Media Representations of *Nüding* in China (2005–2015)

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In recent years, Chinese media witnessed an increasing She Power in a mosaic context with an impressive improvement in women labor participation and a resurgence of patriarchal traditions. Chinese women–themed investigations have been mostly restricted to sociological and psychological perspectives; however, the discursive representations of Chinese child-free women and the exploration of the ideological factors remain inadequate. To address the gap, this article examines news representations of *nüding* (child-free women), a gender-nonconforming group, by drawing on van Leeuwen's social actor theory as one strand of critical discourse analysis. In so doing, we collected data from two state-owned newspapers, *Global Times* and *China Daily*, in China. Our data consist of 93 news reports on *nüding*-related phenomena. Research results reveal that *nüding* are dominantly represented as pressure-suffering women, self-centered women, and career-minded women. This article ends with a discussion of ideological contestations that emerge from such representations of *nüding.*

Keywords: nüding, China, news representations, social actor, tradition, modernity

On November 6, 2020, China's education mogul apologized for his offending remarks on women by claiming that child-free women are "losers" (Wu, 2018). His remarks were refuted by many netizens who satirized him, as his higher education and business success failed to help him "understand women's value and what gender equality is" (Wu, 2018). The mogul's words are reminiscent of such outdated Chinese axioms as *hongyan huoshui* (women are trouble). His views on child-free women correspond with the dominating patriarchal tradition that emphasizes the most unfilial act is the failure to produce an heir for family blood line continuation (Freedman, 1970).

The online firestorm decrying the offensive speech heralds the active voicing of Chinese women through social media. Patriarchy is contested and challenged by modern innovations on female ideals. Even so, academics have yet accorded *nüding* phenomenon much attention, leaving them stigmatized with no virtue and no filial piety and also excluded from the normativity in China. Given that gender stereotyping is neither materially experienced nor discursively enacted in the same way for women everywhere, this study

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aims to explore how *nüding* are discursively represented by Chinese media, while also drawing more understanding of how this gender-nonconforming group reflects the changing gender norms in China. More specifically, the study attempts to address three questions:

RQ1:   *How are nüding discursively represented in Chinese state English-language newspapers?*

RQ2:   *What ideologies are delineated from the discursive strategies of representing nüding?*

RQ3:   *How do these ideologies expound, support, and clash with tradition and modernity?*

Contextualizing Womanhood

Traditional Contexts

A woman is socially and culturally gendered (Beauvoir, 1953). A feminine creature is also created in her interaction with certain sociocultural contexts. Traditionally, Chinese Confucianism provides a patriarchal logic that legitimates the prioritization of men over women (Peng, Hou, Nik, & Zhang, 2021) and establishes the common sense for a harmonious and hierarchical society (Stacey, 1983). Chinese women were allowed to learn only particular skills, such as cooking and needlework, for family services (Tang, 1999). As the miniature unit of the social order, family solidarity in China was often maintained through familism, particularly being reinforced by filial piety that often accentuates younger generations' subordination to the older (Hsu, 1971). The biggest filial piety is to procreate (Baker, 1979). This generation-age-gender patriarchal thought predominantly conceptualizes women's identities and virtues (Ebrey, 2003), especially impacting their fertility intentions.

Also, Chinese history emphasizes a "*yin-yang* balance" gender ethics (Liu, 2014, p. 20). The *yin-yang* gender ideology appears to define men and women as complementary, but it actually accentuates the hierarchal gender roles of *nanzun nübei* (men are superior to women). Particularly, *yin* implies female ideals to be yielding, receptive, and passive, while *yang* requires male ideals to be active, assertive, and dominating (Zhu, 2018). In this sense, the *yin-yang* balance naturalizes gender-biological differences (Lang, 1968). If "*yin* unnaturally gains supremacy, cosmic and social orders will be at risk" (Lazar, 2005, p. 9). As a consequence, the association of womanhood with submissiveness, foolishness, and selflessness is fixated. It results in the sociocultural confinement of female ideals to nonoccupational and self-sacrificing roles that include procreation, childrearing, and housework (Friedan, 2001). Women are thus confined to domesticity and deterred from engagement in public sphere (Marchetti, 2009).

Instead, providing services for parents, husbands, and children thus constitutes "the central core of normal, healthy feminine identity, and ultimately the meanings of woman" (Gillespie, 2000, p. 225) in China. And female ideals are often defined by "maternity instead of intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, [and] relation to others rather than the creation of selfness" (Furth, 1990, p. 190).

Modern Contexts

After 1949, Chinese women lived in a unique context where the Marxist ideology was disseminated to promote egalitarian or desexualize gender roles, which modernized Chinese families within a Communist

political economy (Davis & Harrell, 1993). In the prereform times, more than 90% Chinese women were mobilized to participate in public production (Ji, Wu, Sun, & He, 2017) and enjoyed unprecedented gender equality, particularly in political and economic statuses (Gilmartin, 1995). With rapid socialization (Wu & Zhou, 2015), they were claimed to be half the sky (Xiao, 2013). Hereafter, another major transformation under the influence of "postsocialist gender politics" (Wallis, 2015, p. 226) witnesses an ever-more-intense social milieu for Chinese women (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2020; Gill, Kelan, & Scharff, 2017).

From the late 1970s onward, a series of reforms were implemented in China to deliquate state-allocated employment, reduce state welfare provision, and link China to the global capitalism (Peng, Cummings, & Li, 2022). This transmutation not only facilitates the dissemination of values of individualism and competition but also spurs Chinese people's self-reflexive capacity (Xu & Tan, 2021). Individual competency becomes an integral part for self-realization, allowing the penetration of neoliberal feminism and postfeminism into women's lives in China (Gill, 2007; Liu, 2014; Rottenberg, 2018).

Neoliberal feminism conceptualizes women as entrepreneurial, self-regulating, and calculating creatures, whose capacity is often evaluated by the fulfillment of their well-being and self-care (Gill, 2007, 2008). Women, under the capital-driven market economy, are considered as human capital (Wolf, 2002) whose upward mobility is often conceived of unwavering commitment to their careers. This neoliberal market rationality is mobilized to cultivate women to lean into their careers based on investment-benefit calculus (Chen, 2013; Rottenberg, 2018). Postfeminism presents an affective, psychological, and cultural orientation that emphasizes individual building with positive affects (Gill et al., 2017). It centers women with self-empowerment, free choice, self-transformation, and career ambition (Litosseliti, Gill, & Favaro, 2019). On the one hand, positive affect is mobilized to "[induce] women to constantly work on themselves and their emotional states to cultivate an individuated disposition" (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 114). On the other hand, it blames women for their disadvantaged positions. Furthermore, it places the responsibility of well-being, fulfilling life, and the burden of unhappiness on the shoulders of individual women. Women's individual competency (Feldshuh, 2018) rather than the collective duty and needs of the family has been valued as a crucial struggle for gender equality.

Although Chinese government is committed to improving women's status, it still promotes female ideals with frequent allusion to the *yin-yang* balance, namely highlighting the inherent and naturalized gender differences (Liu, 2014; Wallis & Shen, 2018). Women are urged to "take on attributes of care, emotionality, communicativeness deriving from their role as reproducers and nurturers" (Liu, 2014, p. 20). The contestation surges between traditional femininity and individualized women cohort (Wang, 2014). A series of made-in-China feminisms such as Chinese "country feminism, entrepreneurial feminism," and "noncooperative feminism," circulate and prevail in China (Wu & Dong, 2019). The gender-nonconforming *nüding* belong to the third category. Their emergence represents the increasing She Power with individual competency, free choice, pressure, and struggle in China.

Representations of *Nüding*

Representation is a discursive meaning-making process that mirrors reality, serving to construct the reality and identities of a social group from particular historical and ideological perspectives (Gauntlett,

2008). In various cultural contexts such as news or ad media, social assumptions and patriarchal power relations are discursively produced, perpetuated, and challenged (Lazar, 2005).

Nüding, a transformation from DINK introduced to China in 1980s, is a Chinese term for voluntarily childless or child-free women, and child-free men are *nanding*. Given that gender lexicon is not only a set of labels describing phenomena but also constitutes a conceptual framework that creates and interprets phenomena (Henig, 2017), it is necessary to interpret the meaning of *nüding*. *Nü* means female, and *ding* means "*chengnian nanzi*" (i.e., male adult) or "*laodong de ren*" (i.e., laboring man; https://zidian.aies.cn/NjI=.htm). Therefore, the literal cue for *nüding* is a woman living a man's life. The emerging *nüding* phenomenon might be attributed to the rising individualistic values that take roots in contemporary family education (Brannen & Nilson, 2005; Smart & Shipman, 2005).

Unlike traditional marriages that emphasize family needs and collective duties such as parents-caring and childrearing, modern marriages often prioritize needs and values of individuals (Wang, 2014). Women's pursuit of child-free alternative lifestyles is viewed as "women's ultimate liberation" (Movius, 1976, p. 61) and depicted as a way to uphold an "independent and autonomous female identity" (Movius, 1976, p. 62). Constrained by traditional gender ideology, however, *nüding* still face more discrimination than childbearing women, while also being marginalized by the "hetero-gendered order even in the female community" (Lazar, 2005, p. 9).

Similarly, the female aspiration for freedom in the West also clashes with the long-accepted female normativity. The representation of child-free women with liberation, independence, and autonomy has been challenged with negativity such as "failure" (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007, p. 1278), "self-centered, materialistic" (Rich, Taket, & Graham, 2011, p. 227), "selfish, immature, and unfeminine" (Letherby, 2002, p.10) in sociological, anthropological, and feminism research. Linguistically, Graham and Rich (2014) investigate the representations of child-free women in Australia printed media between 2007 and 2011. Three negative representations (i.e., career women, the artifact of feminism, and reprimanded women) are identified to indicate the undesirability of being child-free women in contemporary Australian society. Such negativity easily finds support in other linguistic investigations into the identities of child-free women in the United States (Badinter, 2011) and Germany (Hill, 2008, 2014).

In China, studies on child-free women often focus on the sociological examinations of family structure transformations, for instance, the shrinking family size, the single motherhood (Wang & Zhou, 2010), and the rise of DINK families (Zimmer & Kwong, 2003). Other child-free women–related sociological studies are conducted to examine the alterations of family values such as the eroding filial piety and the ideational changes of gender identity (Hu & Scott, 2014). In addition, there are a few studies that focus on female aspirations for independence and autonomy. Impressively, such studies are mainly discussed from parenting styles (see Shen, 2020).

However, investigations into discursive representations of Chinese *nüding* and the influencing ideological factors behind the discursive representations are still scant. Fairclough (2001) reminds us that language is significant in the production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power, and practically, it contributes to the domination of some people by others. To fill this gap, the present article

intends to (1) reveal discursive representations of *nüding* in Chinese news media, (2) discover how *nüding* are introduced to the global audience, and (3) investigate the construction of *nüding* identity and explicate the underlying ideological contestations between patriarchal tradition and individualistic modernity.

Methodology

The materials were collected from two state-owned English-language newspapers in China: *China Daily* and *Global Times*. These prestigious and centrally controlled party newspapers aim to disseminate the ideologies of the party and the state council to the public, while also providing "informative, influential, and innovative" (https://www.globaltimes.cn/about-us/) representations for the vortex of ongoing transformation in China. Additionally, given that Chinese "universal two-child" family planning policy came into effect in January 2016 and the influential roles of central government's changing birth policies in shaping China's gender politics and state media reports, we thus confined our data collection to a 10-year period. It spanned from January 3, 2005 (when the first *nüding*-related news was archived) to December 26, 2015 (when the last *nüding*-related news before the implementation of the two-child policy was archived).

Specifically, the collection process consisted of four steps. Initially, we used key terms *childless/child-free women*, *DINK*, *women without child/children/kids*, and *career women* to search the state-owned news websites and obtained 115 potential reports. Worth noting is the newspapers' mixed use of childless/child-free women for *nüding*, as the term childless women also refers to *shidu nü* (women who lost their only child). We thus selected child-free women to represent *nüding* and finally excluded 10 irrelevant news reports on *shidu nü* and 12 on career women with children.

The second step involved independent inspection of the collected data. To be specific, we three authors separately read through these collected news reports to single out the pieces that surround *nüding* or concern *DINKs*. Our third step involved the comparison of independent inspection related to the second. We checked potential pieces collaboratively, which yielded a final 93 news reports: 45 from *China Daily* and 48 from *Global Times*. Finally, each author independently reread the 93 reports to identify the frames of *nüding* for further analysis. Defined as the "selection" and "salience" of certain features or issues, framing aims to "promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, and moral evaluation" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Two of the authors crosschecked their results by consulting the third one concerning the classification of controversial news pieces. Three prominent framings in news reports were obtained, as shown in Table 1.

To explore the ideologies underlying news representations of *nüding* identity, such three framings will be further analyzed by using one string of critical discourse analysis—van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor theory. This analytical framework is extended from the study of grammatical representations of participants in Halliday's Functional Grammar (Halliday, 1985). It draws up a sociosemantic inventory to represent collective identities of the social actors involved in social practice (van Leeuwen, 2008). Also, it places emphasis on sociosemantic interpretations when representing social actors within specific contexts. Representations of social actors, however, are realized by specific grammatical forms that include nominalization, singularity, mass noun, and so on. While van Leeuwen (2008) puts forward two key

strategies, exclusion and inclusion, for representation, the subcategories have also been proved useful in social actor representations. Table 2 presents seven subcategories dominantly used in our study.

Table 1. Three Salient Framings Concerning Nüding-Related Reports.

Frames	Global Times	China Daily	Total
nüding as pressure-suffering women	27	23	50
nüding as self-centered women	13	12	25
nüding as career-minded women	8	10	18
Total	48	45	93

Table 2. Seven Subcategories of Social Actors (van Leeuwen, 2008) in Our Data.

Subcategories	Definitions and Realizations
Backgrounding	Social actors are backgrounded by infinitival clauses with *to*, nonfinite clauses with *–ing*, and *–ed* participles.
Association	Social actors represented as groups that can be realized by parataxis.
Differentiation	Differentiating social actors from other groups, and creating the differences between "self/us," and "other/them."
Genericization	Social actors represented with generic references that can be realized by the plural or singular word with "a" and "an."
Aggregation	Quantifying groups of social actors who are treated as statistics through mechanisms such as opinion polls, surveys, marketing research, and so on.
Collectivization	Collectivizing social actors through plural personal pronouns or a mass noun to denote a group of people.
Individualization	Individualizing social actors through singular noun or pronoun.

Results

This section will explicate how *nüding* are discursively represented in Chinese English-language newspapers. Particularly, we will focus on three framings around *nüding* as pressure-suffering women, self-centered women, and career-minded women, respectively.

Framing 1: Nüding as Pressure-Suffering Women

According to our data, more than half of *(n = 50) nüding*-related news reports project the framing of *nüding* as pressure-suffering women, particularly as sociocultural pressure–suffering women ($n = 45$), and physiological pressure–suffering women ($n = 5$). Impressively, backgrounding, differentiation, and association as key strategies are used to frame *nüding* as sociocultural pressure–suffering women.

Example 1: The Confucian philosopher Mencius outlined the traditional Chinese attitudes when he described not having children deliberately as one of the three most serious sins. (Liao, 2014, para. 23)

Example 1 lends credence to our observation on *nüding* as sociocultural pressure–suffering women with the backgrounding strategy. Here, the journalist targets Mencius as a "role model authority" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 109) to delegitimize the choices of people who bear no children in a deliberate manner. Using the backgrounding strategy, *nüding* as child-free people are thus delegitimized as forced recipients or bearers of "one of the three most serious sins" (Liao, 2014). Worth noting is the choice of the noun "sin," which may imply that *nüding* are as evil as the demons.

This example alerts us against a deep-rooted childbearing concept *"yanger fanglao"* (raising children for being looked after in later life). It derives from Confucian filial piety that has established Chinese family norms where the older family members depend on their offspring when they turn old (Chan & Tan, 2004). In this regard, parents are easier to become powerful supporters for and adherents to the Confucian familism that often prioritizes obligations of the family members to the family (Yang, 2004). Therefore, the biggest sociocultural pressure imposed on *nüding* may come from their beloved parents, as evidenced in the following example.

> **Example 2:** I had no idea how to broach the sensitive topic that my husband and I had decided not to have any children. The last time I tried to bring it up, my parents got quite upset and killed the conversation. . . . My father told me I was crazy for even considering the thought of not having children. (Zhang, 2014, para. 10)

Example 2 creates two intergenerational opposing groups between Us (i.e., the couple) and Them (i.e., a woman's parents), by deploying the strategies of differentiation and individualization to represent *nüding*. Obviously, "my husband and I" form the Us group, while "my parents" become the Them group. The contestation between Us and Them is specified by affective but negative expressions realized by adjective (i.e., upset and crazy), verb (i.e., kill), and adverb (i.e., even). In this sense, the pressure imposed to child-free women and the contention between Us and Them appears to be irreconcilable. As Chan and Tan (2004) observed, such Confucian gender ethics as "three obediences" and "four virtues" in China have confined women's value to maternity and kinship roles as virtuous wives and competent mothers. Clearly, the parents in Example 2 are die-hard followers of Chinese traditional gender ethics. Apart from Confucian confinements to traditional virtuous womanhood, another form of sociocultural pressure that often perceives *nüding* as incomplete women can be seen in Example 3.

> **Example 3:** The feeling is common among women of the post-1980 generation who are married but have no plans to have a baby. It is difficult for them because most parents think having a child is very important for the happiness and well-being of a family. They believe going childless means pity and loneliness for a woman. It is as if women without kids lack something for their whole life. (Wang, 2010, para. 4)

Here, "the feeling" refers to the anxiety and pressure imposed on *nüding* by their parents to have babies. At the beginning, *nüding* are defined as a group of people with homogenous decision within a certain time, by using backgrounding and collectivization strategies. The following two sentences used a differentiation strategy to establish two kinds of families: families with children and childless families. Children are believed, as a key component, to unite the family by bringing family happiness and well-being.

Without having children, women's lives—and even the whole family—are unhappy and imperfect. However, here lies a fallacy that *duozi* (more sons) does not equal *duo fu* (more blessings).

Unlike Example 2 that creates a scenario where parents consider a child-free choice as a conversational taboo, this example relates pressure to *nüding* by regretting an incomplete life. Both are deeply rooted in Confucian depictions about virtuous women. Example 4, however, presents another negative label of *nüding* as "selfish, career-minded," and "bad for society" (Lin, 2015).

> **Example 4:** Childfree is not an easy choice, as childfree women are often labeled with a negative stereotype of being too selfish or too career-minded. According to the Pew report, 38 percent of respondents said childfree women are "bad for society." (Lin, 2015, paras. 11–12)

Child-free women's pressures are explicitly conveyed in the first sentence. Particularly, the labels that child-free women endure are represented with association strategy by using the parataxis "too selfish" and "too career-minded." Furthermore, this negative stereotyped identity accords with the quantified comments "bad for society" in the next sentence, which is realized by aggregation strategy, as it quantifies respondents with statistics "38%." Such a negative representation is easy to understand. For instance, Ye, Liu, Du, and Xia (2003) claim that Chinese social norms require virtuous women to commit to household issues and private sections, while also pursuing family oriented goals with selfless sacrifice. Aaltio and Huang (2018) also indicates that successful career women are often depicted as unhappily married or unsuitable for marriage. Gu (2013), however, notes that women who give priorities to careers rather than to family duties would be reprimanded as selfish and unfeminine, in that they break sociocultural expectations on virtuous women as subordinate and sacrificing.

Another salient frame is to represent *nüding* as physiological pressure–suffering women ($n = 5$) that are realized by the strategies of genericization, differentiation, and association. In this regard, *nüding* are reported to face the threat from women-specific diseases, such as "uterus tumors, age-related infertility, immunity, cancer," and "menopause." These diseases are believed to be caused by their child-free choices. Below is an example illustrating *nüding* as age-related infertility-suffering women.

> **Example 5:** Wang said women need to "think more thoroughly" about committing to a DINK lifestyle than men, who suffer fewer age-related infertility problems than women. "If a husband wants a kid and is still able to but his wife can't have one, such conflict can put strain on a marriage." (Zhang, 2013, para. 10)

As a deputy director at a famous maternity hospital in Beijing, Wang's expertise and social status are directly mobilized to legitimize and rationalize her statements. In addition, the journalist uses differentiation strategy to create two groups: *nanding* (child-free men) and *nüding*. This age-related infertility problem is definitely more anxiety provoking for child-free women than child-free men, as women are more confined by their biological clocks for procreation. Although the pressure imposed on *nüding* seems to be spatially decreasing from Examples 1–5, the intensity of pressures is increasing. As we know, it is much harder to alter the biological clock of female fertility.

Framing 2: Nüding as Self-Centered Women

Unlike framing 1, where *nüding* experience social, parental, conjugal, and even personal health pressures, framing 2 represents them as self-centered women (*n* = 25) who tend to prioritize individualized lifestyles and high-quality life. The representations of *nüding* in this framing are realized by such strategies as collectivization, differentiation, and association. What follows is a representative frame of *nüdings'* individualized lifestyles.

> **Example 6:** White- and golden-collar female workers, who regard their professional
> development as the most important part of their lives, also have other reasons not to have
> a child. They prefer to spend their holidays traveling overseas, exercising in the gym,
> having facials in beauty salons or feeding pets at home. (Wang, 2010, para. 7)

In this example, collectivization strategy is used with expressions like "white- and golden-collar female workers" to specify the economic status of the female workers. Moreover, association strategy is deployed to exemplify *nüdings'* self-oriented choices for their lives, for instance, "professional development, traveling, exercising, beauty," and "pets," which contextualizes child-free women with individualistic performances. Influenced by neoliberal feminism and postfeminism values to promote personal choices, self-empowerment, and self-care (Gill, 2008), these women embrace lifestyles that highlight individual incentive and personal happiness. This finding confirms previous observations (e.g., Peng, 2021; Yu, Coffie, & Feng, 2022) on the transmutation of Chinese womanhood. The following example shows another interesting choice pertaining to *nüdings'* individualized lifestyles.

> **Example 7:** "My husband and I have such a good relationship with our babies [her pets],"
> said Xiaoyu Shanshan. "We have decided to take care of them for their entire lives, instead
> of having children." (Xie, 2015, para. 23)

This example underscores an individualistic choice that *nüding* have made to live a lighthearted lifestyle. On the one hand, to highlight the couple as pet-lovers, the journalist uses collectivization strategy with "we" to form a relatively stable group—conjugal relation—that holds shared opinion on pet-raising. Furthermore, Xiaoyu's affective expression implies that the couple should be committed pet-owners. On the other hand, the differentiation strategy is used to form two opposing groups between rearing children and owning pets. One possible reason for the emergence of such opposing groups is that pets ownership gives people a sense of autonomy and control over their personal lives. This can find consistent support from previous studies. Peng et al. (2022) and Xu and Tan (2021) claim that China's young generation are raised in a competitive marketization era that stimulates the development of individualist and self-autonomy. Facing the competitive and unpredictable public life, young people are more eager to achieve autonomy and self-actualization in their private life. Besides, *nüding* clearly advocate for a high-quality life, as shown in Example 8.

> **Example 8:** My husband and I are happy with our salaries but we don't think it is worth
> it to reduce our standard of living and endure all the stress just to pass on our genes.
> (Liao, 2014, para. 20)

According to this example, the DINK couple attaches great importance to quality of life rather than to having children. The journalist uses collectivization strategy with first-person plural "we" and the corresponding possessive pronoun "our" to emphasize the consensus between the couple about their child-free lifestyle. Moreover, the couple chooses a scientific expression "pass on genes" to replace traditional childbearing concepts like "*chuanzong jiedai*" (the continuation of patrilineal family blood line). For them, the self-oriented need for a quality life trumps the familial collective honor. They deny childrearing as a social and natural task but emphasize it as a personal choice, which thus challenges the traditional opinions of procreation.

To sum it up, framing 2 provides evidence for the circulation of two key concepts of modernity: individualism and self-actualization. Thus, personal desires and choices are often accentuated by the young generations when they consider their lifestyles. This individualistic culture and self-centered lifestyles can also be found in earlier research (e.g., Peng & Zhang, 2003; Wu & Dong, 2019).

Framing 3: Nüding as Career-Minded Women

In this framing (*n* = 18), *nüding*, represented as career-minded women, are mainly achieved through backgrounding and individualization strategies. Example 9 is a case in point that lends support to our observation.

> **Example 9:** As big cities began economic booms, a surge emerged in well-educated, high-earning women who prioritize their careers and hobbies over childrearing. (Zhang, 2013, para. 15)

Here, backgrounding strategy is used to represent *nüding* and their social economic statuses with the preposition "in." Doing so highlights *nüdings'* priority of career over childbearing, which may be aligned with Chinese social reform in the postsocialist era. Particularly, the one-child family planning policy, economic prosperity, and neoliberal individualism work together to cultivate the women born in 1980s to be the most confident, individualistic, and intelligent (Liu, 2014). Such women are encouraged to first invest in themselves so as to receive future returns on their self-investments. Thus, traditional values on family collective interests give way to self-care and self-making, which contributes to promoting the emergence and development of career-minded women.

In addition to backgrounding strategy, news reports are also found to use the individualization strategy to exemplify *nüdings'* personal opinions and experiences. As shown in Example 10, using individualization strategy lays out an individual perception and permutation for Zhao's career, marriage, and child.

> **Example 10:** "I spent all my time and energy on work in my late 20s," a "leftover woman" surnamed Zhao told the *Global Times*. "Career first, marriage second. Child none. That is my view." (Lin, 2014, para. 11)

As opposed to aforementioned examples, *nüding* represented in this example are still single and unmarried. Here, they are individualized with the first-person pronoun "I" and first-person possessive

pronoun "my" to highlight individual *nüdings'* attention to the return of career investments. They are most likely to embrace their singlehood and self-investment in the age of consumerism and individualism (see Wu & Dong, 2019; Yu, Coffie, & Feng, 2022). Example 10 exemplifies *nüdings'* investment in a more profitable way, that is, personal career investment over family investment. Career appears to provide an arena where individual investment and future return can be positively correlated.

Discussion

First, a key strategy deployed to represent *nüding* in framings 1 and 3 is backgrounding. As a substrategy of exclusion in van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor theory, backgrounding is used not only to exclude *nüdings'* involvement in bearing sociocultural pressures and holding career ambitions but also to help journalists and news agencies "deflect blame and culpability" about *nüding* framings (Williams & Wright, 2022, p. 3).

Second, differentiation strategy in framings 1 and 2 contributes to forming the opposing groups. Different conflicting groups reinforce the contradiction and contestation endured by *nüding*. In faming 1, for example, it creates (1) Us group that includes *nüding* and their husbands, (2) Them group that consists of *nüdings'* parents, (3) Self group that includes *nüding*, and (4) Other group that consists of *nüdings'* husbands. The pressures imposed to *nüding* are constructed and reinforced in words, actions, and beliefs by the beloved of *nüding*, including their husbands and parents. This fact indicates that there is little effort to connect *nüdings'* pressures, feelings, and struggles with the larger social or structural inequalities (Rottenberg, 2018). Similarly, differentiation strategy in framing 2 also creates two opposing groups between pet-raising and children-rearing. For example, while satisfying *nüdings'* urge and need for self-autonomy of their lives, pet-raising is negatively perceived as irresponsible, egoistic, and hedonistic (Yang & Li, 2022).

Third, the collectivization strategy in framing 2 enables readers to understand *nüdings'* social economic statuses such as "white and gold collar" and "well-educated." Their emergence may be encouraged by postsocial reforms in China, including the one-child policy (Ji, 2015), individualization and commercialization of Chinese society (Yan, 2009), and competitive market values of neoliberalism (Rottenberg, 2013; Xu & Tan, 2021). They are educated to be "independent, knowledgeable, competent," as upward social mobility can be achieved via their "self-determination, efforts, and smart choices" (Liu, 2014, p. 21). Such a female independence reshapes modern womanhood by emphasizing self-value and individual autonomy but disavowing women's values on traditional kinship roles. Framings 2 and 3 abound with this identity that represents *nüding* as self-centered and career-minded women.

Additionally, framings 2 and 3 further attest that Chinese women are living under the influence of neoliberal feminism and postfeminism. As Rottenberg (2018) rightly points out, neoliberal feminism is producing women whose "consumption, education, career, and mate selection are all configured as practices of self-investment" (p. 145). Self-investment, self-empowerment, and self-actualization are promoted by neoliberal feminism and postfeminism, which disavows the social, cultural, and economic forces that produce gender inequality. Meanwhile, neoliberal feminism and postfeminism construct and navigate women to be wholly responsible and blamable for their own individual lives (Liu, 2011). Gender inequality is thus converted from a structural problem into an individual concern. Hence, self-responsibilization and self-care

become obligatory for emancipatory and progressive women (Rottenberg, 2018; Thornham & Feng, 2010). With women's rising self-oriented pursuit, tensions and dilemmas also arise from women who may have trouble in escaping the influence of Chinese traditions.

It also should be mentioned that more than half of news reports in framing 1 evidence the important influence that traditions have exerted on *nüdings'* identity. Chinese familism and patriarchy construct the family hierarchy with two major sets of relations: filial piety to regulate intergenerational relations and *yin-yang* gender roles to shape conjugal relations (Schein, 1997). Filial piety gives precedence to the eldest male whose biggest wish is to ensure the continuation of the patrilineal family blood line (Song, 2008). In other words, the ultimate virtue for filial descendants is to fulfill the family wishes that are often sequenced in a descending order based on the generation-age-gender hierarchy (Chan & Tan, 2004; Deutsch, 2006). As a consequence, women's major duties are defined by two major kinship roles, namely virtuous wife and good mother (Baker, 1979). Since *nüding* voluntarily have renounced their values on motherhood, they are bound to confront pressures imposed by traditional sociocultural concepts, such as femininity traditionally defined as family oriented, subordinate, diligent, but unintelligent (Liu, 2006), and *yin-yang* gender ethics. Just as the question posed by Grill (2019): "When can a woman contemplating a child-free life find mirroring, validation, and connection without being othered?" (p. 64). However, the pressures imposed to *nüding* are most likely to increase, because of Chinese implementation of the multichild policy.

Conclusion

Informed by social actor theory, this article investigates *nüding* discourse in *China Daily* and *Global Times*. According to the results, three points deserve more attention. First, the framing of *nüding* as sociocultural pressure–suffering women discloses the prevailing gender ethics that are mainly inscribed by Confucian patriarchal and familial orders. Second, the framings of *nüding* as self-centered and career-minded women indicate that China is experiencing the circulation and influence of Western thoughts, such as neoliberal feminism and postfeminism. And third, these three framings together disclose the interaction, clashing, and contestation between familism and individualism.

In addition, ideological contestations emerging from such framings are identified, including patriarchy, familism, and individualism. Patriarchy and familism, particularly filial piety, are decisive traditional ideologies in shaping state news representations of *nüding* mainly for two reasons. First, both ideologies prioritize familial obligations and intergenerational relations higher than individual development and autonomy and push the childcare and old-age care into the parent-child familial system. Second, traditional familism with the generation-age-gender hierarchy serves as an effective strategy to realize China's modernization (Yan, 2018). Hence, the influence of the two traditional ideologies will still be dominating in the near future. Chinese women will also be expected to prioritize the needs of family, particularly their parents and husbands.

However, *nüding* choose to spend their prime time climbing social or professional ladders and highlight their needs of self-actualization in the public sphere. Inevitably they would be defamed as selfishness, calculation, or incompletion. Even within the female community, *nüding* are still othered, as early marriage and motherhood practices are prevailing as the social norm in China. However, the traditional

ideologies are contested, challenged, and interacted with the individualized modernity, particularly with the promotion of self-care and self-empowerment influenced by neoliberalism. The neofamilism concerned with the well-being of family members (Yan, 2018) begins to evolve from traditional familism that focused on familial hierarchy. *Nüding* captured this cultural shift within the family and took the initiative to make strategic and agentic responses to construct and realize their ideal self. The individualistic pursuit and individual fulfillment enable modern Chinese women to break away from the confinement of wifely and motherly duties in both inner and outer spheres; however, it fails to unveil the sociocultural and institutional forces that influence gender relationship.

Admittedly, the size of the data set and the samples is relatively limited. Further studies could consider a corpus-assisted in-depth comparative analysis by collecting social media discourse about *nüding* before and after the universal two-child policy in China. It will offer insights into disclosing the changing gender norms and family relationships in modern China.

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