield power over women (Rich 1980). As the survey results showed, the perceived *straight man cancer*'s perspectives includes the belief that women should do housework and take care of children, whereas men should receive more education, manage marital financial matters, make decisions in the family, and maintain a higher social status. By labeling those who share the perceived beliefs, women explicitly castigate sexist thinking and behaviors. In addition, 'straight man' in this male-referential term also shows Chinese women's alliance with non-hegemonic groups of men, to confront hegemonic masculinity represented by heterosexual men. Hegemonic

masculinity is defined based on “cultural ideal and institutional power” (Connell 1995: 77). In Connell’s (1995) model of masculinities, hegemonic masculinity is viewed as having the dominance not only over femininities, but also over non-hegemonic masculinities, including homosexual men (Connell 1995), working-class men (Pujolar 1997), violent men (Messerschmidt 1993), and physically weak or socially inept men (Edley & Wetherell 1997). Similarly, Bornstein (1998) proposed that “perfectly gendered” people, whose traits include white, male, heterosexual, middle-aged, and wealthy, occupy the top of a pyramid of power, while other identities are at lower levels. In the Chinese contemporary context, by specifying ‘straight man’ in the label and sharing this linguistic resource, Chinese women “align themselves not only with one another but with others whom they imagine have shared values and interests” (McConnell-Ginet 2003: 72). In this case, the imagined community includes not only women but also homosexual men, who experience rejection in family and society in contemporary China (Liu & Choi 2006). In contrast to them, heterosexual men have the privilege and thus are socio-economic advantageous (McIntosh 1988). The expression ‘straight man cancer’ is thus used by women to condemn the toxic masculinity exhibited by some of these men and to vent frustration and irritation caused by misogyny, male chauvinism, and gender inequality. The usage epitomizes the dynamic nature of socio-emotions in gender discourse, reflecting women’s rising gender awareness, and thus giving an unprecedented voice to Chinese women who have been subjugated to the gender order biased against women in society for centuries (Lang 2020).

By contrast, “soft masculinity” represented by non-hegemonic young men finds favor with some Chinese women. Women have been sexualized, objectified, and commodified through social labeling (Jing-Schmidt & Peng 2018) and the “male gaze” (Berger 1972: 47). They are placed in a powerless position and judged by men. However, the new upsurge in females’

infatuation with “soft masculinity,” a new type of male aesthetics, coincides with the “consumption of sexualized men” in Pan-East Asian culture (Jung 2009, Li 2020: 2), which seems to be a reversal of the “male gaze.” Accompanied by women’s increasing economic power, more merchants include young male celebrities in advertising products to fulfill women’s inner fantasies (Hu 2017, Louie 2012), which suggests women’s growing buying power in consuming young male celebrities. Women’s affection for “soft masculinity” also indicates their empowerment through the visual consumption of men (Kim et al. 2013). The data in this chapter confirms this trend and points to an ongoing social change. The linguistic adoption of *xiǎo-xiānròu* ‘little fresh meat’ suggests women’s rhetorical sexualization of men, which seems to overturn the traditional gender order from a patriarchal perspective. This reversed gender order implies women’s abandonment of patriarchal authority and masculine qualities and reveals women’s autonomous agency in choosing contra-masculine aesthetics. At the same time, the term posits women in the role of sexual predators getting their “piece of meat.” Although women positioning themselves as sexual agents is different from men because historically women did not have the social power to treat men as objects, it does place women in the sexist role of objectifying someone they construct as weaker than themselves.

Moreover, the new and complex gender discourse could not have been as far-reaching without the broad use of social media that enables and facilitates the creation and dissemination of these gender labels. Unlike face-to-face communication, Internet-based interaction has been claimed to enable women and men to participate equally and thus lead to greater gender equality (Herring 2004, 2014). As noted by Graddol and Swann (1989), technological innovation allowed women to comment on and protest men’s sexist language use in a computer conferencing system in the mid-1980s. Graddol and Swann (1989: 189) suggest that “a change in language practices



and in the relationships between language users may arise as a by-product of an unrelated technological innovation and change in a communicative context.” Today, online social networking not only provides an indispensable medium for language practices among language users, but also accelerates a complex social dynamic. The gender labeling practices under study occur on social media platforms where women are empowered to publicly criticize men’s sexism and express an anti-masculine aesthetic through a discursive community of practice. As the less powerful gender in economic, political, and social dimensions, women actively utilize online discussion to express themselves, trying to gain more discursive power in gender discourse. However, as Herring (2014: 567) argues, although women seem to reap most benefits from online interaction, “men too stand to benefit from anonymous online communication; the difference is that for women, the technological environment purportedly removes barriers to participant in domains where barriers do not exist – or do not exist to the same extent – for men.” Women are not the only group utilizing digital communication to verbalize and spread derogatory labels. Men also use online platforms to combat and suppress women’s gender awareness by creating and employing more pejorative female-referential terms, such as ‘feminist cancer,’ ‘female cunt cancer,’ and ‘straight woman cancer’ (Lang 2020). While the verbal battle may not necessarily favor women in the online setting, feminist linguistic actions have been undertaken at the grassroots level, and have raised women’s awareness of gender bias at the linguistic level. Although women have yet to overcome barriers and struggles to achieve gender equality, women feel empowered to express their concerns and desires in the contemporary sociocultural context. However, as Chinese feminists argue, women’s objectification of men does not necessarily signify women’s winning of the battle against patriarchy (e.g., Dai 2021). Women may be considered empowered to the extent that they are able to counterattack men, but

true empowerment requires abandoning the entire way of looking at human beings as objects and treating each and every one as autonomous individuals, women, or men.

## 6.6 Summary

This chapter explores two male labels ‘straight man cancer’ and ‘little fresh meat’ in online gender discourse as well as Chinese women’s perceptions of men labeled with these terms. The label ‘straight man cancer’ protests gender stereotypes and confronts hegemonic masculinity, while ‘little fresh meat’ shows a shift in aesthetic grounds. Both terms are used by women to claim linguistic agency through social labeling practices in contemporary Chinese gender discourse. That Chinese women create and adopt gendered terms for men can be seen as a significant sign that they challenge the long-standing gender order and masculine aesthetics, suggesting their growing desire for gender parity and autonomy at a societal level. This transformation is not trivial but inextricably intertwined with women’s increasing economic power; however, the verbal action of objectifying men places women in the role of sexual consumers.

## CHAPTER VII

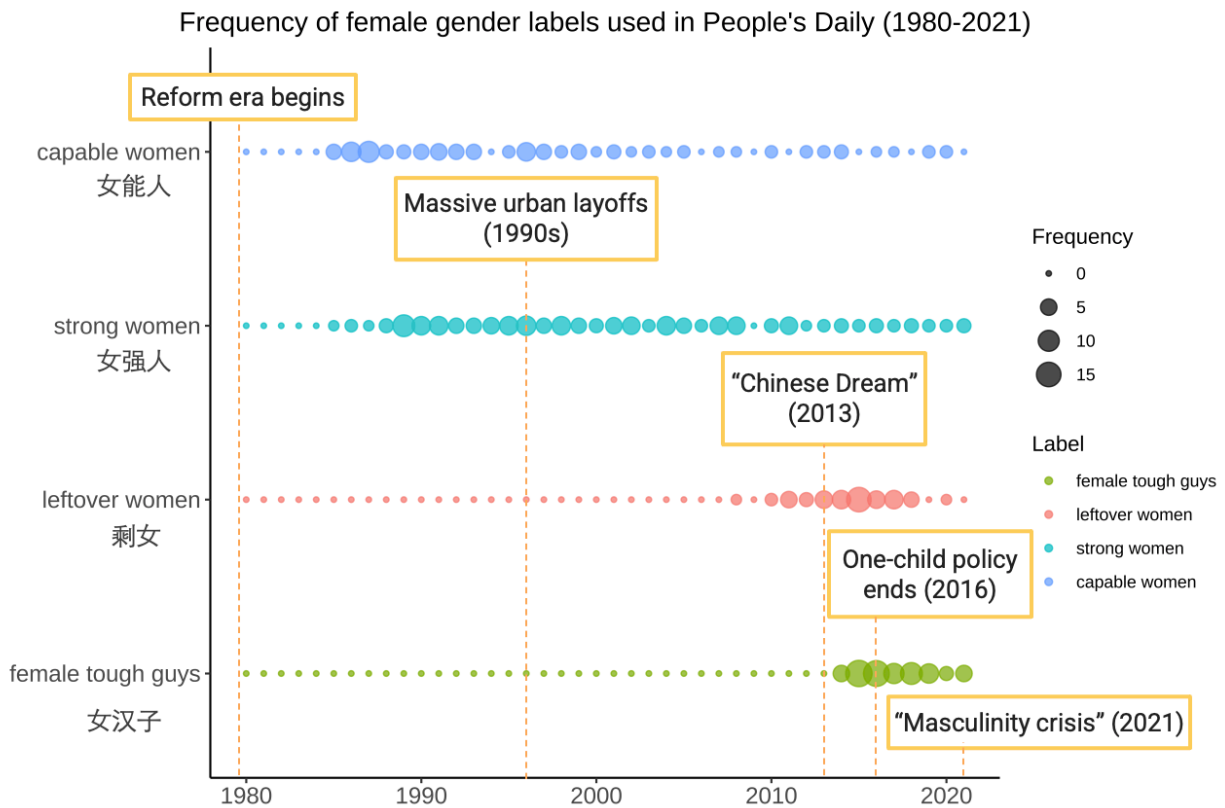
### GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### 7.1 Official use of female labels as a reflection of development priorities

Chapter III analyzes the ways in which women are labeled and categorized in the official state media and how the categorization reflects national development priorities in the post-reform era. Early labels 女能人 *nǚ-néng rén* ‘capable women’ and 女强人 *nǚ-qióng rén* ‘strong women’ appeared in the context of the economic boom. These women were praised and were seen as empowered, but the praise and empowerment served the larger agenda of economic growth in the reform era such as poverty alleviation. The newly-coined labels 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ and 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ appeared in the contexts of birth rate decline, the perceived “masculinity crisis,” and the promotion of the national rejuvenation project. The use of 剩女 *shèngnǚ* ‘leftover women’ is an example of a term used derogatorily towards women and evidence of the pressure put on women to marry, while the adoption of 女汉子 *nǚ-hànzi* ‘female tough guys’ indicates that women are praised for contributing to the Chinese Dream. All these linguistic discourses cannot be fully explained within the discourse per se. The usages and reasons for using these terms must be understood in light of the larger party priorities because *People’s Daily*, the Party’s mouthpiece, is the articulator of national policy agendas.

Figure 7.1 shows the frequency of the four labels used in *People’s Daily* with the most important milestone events indicated along the temporal axis. Starting in the 1980s, the reform era began, and the “One Child” policy was strictly implemented especially in urban areas. The 1990s witnessed the most dramatic number of urban layoffs and women bore the brunt of the massive layoffs (Perry & Selden 2003; Yang 2007; Wu & Zhou 2015). Economic development continued into the new century and reached its new height when the “Chinese Dream” was

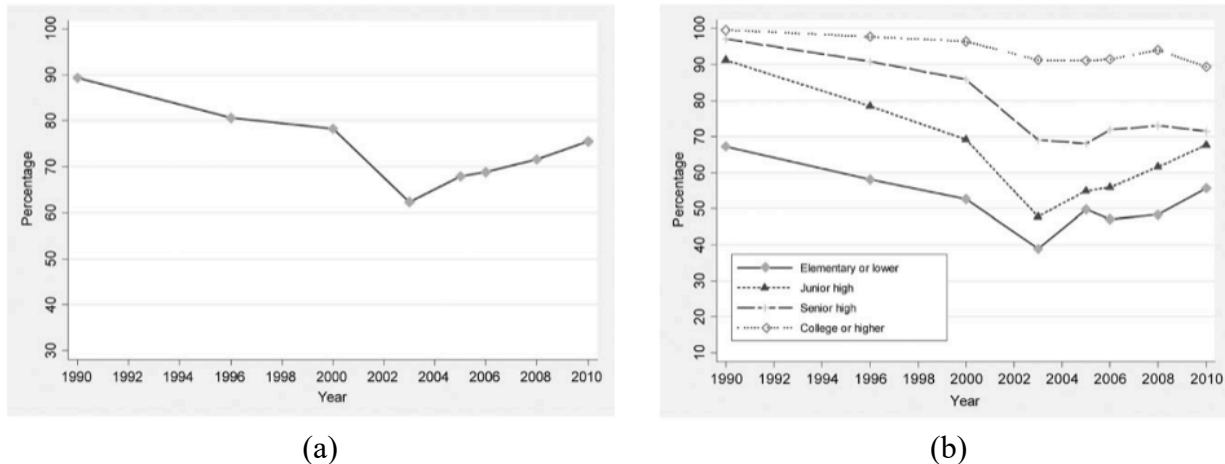
formulated as a national rejuvenation project in 2013. In 2016, the “One Child” policy became a challenge, potentially undermining the “Chinese Dream” and future economic growth. Another undermining factor to this grand goal is the perceived “masculinity crisis,” which gave rise to a heated debate in 2021.



**Figure 7.1** Frequency of the four female gender labels used in *People’s Daily* and milestone events (1980-2021)

In the following section, I will zoom in on the milestone events and discuss the usage of female labels. Firstly, in the 1990s, there was a decrease in regular urban employment caused by the economic reforms of state-owned enterprises, and most displaced employees were female workers. As seen in Figure 7.2 (a) retrieved from Wu and Zhou’s (2015) research on women’s labor force participation in urban China, the rates of women’s participation in the labor force declined and reached its lowest level in 2003. Even by 2010, the rates did not return to previous

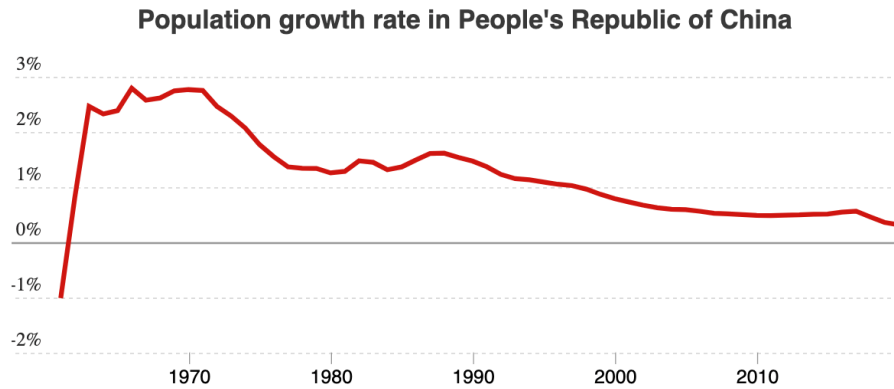
levels seen before the massive layoffs. Figure 7.2 (b) shows the rates of women’s participation in the labor force according to their level of education in urban China. Women who received a college education or higher suffered the least, whereas those with only a junior high school degree suffered the most. It was exactly during these twenty years (1990-2010) that the so-called ‘strong women’ and ‘capable women’ came out from the untold story of the massive layoffs. They were praised in state discourse for being resilient, being able to overcome poverty, and by becoming entrepreneurs helping other laid-off female workers to be re-employed and become rich in the state discourse.



**Figure 7.2** Women’s labor force participation in urban China (Wu & Zhou 2015)

Figure 7.3, retrieved from the World Bank, shows the sharp decline in birthrate since the 1990s. This birthrate decline undermines future economic growth and turned the fear of overpopulation into the fear of a dwindling workforce. It shows that women’s economic worth is largely equated with their reproductive potential when the population shrinks. This is in contrast with the praise given to women for their late marriage and late birth when their reproductive rights were suppressed in keeping with the population control policy. In either case, the government views women’s reproductive rights as something that needs to be controlled.

Women who do not comply with the larger national agendas are perceived as subversive and a threat to the new agenda of the “Chinese Dream” and are labeled ‘leftovers.’



**Figure 7.3** Annual population growth rate in China, 1961-2020 (Data from [datacatalog.worldbank.org](https://datacatalog.worldbank.org) via Data Commons)

In 2021, the perceived “masculinity crisis” was heightened due to the debate concerning the weakening of Chinese virility 阳刚之气 *yánggāngzhīqì* ‘masculinity.’ A delegate of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference suggested that Chinese schools should recruit more male teachers for students’ physical education to mitigate a looming feminization, hinting at fears that schoolboys are influenced by the so-called ‘little fresh meat’ celebrities (Da & Chen 2021). The proposal quickly sparked a fierce debate about gender stereotypes and the masculinity standards on social media (Wen 2021; Yu & Sui 2022). In response to the suggestion, the Ministry of Education of China published an article entitled 培养阳刚之气并无男女之分 ‘Cultivating masculinity is applicable to both men/boys and women/girls’ on the official website (The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2021a). The statement seems to signal a resurgence of the socialist gender erasure, which disregards gender differences between men and women and proposes a masculine androgyny for the entire

population. Later that same year, the National Radio and Television Administration released pro-masculinist media rules banning “sissy” boybands and effeminate idols (The National Radio and Television Administration 2021). This official notice explicitly used 娘炮 *niángpào* ‘sissy pants,’ an insulting term referring to effeminate aesthetics, and contradicted an earlier comment published in *People’s Daily* in 2018 calling for “respect for diverse aesthetic standards and an appreciation of inner beauty” (*People’s Daily* 2018; Xu 2018). As Song (2021: 79) and Wen (2021) point out, male effeminacy is perceived as a threat to the nation’s future, leading to a surge of “sissyphobia” and an “anxiety over the virility of a masculine nation.”

## 7.2 Instrumentalization of women’s images

Women actively engaging in economic development and gaining personal success are labeled with different terms in *People’s Daily*. In the official narratives, some of these women showed their strong rejection of being labeled with these terms, while others were portrayed as deeply distressed and desperate. In fact, all women’s images are utilized in state discourse to enable sociopolitical goals.

In earlier studies on socialist China, scholars of state gender equality discourse argued that women were instrumentalized for larger economic productivity in the pre-reform era (Andors 1983; Evans 2003; Wolf 1985; Yang 1999). After the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, Party authorities instituted a series of social reforms banning a wide range of discrimination against women (e.g., arranged marriages, prostitution) and launched active campaigns to mobilize women to participate in public work and take up jobs traditionally regarded as those for men in the name of 妇女解放 *fùnǚ jiěfàng* ‘women’s liberation’ (Dai 1995; Croll 1995; Zhang 2007). Although the Party demonstrated support for gender egalitarianism, ‘women’s liberation’ was an imposed and institutional program rather than an individual rights-

based women's movement (Yang 2007; Zuo 2013). The discourse of *fùnǚ jiěfàng* was thus formulated and utilized as “communist rhetoric” within the Party's “exegetical lexicon” to position women as “vehicles of other's power,” which neither constructed female agency nor invoked “gender relations as a site of social transformation” (Evans 2003: 210-213). In other words, state feminism was ostensibly committed to gender equality in public arenas, but the goal was to serve the broader agenda of socialist production. As Barlow (1994), Meng (1993), and Dai (1995) have argued in their feminist literary and film studies, the “forced sameness” of the socialist era erased sexual difference and disallowed any forms of representation of femininity, as reflected in the socialist slogans 妇女能顶半边天 ‘Women hold up half the sky,’ and 男同志能做到的事情女同志也能做到 ‘Everything a male comrade can do, a female comrade can do as well.’ To quote the views of some feminist sociologists, evidence that gender reform is “unfinished” can be found in the fact that the goal of top-down gender equality in socialist China is not to establish true gender parity (Andors 1983; Zuo 2013).

I argue that the pattern of instrumentalizing women preserved during the reform era and has also continued in post-reform China. The means may be different at different historical moments, but the purpose remains the same, which is the mobilization of women to engage in the larger economic growth. The so-called ‘strong women’ and ‘capable women’ are utilized for their ability to lift the rural poor and to reduce the widening wealth gap between urban and rural areas brought about by the economic reforms at earlier stages from the late 1970s to the 1980s. Although the term ‘capable women’ was short-lived and mostly circulated in state discourse, its evanescence undoubtedly indicates the institutional and temporary use of this label as semiotic means to enlist women, especially from rural areas, in the labor force to create social capital. With the national accumulation of social capital and successful implementation of the reforms,



China drew worldwide attention to its surge in wealth creation from the 1990s to 2000s (Pettis 2014). The world then witnessed China's economic transformation as China became the world's second-largest economy in the 2010s. The term 'female tough guys' was deployed at the start of this new era to signify that masculinity is the most desired quality for the realization of the "Chinese Dream." Similar to usage of the term *tiě-gūniang* 'iron girls' that portrayed women as model figures ostensibly transcending traditional gender stereotypes in the socialist era, women's image indicated by 'female tough guys' in today's China is once again used to construct the hegemonic meaning of a national ambition. At the same time, the concept of 'leftover women' was formulated and used as a political and rhetorical device to utilize women's unused reproductive capacity for sustainable development. As Meng (1993:118) pointed out, female images are employed "to signify either a certain class or sociopolitical group or the authority of the Communist Party itself." The specific referents of these female labels were therefore modified "to correspond with the changing definitions of the Party policy priorities and emphases" (Evans 2003: 212). One of the most crucial reasons for the continuation of instrumentalizing female images is the underlying patriarchal gender ideology reproduced in the state media, which perpetuates gender bias in their propagandist language use to promote national priorities.

### 7.3 Non-linearity, complexities and contradictions of Chinese feminism

While Chapter III explores state gender ideology and national priorities embedded in the gender label use, Chapters IV – VI provide converging evidence from social media discourse and social perception data that feminist progress and barriers coexist in the post-reform context, which implies the non-linearity, complexity, and contradiction of Chinese feminism.

Feminist progress is reflected in sociocultural and sociopolitical changes at many levels. In Chapter IV, I have shown the ways that female grassroots language users expressed their self-determination in the counter-discourse to reject the label ‘leftover women’ on social media. They adopted defiant homophones, such as ‘winsome women’ and ‘flourishing women,’ to resist and challenge the derogatory labeling and to counteract the biased gender order promoted in mainstream ideology. In their counter discursive intervention lies the true emancipatory potential of personal autonomy, defying state discourse of hegemonic gender politics that uses women as instruments of propagating ever changing national agendas. The discursive events that occurred at the individual level are not trivial, especially when the widespread social media transformed them into a potent force on the Internet. To change how others perceive them, single career women in China are using their economic power to counteract the state narratives portraying them as desperate and pathetic (Liu & Kozinets 2021). In 2022, a growing number of women are fighting the stigma of being single by celebrating their singledom on Xiaohongshu, an Instagram-like platform, where they post glamorous lifestyle photos and videos to proclaim their independence and self-sufficiency (Yip 2022). Through the collective actions of anti-stigmatization, women are redefining the meaning of success for and by themselves on their own terms. Traditional gender ideology expects women’s success to be restricted in the domestic sphere, as reflected in the old Chinese saying 干得好不如嫁得好 ‘Doing well in a career is not as good as marrying well,’ but the rising generation of Chinese women spell out their new identities in online communities to challenge the patriarchal motto. Their awakening gender awareness is echoed in the latest representations of female role models in mass media, as in TV shows such as 三十而已 *Nothing but Thirty*. Produced in the 2020s, the show incorporates levels of education and financial independence into the expectation of a successful woman (Lam 2021).

At the societal level, successful Chinese women have gained greater recognition especially among the younger generation, as shown by the perception findings in Chapter V. Young people are more likely than those of the older generation to point out that these labels are negative and that women labeled with these derogatory terms are well-educated, autonomous, hardworking, and eager for self-improvement. In addition, young women's rising consciousness makes them more aware of gender inequality and able to utilize linguistic resources to collectively label men when condemning toxic masculinity as shown in Chapter VI.

Chinese feminist efforts and the changing social attitudes among young people are nascent and may not be as impactful as mainstream ideologies broadcast in state media. However, the nascent force shows an immense potential for institutional change. The mainstream media eventually bowed to the pressure of grassroots voices against labeling single women as 'leftovers.' In 2017, *中国妇女报 China Women's Daily* explicitly banned a list of sexist words including 'leftover women' for being discriminatory. The frequency of this term appearing in *People's Daily* has also been greatly reduced in recent years as shown in Chapter III. In addition to the official linguistic advisory on the avoidance of sexist terms in news media, the government enacted laws in 2019 explicitly prohibiting discriminatory language such as "men only" in job listings to expand workplace protections for women (Nadworny 2021). These new laws also prohibit employers from asking female job applicants about their marital or family plans and from requiring women to guarantee not giving birth as an employment condition (Catalyst 2020; Vogelstein & Stone 2021). Recent years have also seen a narrower gender wage gap, though it still exists. Women earned 84% of what men earned for similar work in 2019, which was an improvement from 2016 when the ratio was 77% (Catalyst 2020).

However, feminist progress coincides with barriers to gender equality in all aspects of women's lives. While women's economic success is reflected in all four labels (i.e., 'strong women,' 'capable women,' 'female tough guys,' and 'leftover women'), women's struggles are also seen in the patriarchal gender order reflected in these sexist labels. The patriarchal ideology embedded in these terms echoes the "norms of restrictive masculinities," which impedes women's empowerment in both public and private spheres (OECD 2021). Specifically, when societies anticipate that men will "be the breadwinner, be financially dominant, do 'manly' jobs, be the 'deal worker,' and be a 'manly' leader in the economic and political arenas," social acceptance of these norms confines women to their reproductive and caretaker roles in the private sphere. When society expects men "to not do unpaid care and domestic work, to have the final say in household decisions, to control household assets, protect and exercise guardianship over women in the household, and to dominate sexual and reproductive choices in heterosexual relationships," social practices in the domestic sphere deny women's agency and decision-making power over their bodies, time, and resources (OECD 2021). Women who do not fit into gender stereotypes or yield to these restrictive social norms are labeled 'strong,' 'capable,' 'tough,' and 'leftover.' In the professional sphere, these women demonstrate capability, independence, and leadership, but they are more likely to be judged and scrutinized than their male counterparts. Studies have shown that women are perceived as less capable than men in male-congenial environments despite their capabilities and leadership (Carbonell & Castro 2008; Eagly 2007; Garcia-Retamero & Lopez-Zafra 2006). Capable women are caught in a double bind, facing "conflicting demands of their roles as women and their roles as leaders" (Eagly 2007: 4). This conundrum is due in large part to cultural stereotypes and traditional gender roles that associate certain agentic traits such as independence, confidence, and self-assertation with

men rather than women (Williams & Best 1990). As a result, women manifesting similar traits face a social impediment to achieving their career aspirations and personal advancements and are also placed at a disadvantage for social evaluations that underline egalitarian principles. Traditional gender roles are so entrenched that they penetrate deeply into the social subconscious. As seen in Chapter V, biased social evaluations of successful women are manifested in the findings that there is a generation gap and a gender gap when it comes to perceiving women labeled with these terms. The older generation is more likely than the younger generation to negatively perceive these women, and men are more likely than women to associate career women's choice of self-development over family and marriage with "personal failure."

If unconscious social bias against women seems ubiquitous, structural forces obstructing feminist progress are even more pervasive and overwhelming. Women's activism such as the #MeToo movement was constrained by strict censorship and restrictions and was brought to a halt in the Chinese authoritarian context after 2019 (Xiong & Ristivojević 2021). Despite feminist linguistic activism (e.g., *mitu*, 米兔 lit. 'rice bunny') to keep the movement alive in China, the new homophonic substitutes can no longer be found on social media after they became recognizable targets of censorship. At the same time, policymaking, legislation, and official discussions regarding social problems once again render women's roles invisible in the public area. To ease falling birth rates, the three-child policy was introduced in 2021 to replace the previous limit of two children allowed per family enacted in 2016. The new policy aims to alleviate the national aging crisis but reinforces traditional social expectations of women to give up career development for the sake of performing their reproductive roles in the domestic sphere. In 2021, the policy known as 双减 *shuāngjiǎn* 'double reduction' was made to decrease

children's time spent on homework and in private tutoring institutions (The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2021b), shifting the burden of supervision and academic tutoring to mothers. In 2022, the Family Education Promotion Law comes into force as the first piece of parenting legislation (The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2022). Thus, while the goals of the new policy and law are to alleviate children's academic burdens and to instruct parents on their responsibilities as guardians, the implementations and implications should not be overlooked. As long as the traditional gender norms and gendered division of domestic labor persist, parenthood will largely be expected to rely on mothers, making it more difficult for career women to juggle their jobs, children, and family responsibilities. The move of pushing women back into the home not only mirrors the return of women to household labor during the reform period but also echoes the resurgence of traditional women's roles as mothers and homemakers emphasized by the government authority (Qin 2019). In the domestic sphere, protections of women's safety, sexual and reproductive choices, and property rights are demanded. However, although an anti-domestic violence law came into effect in 2016, effective enforcement of protections is not specified (Cai 2021). In addition, the 2021 Civic Code requires divorcing couples to wait for 30 days, known as a "cooling-off period," before a divorce is granted, which could put victims of domestic violence at risk (The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China 2020). In rural China where many single aging men have difficulty finding wives, county-level officials have proposed solutions ironically dubbed "keeping men's beds warm," with the intent of prohibiting rural young women from leaving their hometowns in order to ensure that rural men can find wives (Tian 2021). The women as bed-warmers proposal elicited criticism and a feminist uproar on social media for its utilitarian approach that simply objectifies women as sexual and reproductive

tools, devalues women as human agents, and violates women's rights (Shen 2021). Meanwhile, when state narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic in the TV series *最美逆行者* *Heroes in Harm's Way* extolled male participation and overshadowed female contributions to the fight against the virus, it invited scathing public remarks for its unfair portrayal of women and persistent discrimination against women (Xie & Zhou 2021; Wang 2020). Similarly, at an earlier stage of the pandemic, when Chinese state-owned media outlets posted a video showing that female nurses were crying while their hair was shaved off for a better fit for protective gear and calling them "the most beautiful warriors," it quickly caused a public uproar on social media accusing the state of using women's body as tools for propaganda (J. Li 2020; Wang 2020).

While social and institutional bias against women is prevalent, the public furor shown in the resistance discourse reveals civic consciousness and a yearning for gender equality. However, feminist development in post-reform China is not a linear process. The path is beset with difficulties, dilemmas, and contradictions. In the social media discourse shown in Chapter IV, although some women self-label as 'female tough guys' to articulate their independence of personality and spirit, others continue to take women who represent "ideal" womanhood as a reference point when defining themselves. The linguistic behavior of self-labeling with self-pity and self-deprecation essentially grounds one's own identity on "othering" or "demarcation from the other" (Croll 1995: 153). When women are baffled by their self-perceived inferiority, they seem unaware that gender is not a feminine-masculine dichotomy but a continuum with many possible gender identities on it. At the same time, when some women call for a halt to labeling women with derogatory terms, others label and objectify men in a similar way as seen in Chapter VI. Contemporary Chinese women's rising gender awareness and their growing economic power contributed to the creation of male labels as linguistic devices of resistance and empowerment.

The use of these labels indicates women's fervent wish to gain linguistic power through lashing out against male chauvinism and fantasizing about male celebrities' sexuality in daily language use. When labeling men, women show that as a historically powerless group, they now can also use language as a tool to feel empowered. However, women also face the dilemma of claiming linguistic agency in a consumer culture wrought by the market economy. Although the affection for effeminate young men may show a liberal attitude toward diverse gender presentations, the labeling practice per se not only puts female language users in the role of sexual consumers in the culture of neoliberal commodification but also undergirds existing power relations and inequalities. The popularization of the sexist labeling might also fuel fears of "soft masculinity," which is perceived as a subversive factor that detracts from the official pronouncement of state virility and its central role in accomplishing socioeconomic priorities.

#### 7.4 Concluding remarks

This dissertation has explored the role of women in gender discourse in post-reform China through the examination of representations of successful women in official mainstream media, grassroots women's voices on social media, and social perceptions of gender labeling practices. The findings suggest linguistic sexism in the cultural construction of women and social labeling practice, women's rising gender awareness, and the complexities and contradictions encountering Chinese feminism in the post-reform era. While this dissertation does not exhaust all gender labels and cannot fully cover gender discourses involving all social issues facing contemporary Chinese women, this project has made significant contributions to the field and highlights implications for future research on women's lived experience and feminist linguistics.

My dissertation contributes to the field of language and gender in three ways. First, it fills a research gap by providing a timely treatment of gender labeling through a community of



practice perspective, situating Chinese feminism in the specific sociohistorical and local context. This feminist linguistic approach makes individual identities embedded in the linguistic practices visible. The revelation of women's agentic choices not only highlights the importance of understanding women's place, their voices, and their changing role in contemporary China, but also addresses gender inequality in language use that hinders gender emancipation at individual, societal, and institutional levels. Second, this dissertation contributes to the interdisciplinary field of digital humanities research by providing an innovative methodological framework. Addressing the digital revolution from a socio-technological perspective, the new approach has shown empirical power to explain what makes women's empowerment possible in today's digital China. Third, my dissertation is also the first to use data mining from digitized press media and social media, supplemented with sociolinguistic survey data on the perceptions of the social meanings of gender labels and people who are labeled with those terms.

Economic reforms have successfully transformed China into a modern and powerful nation, but it seems the masculinist nature of the state and the market has not changed. Under the masculinist state order, women are catapulted into the public field of labor and politics and simultaneously propelled to return to the domestic sphere as wives and mothers, leaving them perplexed and in a quandary about their social values. The dilemma for women as mothers and wage workers, on the other hand, spurred feminists to carve out an inclusive discursive space in which people from all walks of lives can participate in articulating their frustrations and their hopes for social and institutional changes. As Freedman (2007: xii) noted, "Feminism responded to the contradictions in women's lives wrought by capitalist economic growth, as well as the limitations of democratic political ideals." Chinese feminism in the post-reform era has further developed to not only articulate the rejection of patriarchal rules but also move a step closer

towards gender equality by initiating social movements that demand changes of laws and customs.

Global movements and the employment of digital technology empower women to tap into collective actions across cultures and national borders through social media. Chinese women's active participation in cyber gender discourse presents an unprecedentedly forceful voice, resisting patriarchal authority and challenging hegemonic gender politics. However, these voices are predominantly made by digitally linked young urban women. Future research should examine the voices and narratives made by vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, including financially disempowered women, subjugated women who suffer from involuntary motherhood, and women in lower socioeconomic classes that face poverty, violence, abandonment, and exploitation. In addition, the sociolinguistic analysis in this dissertation only focused on the intersectionality of gender, age, and education and how these variables affect social perceptions of women and gender labels. Future research should also investigate a wider range of variables, such as class, sexuality, and ethnicity to bring about a more nuanced understanding of the changing social attitudes toward women and men.

True equality should not forestall anyone from pursuing freedom, developing their full potential, or realizing their self-worth; should not instrumentalize half of humanity for socioeconomic gains; should not overlook problems brought on by the policymaking and predicaments facing women and men. However, removing institutional forces impeding feminist causes does not automatically produce equality (Cameron 2009). Old patterns of thinking and behaviors may persist within social structures long after the disappearance of structural biases (Mills & Mullany 2011). The relationship between gender and society is thus a dialectical one. As pointed out by Wodak (1997: 108), "by only changing the organizational systems, no changes

in gender roles will be achieved, and vice versa; by changing gender roles, no significant change of the structure would be achieved.” Therefore, I want to conclude this dissertation by advocating for more feminist linguistic research to address linguistic sexism and gender imbalance at both individual and institutional levels as a starting point from which to reflect on and hopefully alter biased social attitudes, change stereotypical gender roles, champion movements for social justice, invite inquiry into law enforcement, and bring about true gender emancipation.

## APPENDIX A – SURVEY I (ORIGINAL CHINESE)

### 欢迎参加本研究调查!

您好，我想了解关于“女强人”“女汉子”“剩女”的语义特征和使用情况。这份匿名问卷将询问您一些与此有关的问题，也请您不要透露他人的隐私。您的回答将完全保密，请放心。

此调查只需 3-5 分钟即可完成。您参与此项研究纯属自愿。您有权因任何原因在调查期间随时退出，并且不会对您产生任何偏见。如果您想联系研究负责人讨论此研究，请发送电子邮件至 [jlang7@uoregon.edu](mailto:jlang7@uoregon.edu)。

请注意，此调查在笔记本或台式电脑上的显示效果最佳。在移动设备上使用时，某些功能的兼容性可能稍差。点击下列按钮即表示您同意自愿参与此调查，您的母语是汉语，您已年满 18 周岁，且了解您可以因任何原因随时选择终止参与此调查。

- 我同意，开始调查
- 我不同意，拒绝参加

Q1 请问您的性别是

- 女性
- 男性
- 不便说明

Q2 请问您的年龄是

- 18 岁-29 岁
- 30 岁-39 岁
- 40 岁-49 岁
- 50 岁-59 岁
- 60 岁-69 岁
- 70 岁以上

Q3 请问您所接受的最高教育水平为

- 高中
- 大学
- 研究生

Q4 请问您是否【听说过】以下用语？

|     | 总是听到                  | 经常听到                  | 有时听到                  | 很少听到                  | 从未听说                  |
|-----|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 女强人 | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 女汉子 | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

剩女 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Q5 如果听说过，请问您在【什么场合】听过/见过这种用法？（可多选）

|     | 报刊/书籍/新闻                 | 影视/娱乐节目                  | 微信                       | 微博                       | 口头聊天                     | 从未听说                     |
|-----|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 女强人 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 女汉子 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 剩女  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q6 您是否【使用过】以下用语？

|     | 总是使用                  | 经常使用                  | 有时使用                  | 很少使用                  | 从未使用                  |
|-----|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 女强人 | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 女汉子 | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 剩女  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q7 您认为以下用语是褒义、贬义、还是中性？

|     | 褒义                    | 中性                    | 贬义                    |
|-----|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 女强人 | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 女汉子 | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 剩女  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q8 请您用 3-5 个词描述被称为“女强人”的群体（可从外貌、性格、工作、婚姻家庭等方面来描述）

\_\_\_\_\_

Q9 请您用 3-5 个词描述被称为“剩女”的群体（可从外貌、性格、工作、婚姻家庭等方面来描述）

\_\_\_\_\_

Q10 请您用 3-5 个词描述被称为“女汉子”的群体（可从外貌、性格、工作、婚姻家庭等方面来描述）

\_\_\_\_\_

Q11 您是否还有其他要补充的内容？

- 否
- 是（请简单介绍） \_\_\_\_\_

非常感谢您在百忙之中抽出时间填写问卷！

## APPENDIX A – SURVEY I (ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

## Welcome to the survey

Hello! You are invited to take part in a study investigating the semantic features and usage of “strong women,” “female tough guys,” and “leftover women.”

This is an anonymous questionnaire, and your answer will be completely confidential. This survey takes approximately 3-5 minutes to complete. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time during the investigation for any reason. If you want to contact the researcher to discuss this research, please send an email to [jlang7@uoregon.edu](mailto:jlang7@uoregon.edu).

Please note that this survey works best on a laptop or desktop computer. When used on a mobile device, the compatibility of some functions may be slightly low. By selecting “Yes” below, you are indicating that (1) your native language is Chinese, (2) you are 18 years of age or older, (3) you have voluntarily decided to participate, and (4) you understand that you have the right to withdraw at any time during the investigation for any reason.

- Yes, I agree
- No, I disagree

Q1 What is your gender?

- Woman
- Man
- Prefer to not indicate

Q2 How old are you?

- 18-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60-69
- Above 70

Q3 What is the highest level of education that you received?

- High School
- University/College
- Postgraduate

Q4 How often do you encounter the following terms?

|                   | Always                | Often                 | Sometimes             | Rarely                | Never                 |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Strong women      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Female tough guys | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Leftover women    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q5 If you have heard of the terms, on what occasions do you encounter the terms? (Multiple choices allowed)

|                   | Newspaper/<br>books      | TV/Internet<br>shows/<br>movies | WeChat<br>Network        | Social<br>Media          | Oral<br>conversation     | Never<br>heard of        |
|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Strong women      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Female tough guys | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Leftover women    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q6 How often do you use the following terms?

|                   | Always                | Often                 | Sometimes             | Rarely                | Never                 |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Strong women      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Female tough guys | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Leftover women    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q7 Do you think the following terms are positive, neutral, or negative?

|                   | Positive              | Neutral               | Negative              |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Strong women      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Female tough guys | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Leftover women    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q8 Please use 3-5 words to describe women called “strong women” in terms of appearance, personality, career, marriage, family, etc.

---

Q9 Please describe women called “leftover women” in 3-5 words in terms of appearance, personality, career, marriage, family, etc.

---

Q10 Please describe women called “female tough guys” in 3-5 words in terms of appearance, personality, career, marriage, family, etc.

---

Q11 Do you have anything else to add?

- No
- Yes (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time spent taking this survey!

## APPENDIX B – SURVEY II (ORIGINAL CHINESE)

### 欢迎参加本研究调查!

您好，我想了解关于“直男癌”和“小鲜肉”的语义特征和使用情况。这份匿名问卷将询问您一些与此有关的问题，也请您不要透露他人的隐私。您的回答将完全保密，请放心。

此调查只需 5-10 分钟即可完成。您参与此项研究纯属自愿。您有权因任何原因在调查期间随时退出，并且不会对您产生任何偏见。如果您想联系研究负责人讨论此研究，请发送电子邮件至 [jlang7@uoregon.edu](mailto:jlang7@uoregon.edu)。

请注意，此调查在笔记本或台式电脑上的显示效果最佳。在移动设备上使用时，某些功能的兼容性可能稍差。

点击下列按钮即表示您同意自愿参与此调查，您的母语是汉语，您已年满 18 周岁，且了解您可以因任何原因随时选择终止参与此调查。

- 我同意，开始调查
- 我不同意，拒绝参加

Q1 请问您的性别是

- 女性
- 男性
- 不便说明

Q2 请问您的年龄是

- 18 岁-26 岁
- 27 岁-35 岁
- 36 岁-45 岁
- 46 岁以上

Q3 您认为“直男癌”一词是褒义、贬义还是中性？

- 褒义
- 贬义
- 中性

Q4 您认为“小鲜肉”一词是褒义、贬义还是中性？

- 褒义
- 贬义
- 中性



Q5 您对被称为“直男癌”的这类群体的主观感受如何？

- 非常喜欢
- 比较喜欢
- 无感
- 比较讨厌
- 非常讨厌

Q6 您对被称为“小鲜肉”的这类群体的主观感受如何？

- 非常喜欢
- 比较喜欢
- 无感
- 比较讨厌
- 非常讨厌

Q7 请问您在日常现实生活中(非影视作品中)遇到“直男癌”的频率为

- 总是遇到
- 经常遇到
- 有时遇到
- 很少遇到
- 几乎没有遇到过
- 从来没有遇到过

Q8 请问您在日常现实生活中(非影视作品中)遇到“小鲜肉”的频率为

- 总是遇到
- 经常遇到
- 有时遇到
- 很少遇到
- 几乎没有遇到过
- 从来没有遇到过

-----此部分为关于“直男癌”的开放式问题，非常感谢您花时间填写！-----

Q9 对被称为“直男癌”的群体，请您用 3-5 个词或短语描述其【相貌】

---

Q10 对被称为“直男癌”的群体，请您用 3-5 个词或短语描述其【着装】

---

Q11 对被称为“直男癌”的群体，请您用 3-5 个词或短语描述其【性格】

---

Q12 对被称为“直男癌”的群体，请您用 3-5 个词或短语描述其【恋爱观】

---

Q13 对被称为“直男癌”的群体，请您用 3-5 个词或短语描述其【家庭观】

---

Q14 对被称为“直男癌”的群体，请您用 3-5 个词或短语描述其【职业】

---

-----此部分为关于“小鲜肉”的开放式问题，非常感谢您花时间填写！-----

Q15 对被称为“小鲜肉”的群体，请您用 3-5 个词或短语描述其【相貌】

---

Q16 对被称为“小鲜肉”的群体，请您用 3-5 个词或短语描述其【着装】

---

Q17 对被称为“小鲜肉”的群体，请您用 3-5 个词或短语描述其【性格】

---

Q18 对被称为“小鲜肉”的群体，请您用 3-5 个词或短语描述其【恋爱观】

---

Q19 对被称为“小鲜肉”的群体，请您用 3-5 个词或短语描述其【家庭观】

---

Q20 对被称为“小鲜肉”的群体，请您用 3-5 个词或短语描述其【职业】

---

-----这是本次问卷的最后一个部分，问题涉及到“直男癌”对性别角色的看法-----

Q21 您认为所谓“直男癌”群体在【男女社会地位】这个问题上有什么看法？

---

Q22 您认为所谓“直男癌”群体在【男女学历】这个问题上有什么看法？

---

Q23 您认为所谓“直男癌”群体在【家务分工】这个问题上有什么看法？

---

Q24 您认为所谓“直男癌”群体在【家庭中谁做决定】这个问题上有什么看法？

---

Q25 您认为所谓“直男癌”群体在【家庭中谁掌握理财权】这个问题上有什么看法？

---

Q26 您认为所谓“直男癌”群体在【家庭育儿】这个问题上有什么看法？

---

Q27 您是否还有其他要补充的内容？

- 否
- 是（请简单介绍） \_\_\_\_\_

非常感谢您在百忙之中抽出时间填写问卷！

## APPENDIX B – SURVEY II (ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

### Welcome to the survey

Hello! You are invited to take part in a study investigating the semantic features and usage of ‘straight man cancer’ and ‘little fresh meat.’

This is an anonymous questionnaire, and your answer will be completely confidential. This survey takes approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time during the investigation for any reason. If you want to contact the researcher to discuss this research, please send an email to [jlang7@uoregon.edu](mailto:jlang7@uoregon.edu).

Please note that this survey works best on a laptop or desktop computer. When used on a mobile device, the compatibility of some functions may be slightly low. By selecting “Yes” below, you are indicating that (1) your native language is Chinese, (2) you are 18 years of age or older, (3) you have voluntarily decided to participate, and (4) you understand that you have the right to withdraw at any time during the investigation for any reason.

- Yes, I agree
- No, I disagree

Q1 What is your gender?

- Woman
- Man
- Prefer to not indicate

Q2 How old are you?

- 18-26
- 27-35
- 36-45
- Above 46

Q3 Do you think “straight man cancer” is a positive, negative, or neutral term?

- Positive
- Negative
- Neutral

Q4 Do you think “little fresh meat” is a positive, negative, or neutral term?

- Positive
- Negative
- Neutral

Q5 What is your feeling toward men who are labeled “straight man cancer”?

- Like a great deal
- Like a moderate amount
- Neither like nor dislike
- Dislike a moderate amount
- Dislike a great deal

Q6 What is your feeling towards men who are labeled “little fresh meat”?

- Like a great deal
- Like a moderate amount
- Neither like nor dislike
- Dislike a moderate amount
- Dislike a great deal

Q7 How often do you encounter men who are labeled “straight man cancer” in reality?

- Always
- Most of the time
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Almost never
- Never

Q8 How often do you encounter men who are labeled “little fresh meat” in reality?

- Always
- Most of the time
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Almost never
- Never

-----Open-ended questions about “straight man cancer.” -----

Q9 Please use 3-5 words to describe men called “straight man cancer” in terms of their appearance.

---

Q10 Please use 3-5 words to describe men called “straight man cancer” in terms of their dressing style.

---

Q11 Please use 3-5 words to describe men called “straight man cancer” in terms of their personality.

---

Q12 Please use 3-5 words to describe men called “straight man cancer” in terms of their viewpoints of romantic relationships.

---

Q13 Please use 3-5 words to describe men called “straight man cancer” in terms of their viewpoints of family life.

---

Q14 Please use 3-5 words to describe men called “straight man cancer” in terms of their occupation.

---

-----Open-ended questions about “little fresh meat.” -----

Q15 Please use 3-5 words to describe men called “little fresh meat” in terms of their appearance.

---

Q16 Please use 3-5 words to describe men called “little fresh meat” in terms of their dressing style.

---

Q17 Please use 3-5 words to describe men called “little fresh meat” in terms of their personality.

---

Q18 Please use 3-5 words to describe men called “little fresh meat” in terms of their viewpoints of romantic relationships.

---

Q19 Please use 3-5 words to describe men called “little fresh meat” in terms of their viewpoints of family life.

---

Q20 Please use 3-5 words to describe men called “little fresh meat” in terms of their occupation.

---

The last part of this survey is about familial gender roles from the perspective of men labeled “straight man cancer.”

Q21 What do you think their opinions are on the social status of men and women?

---

Q22 What do you think their opinions are on levels of education of men and women?

---

Q23 What do you think their opinions are on division of housework?

---

Q24 What do you think their opinions are on familial decision-making?

---

Q25 What do you think their opinions are on familial financial power?

---

Q26 What do you think their opinions are on in-home childcare?

---

Q27 Do you have anything else to add?

- No
- Yes (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time spent taking this survey!

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