Jiangshanjiao, Do You Get Your Period?:
Understanding Feminist Expressions Against State Propaganda in China

KEDI ZHOU◆[1]
University of Southern California, USA

In February 2020, the Communist Youth League introduced two virtual idols, Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman, on Weibo to gain political solidarity during COVID-19. However, the move sparked massive criticism for using an animated female idol while ignoring the needs of female medical workers in the pandemic's epicenter who lacked essential menstrual supplies. One post, "Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?" went viral and was retweeted more than 100,000 times in several hours before being censored. The pushback eventually led to the league deleting its original announcement. Based on 1,106 posts and 10 interviews, this study explores the emotions expressed through Jiangshanjiao and how they inform feminist online engagement in China. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's framework on emotions, the findings show that emotions expressed through Jiangshanjiao predominately circle around disgust and fear, which confront state propaganda, acknowledge the pervasiveness of sexual violence, and foster solidarity. Chinese feminism has been caught in the middle of misogyny and the strict control of activism. Reviewing Jiangshanjiao provides insights into how resistance has played out in the complicated gender politics in China.

Keywords: online feminism, propaganda, censorship, emotions, COVID-19

In February 2020, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League announced the debut of two virtual idols on China's major social media and video platforms, Jiangshanjiao (female) and Hongqiman (male; see Figure 1). Extracted from a famous poem by Chairman Mao, Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman mean "the gorgeous homeland" and "abundant red flags," respectively, in Chinese. Being introduced a month after the lockdown of Wuhan, the two animated teenage characters were expected to generate positive energy and encourage political solidarity in response to the unprecedented outbreak of the pandemic. However, massive criticism and pushback erupted almost immediately after the idols were publicized. By then, lots of public attention was paid to female medical workers in the epicenter—nurses on duty in Wuhan were seeking help online for supplies of tampons and pads since their requests were being turned down as unnecessary by their male supervisors, and female medical workers heading toward the frontline being shaved bald by

their male colleagues in front of cameras. Clashing with the widespread concern over the unfair treatment of female medical workers, the debut of two virtual idols was received as whitewashing of misogynistic practices. Female Weibo users started to express their dissent online, and one user's post, "Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?" was retweeted more than 100,000 times in several hours before it was censored. The resistance was so significant that it eventually led to the Communist Youth League withdrawing the virtual idols only 5 hours after it was posted and announced that they "were not ready to meet everybody yet" (Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman Official, 2020).

Figure 1. Screenshot showing Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman (Li, 2020).

Four years later, while the visibility of Jiangshanjiao in current discourse may have reduced, its semantic value in feminist online expressions remains important. Initially a direct challenge to state propaganda, Jiangshanjiao allows predominantly female users to critique issues such as shaming, sexual violence, and political oppression, particularly during the zero-COVID policy era. The practice of posing questions, inspired by the censored post "Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?", has transformed into a popular mode of expressing dissent. Meanwhile, Jiangshanjiao is also an epitome of the complex emotions underlying feminist activism. The figure of Jiangshanjiao encapsulates the deep feelings that energize and sustain the feminist movements. These emotions, articulated through digital expressions and interactions, not only challenge the immediate contexts of state control but also resonate with broader narratives of gender resistance, making Jiangshanjiao a lasting symbol of how deeply felt emotions can fuel collective feminist endeavors. Reviewing this spontaneous activism, this research raises the following question: What emotions were circulated within the digital spaces, as exemplified by the case of Jiangshanjiao, and how do they reveal broader feminist concerns in China? Through the thematic analysis of Weibo posts and interviews, this study explores the strategic appropriation of state-endorsed symbols for grassroots activism and the evolving concerns within the feminist political landscape in the digital age. Jiangshanjiao not only highlights the innovative tactics employed by feminists to engage in online conversations but also offers

insights into the broader implications of these practices for understanding the interrelation between state power and gendered resistance.

Literature Review

Propaganda and Censorship in China

Propaganda in China is a highly sophisticated system that has been pivotal for the Chinese government to hold on to power. As Brady (2009) wrote, defined as "the attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and thereby behaviors" (p. 3), propaganda uses a variety of means, including state-controlled media outlets (television, newspaper, radio), social media platforms, and educational programs, to promote the government's policies and ideologies. The structure of the propaganda system "follows a model similar to China's other supra-bureaucracies" (Brady, 2009, p. 9), with the Central Committee's Propaganda Department holding a guiding role over the entire system. Although the focus of propaganda has been transforming, this persuasive approach ensures a unified narrative across the country, reinforcing the government's legitimacy and strengthening national identity. Recent studies have highlighted a significant evolution in the strategy and execution of propaganda in China, marking a shift toward digitalization, popularization, and aestheticization (Zou, 2023). Such "soft" propaganda products, characterized by "embedding political messages in art and entertainment" (Mattingly & Yao, 2022, p. 4), have been increasingly relying on online platforms and visually appealing, interactive content to engage with lay audiences more affectively. Propaganda wrapped in emotionally powerful messages has proven to be effective in manipulating public attitudes and behaviors (Mattingly & Yao, 2020). This trend of emotion mobilization is not entirely new in China's propaganda work but has been significantly amplified with the advent of digital technologies, with the recent agenda shifting toward the promotion of "positive energy" (Zou, 2023), emphasizing themes of national pride, harmony, and optimism. Within this context, virtual idols like Jiangshanjiao can be understood as an embodiment of soft propaganda, designed to resonate with younger demographics through relatable and engaging content for disseminating state-endorsed values both emotionally and ideologically.

Unlike propaganda, which seeks to shape public opinion by promoting certain narratives, censorship in China functions as a critical mechanism of state control that can directly limit access to information deemed sensitive or undesirable by the state. As Qin, Strömberg, and Wu (2017) noted, while censorship is also regulated by the Propaganda Department, in practice, "censorship is implemented largely by private service providers who are registered in Beijing" (p. 121). Subject to government regulation, commercial platforms, such as Weibo, are facilitators of state censorship as they deploy sophisticated algorithms, censors, and techniques for content monitor and user surveillance (MacKinnon, 2011). However, the implementation of censorship on social media cannot be seen by taking a simplistic view. The complexity arises from not only the state's directives but also the temporal nature of censorship guidelines, coupled with the commercial interests of digital platforms. These intertwining factors have created a dynamic censorship landscape where what is assumed to be censorable can fluctuate. Xu and Albert (2014) explained that censorship guidelines are distributed weekly from the Propaganda Department to prominent editors and media providers, indicating that certain websites and topics may be deemed more sensitive or dangerous during specific periods of controversy. Consequently, media companies must navigate a

constantly shifting terrain to adhere to state policies. Furthermore, market competition can prompt media companies to disobey state directives, even in highly sensitive situations, as evidenced by Sina Weibo's strategy to outperform its competitor, Tencent Weibo, by allowing posts of protests (Miller, 2018). This competitive drive encourages platforms to test the boundaries of state-imposed restrictions, potentially leading to a more diverse discourse that challenges dominant narratives, which might account for the initial censorship but later allowance of posts with Jiangshanjiao on Weibo.

Propaganda and censorship are two critical mechanisms through which the state maintains power, each supported by distinct institutional frameworks. Propaganda benefits from a bureaucratic infrastructure designed to systematically craft and disseminate dominant narratives. In contrast, as Brady (2009) reviewed, China has never had a centralized censorship office; rather, the responsibility is dispersed across multiple institutions and organizations with overlapping duties, reflecting a more complex and less visible control mechanism. While the decentralized model of censorship may allow for more effective monitoring and management of content across various platforms, the system's complexity can sometimes also create spaces for personal engagement and pushback as individuals navigate these overlapping layers of control to find opportunities for expression. In the context of digital activism, such as the case of Jiangshanjiao, this dynamic demonstrates how social media platforms can become arenas for negotiating the boundaries of state control, where personal and collective expressions emerge and evolve.

Navigating Digital Activism Under Censorship in China

As McCaughey and Ayers (2003) wrote, defining digital activism can be as complex as defining activism before the Internet. Broadly understood as "social activism mediated through digital technologies to promote social movements" (George & Leidner, 2019, p. 5), digital activism leverages social media platforms, blogs, and other digital tools to organize and mobilize actions for social and political drives. Compared with traditional offline activism, digital activism is quicker, simpler, and more accessible to a wider variety of people (Petray, 2011). It also motivates people to take full advantage of the hypertextual and visual capacities offered by the Internet to tailor messages that are "uniquely situated to the spaces and communities they value" (Gurak & Logie, 2013, p. 45). Digital activism in China, according to Yang (2009), has its roots in the student movement in 1989, with Chinese students and scholars overseas using e-mails and newsgroups to communicate and mobilize support. This early use of the Internet for activism set the stage for the surge in digital activism from the 1990s onward, characterized by daily occurrences of diverse contentious issues. Digital activism in China manifests through "permanent campaigns on websites and poly-centric communication networks" (Yang, 2009, p. 31), addressing a broad spectrum of issues from nationalist territorial claims and labor to consumer rights and environmental protests. As Yang (2009) argued, digital activism is supported by both formal organizations and informal individual networks, which enable sustained efforts and spontaneous actions against injustices. Unlike traditional protests aiming for sweeping changes, digital activism often focuses on modest, concrete goals through symbolic actions. Digital platforms attract mainly urban and young participants and are inclusive of various genders and occupations. This demographic diversity underlines the broad reach and adaptability of digital activism within the restrictive political landscape in China.

As numerous studies have highlighted, digital activism in China must navigate the complexities of censorship (Lee, 2016; Poell, 2014). Sometimes, activists even confront censorship head-on, as seen in Liao's (2019) account of queer activism directly challenging the censorship of homosexual content on Weibo. However, it must be noted that not all acts of digital activism are subject to censorship and face suppression. The state's approach to monitoring and controlling online discourses is strategically selective, allowing some forms of activism to take place under certain conditions based on the potential threat to its legitimacy. As Yang (2009) noted, grassroots movements targeting local issues and authorities may be permitted, indicating the central leadership's nuanced balance between state control and civic engagement. This dynamic interplay between the state and citizens also involves a strategic negotiation over discourse power. As Cao, Zeng, and Evans (2022) exemplified in their study of collective mourning for Dr. Wenliang Li by Chinese netizens during the pandemic, "citizens do not simply engage in resistance, nor did the government adopt the logic of control and censorship" (p. 173). Instead, both sides aim to legitimize their demands and positions without undermining the state's authority or the public quest for "recognizable" justice. Additionally, the economic implications of censorship further complicate this balance (Roberts, 2018). The limited access to technologies has increased the operational burdens on many companies, affecting their competitiveness in the international market, which necessitates the government to reconsider the extent of information management and maintaining control. Therefore, as Han (2015) concluded, while selectively targeting dissent, the state is also showing "its willingness to accommodate digital activism rather than standing against the public" (p. 276). By appearing responsive and adaptive to societal demands for better governance, these strategies have contributed to ensuring stability and enhancing state legitimacy.

Contextualizing Digital Feminist Engagement With Emotions in China

Feminist activism has emerged as an increasingly significant focus of digital activism in recent years, reflecting a growing awareness of gender disparities and advocacy for equality. Digital feminism in China is characterized by pro-change narratives (Hou, 2020; Yin, 2022), which actively establish gendered and political subjectivity, build alliances, and politicize women's private struggles to the realm of public debates and policy reform through feminist campaigns such as "Naked Chest Against Domestic Violence" and #MeToo in China. As digital feminism gains prominence, it also encounters intensified censorship and misogynistic attacks (Yin & Sun, 2021). This environment has pushed feminists to adopt innovative tactics for circumventing censorship with media practices, notably through the strategic masquerading of content and the digital alteration of images to represent women's bodies in public discourses (Tan, 2017). In the wake of the pandemic, digital feminism has become even more pronounced as gender inequalities continue to exacerbate. Women have disproportionately faced psychological stress (Yan et al., 2021), a surge in domestic violence (Zhang, 2022), and heightened unemployment (Li, Barwick, Deng, Huang, & Li, 2023). These challenges underscore the urgency of feminist activism to address and mitigate the compounded effects of the pandemic on women's lives and rights. Moving forward, it is critical to recognize the distinction between sex (biologically determined) and gender (socially constructed roles and identities) as most research in China tends to conflate the two terms and misrepresents sex-disaggregated data as findings on gender, which ignores how social expectations shape the experiences of women (Feng, Gan, Leiva, Zhang, & Davies, 2022, p. 5). As Wu, Feng, and Lansdowne (2018) suggested, this should involve expanding the focus to a wider spectrum of women's rights and interests, including but not limited to sexual relations between women and men, to understand digital feminism as a driving force of China's social transformation.

One critical element that has both fueled and shaped the discourses and actions within digital feminism in China and worldwide is emotion. Historically linked to "the personal, the body, and the feminine" (Åhäll, 2018, p. 37), emotion holds significant epistemological value in feminist politics in challenging the patriarchal frame that unjustly deems women's emotionality as inherent flaws (Boler, 2015). Brian Massumi (1995) characterized emotion as "a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal" (p. 88). He described emotion as an essentially qualified intensity, one that is structured within culturally accepted frameworks of meaning and expression, forming part of coherent narrative sequences of cause and effect. It is an intensity that is "owned and recognized" (Massumi, 1995, p. 88). Massumi (1995) also underscored the importance of differentiating emotion from affect. Affect, as he defined it, is unqualified—nonconscious and nonsubjective experience independent of meaning and intent—making it "not ownable or recognizable and thus resistant to critique" (Massumi, 1995, p. 30). Sara Ahmed (2014) extended the discussions on emotions by turning to their social dimensions, particularly in relation to race and gender. According to Ahmed (2014), emotions do more than just mediate individual experiences; they actively create "the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place" (p. 10), thereby aligning bodies within social spaces. Emotions define boundaries between the self and others, essentially dictating who belongs within certain social, racial, and gendered circles. Consequently, emotions are integral to the maintenance of social order. The circulation and attachment of specific emotions to certain bodies not only influence interpersonal interactions but also solidify social hierarchies and power structures by aligning individual feelings with collective ideologies and identities.

Ahmed's (2014) theorization of emotions provides a compelling model for understanding the dynamics of feminist digital activism. Ahmed (2014) argued that emotional responses, such as anger at women's oppression, are not direct triggers for feminist identification but reflections of deeper interpretive processes that "*already* involve a reading of the world in a particular way" (p. 171). She emphasized that emotions are mediated, "dependent on past interpretations that are not necessarily made by us" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 171), highlighting how knowledge and bodily experience of feelings are inseparable. Emotions like pain, fear, and disgust are felt on the bodily surface and involve sensations that connect us physically or emotionally to the collective experiences of others. Such emotions are crucial in reanimating the relationship between individual subjects and the collective, mobilizing feminists not through immediate reactions but through shared, deeply felt interpretations of injustice and oppression. Feminist activism often requires labor that extends beyond articulating personal injustices to include extensive emotional and affective work for community mobilization and empathy cultivation. For instance, the #Girls help girls# hashtag campaign in China demonstrated how individuals' highly emotional manifestations of harassment and assault could catalyze broader societal discussions and demands for change (Yang & Hu, 2023). Furthermore, Whittier (2021) underscored the significance of collective emotions, such as fear of threat or anger at a common enemy, as foundational to feminist coalitions. These shared emotional landscapes not only forge connections among individuals but also amplify the impact of emotional expressions, transforming personal grievances into a powerful collective call for change. Therefore, emotions are not merely a catalyst for unifying feminist forces; they are also critical analytical tools for understanding social media initiatives like Jiangshanjiao and deepening our comprehension of feminist politics in China.

Methods

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a socio-constructivist approach to emotions, drawing primarily from the works of Sarah Ahmed (2004; 2014). Her framework of emotions suggests that emotions are not intrinsic properties of individuals but are shaped through social and cultural interactions. Emotions do more than pass through individuals; they effectively bind individuals to collectives, aligning personal experiences with broader community narratives and sociopolitical movements. In Ahmed's (2014) view, emotions delineate boundaries and define the surface against which identities and communities are forged and contested. Emotions are intricately linked to the production and maintenance of social norms and power structures, making them inherently political. Ahmed's (2014) particular emphasis on how emotions are instrumental in feminist politics further sheds light on how emotions like pain and fear are not just felt but are enacted and performed, contributing to the visibility of feminist issues and demanding societal recognition. This performative aspect of emotions underlines their role not as merely reactive but proactive agents in building feminist discourses and actions.

Meanwhile, in the exploration of feminist expressions on digital platforms, it is crucial to contextualize the culturally specific ways in which emotions are performed and interpreted. As Ahmed (2004) suggested, emotions are not only personal, psychological experiences but also constantly shaped by and reactive to the cultural and social spaces within which they are expressed. Ahmed (2014) provides a framework to see how emotions, though universally experienced, are uniquely mobilized and performed in Chinese digital spaces. Within the Confucian cultural traditions in China, as Yik (2010) demonstrated, the Confucian ethos endorses an interdependent self-construal, where the self is inextricably linked to its social context, embedded within a complex web of relationships. The cultural paradigm values emotional and thought regulation to align with collective needs, emphasizing harmony and fulfilling social duties. Therefore, the expressions of emotions such as fear and disgust in the Chinese digital space are deeply influenced by the imperative to maintain social harmony and adhere to familial and societal expectations. This cultural coding of emotions underlies the unique ways in which people navigate state surveillance and censorship in China. Understanding this emotional construct will offer deeper insights into the dynamics of Chinese digital feminism, showing how emotions are not just by-products of individual reactions but also central to the articulation and advancement of feminist causes.

Data Collection

The primary data for this study consist of 1,106 Weibo posts collected over a period of 18 months, from June 1, 2022, to December 31, 2023, using the keyword Jiangshanjiao. Due to platform restrictions, all data were collected manually, ensuring compliance with Weibo's content acquisition protocols. For each post, the content and the date were recorded. After filtering out unrelated posts and retweets, a sample of 1,106 posts was finalized, with 1,002 posts dating from 2022, indicating a significant concentration of relevant discussions in that year (see Figure 2).
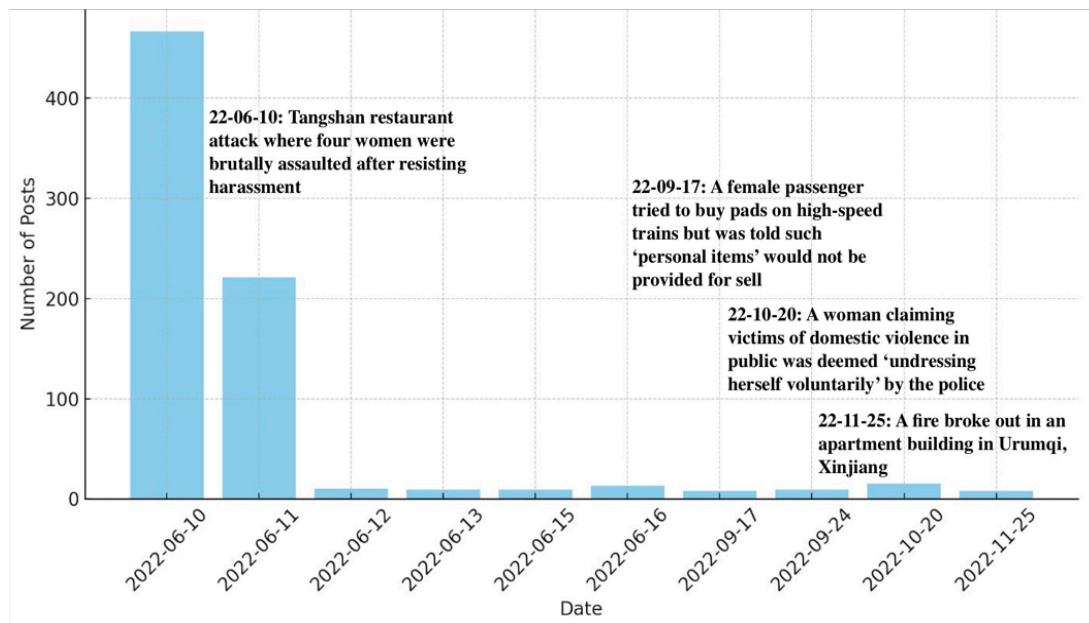
Figure 2. Top 10 dates with the most posts.

This data set is supplemented by semi-structured interviews with individuals who had participated in the Jiangshanjiao conversations by posting original content within the post data set. In total, 10 interviews were conducted via voice call on WeChat. The respondents comprised individuals assigned female at birth and self-identified as female, aged between 19 and 28 years, living in urban areas (see Appendix). One of the respondents was the initiator who posted, "Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?" in 2020. Interviews were conducted in a respectful and safe environment, and consent was received from all respondents. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, ensuring enough time to listen to and understand the complexities of each respondent's experiences and perspectives. The conversations were audio-recorded with consent, and transcriptions were imported to NVivo to facilitate a systematic analysis of the textual data. To ensure confidentiality and follow ethical standards, all identifiable information was anonymized.

Data Analysis

To explore the articulation and circulation of emotions within digital feminist activism, this study employs thematic analysis on the data set consisting of 1,106 Weibo posts and transcripts of 10 semi-structured interviews. Drawing on Ahmed's (2014) *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, initial coding focused on identifying textual instances of specific emotions such as pain, hate, fear, disgust, and shame, as addressed in her book. The coding scheme was adapted to recognize how the expression of emotions is culturally mediated in China, emphasizing how these expressions often reflect not just individual sentiments but also a collective concern for the societal welfare of women. Two trained coders independently annotated the data set, applying codes that correspond to these emotions based on detailed definitions and examples derived from Ahmed's (2014) descriptions. Special attention was given to the contextual significance of each

post, considering the sociopolitical climate and the specific social events and controversies that happened in China during that period. To enhance the reliability of the coding process, the coders met regularly to compare and discuss findings, resolving any discrepancies through discussions. Following the initial coding phase, the reliability of the coding was enhanced through a careful process of inter-coder discussion. NVivo was used to identify discrepancies between the coders, which were then resolved through consensus, thus leading to a refined coding scheme to ensure consistency.

After the codes were established, the analysis proceeded by grouping related codes into broader themes that reflect the interplay between emotions and their impact on feminist expressions. This thematic development was guided by examining how emotions like disgust interact with fear and how these collective emotional landscapes shape narratives of resistance or compliance within feminist discourses. Each theme was critically analyzed to understand its role in shaping collective identities and strategies against state propaganda. The final phase of analysis involved a detailed interpretation of these themes, connecting them back to Ahmed's (2014) theoretical perspectives on the sociopolitical construction and function of emotions. For example, the emotion of disgust was frequently discussed in relation to state actions, fueling a collective response in criticizing the status quo. Linking these emotions to the broader political context and discussions has further provided insights into the strategic use of emotions in navigating and contesting spaces of patriarchal power within the digital sphere.

Findings

Disgust: Contesting Propaganda Through Embodied Rejection

The emotion of disgust emerges as a powerful undercurrent in the digital feminist expressions surrounding Jiangshanjiao, indicating a profound form of contestation against state propaganda and the erasure of women's experiences. Ahmed (2014) describes disgust as an intense response that rejects the object yet paradoxically binds us to it by virtue of its repulsion. It not only marks what is socially acceptable or not but also plays a role in power dynamics, shaping what and whom we consider inside or outside our societal boundaries. In the context of Jiangshanjiao, this notion extends to how communities use the collective experience of disgust to strengthen social bonds and define collective identities by excluding what is deemed disgusting. Disgust manifests in the expressions of feminist activists who encounter the dual forces of state censorship and propaganda. On the one hand, these activists were repelled by the state's attempt to idealize and sanitize female figures under the guise of promoting cultural and national values. Building up anthropomorphic characters to metaphorically represent the nation is not a new strategy in China's soft propaganda (Dong, Wu, Wu, Mou, & Ivanov, 2022). In 2019, in response to protests in Hong Kong, "Azhong-Brother" was introduced to mobilize fan communities to idolize China and enhance nationalism. However, in contrast to Azhong-Brother, who was more literal and less visually defined, Jiangshanjiao, a slim, extremely pale, and good-looking young woman, presented a more sexualized embodiment of propaganda. The idealization of women's bodies promotes unattainable standards of beauty under the male gaze and entrenches societal expectations, making it extremely difficult for the audiences to identify themselves with. As one respondent noted,

> I just feel like they [the Communist Youth League] are doing two things at the same time: Treating a woman as a goddess but also making her extremely sexualized. It feels so ironic. I felt gross. Then I thought, this kind of virtual goddess-like perfect girl created by them, would she suffer the same existential pain as we real women?

This comment has underscored the irony and frustration felt by many who view such a representation as idolizing, objectifying, and disempowering, which constantly places women on a pedestal and reduces them to their physical attributes. The contradiction also points to a deeper issue within the mainstream portrayals of women in media and propaganda: The disregard for the complexity and authenticity of women's experiences. Jiangshanjiao, as a virtually perfect yet unrelatable figure, cannot reflect the realities of women's lives, including the struggles, pain, and achievements that shape and define them. Instead, it only projects a false picture of peace and prosperity through propaganda. The viral post, "Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?", followed by many other widely retweeted posts (i.e., "Jiangshanjiao, do you also skip dinner every day because you are afraid of gaining weight?", "Jiangshanjiao, do you also only wear XS size dress?"), epitomizes this disgust, highlighting the disconnect between the state's sanitized image of women and the messy realities of their bodily experiences. In Chinese culture, where social harmony is always prioritized, the expression of disgust can be particularly potent in challenging normative silence around controversial topics. The expression of these posts also transcends individual grievances, aligning with a collective concern for women's well-being and gender-based discrimination.

Meanwhile, disgust serves as a powerful speech act that does more than express a feeling—it actively shapes reality. When something is declared "disgusting," this declaration is not just descriptive; it is prescriptive. It influences how others perceive and react to the object of disgust and, in doing so, enforces societal norms and boundaries. Historically, menstruation has often been subject to the speech act of disgust. Similar to other cultures, Chinese culture has also been treating menstruation as "dirty, polluting, unclean, and needing to be hidden" (Guo et al., 2022, p. 382). By declaring menstrual blood and the associated products like tampons and pads as "disgusting," societies reinforce a stigma around this natural biological process. As Ahmed (2014) noted, disgust is performative, and this performative nature can lead to real-world effects—for instance, inadequate provision of sanitary products in public spaces, lack of open discussions about menstrual health, and even the design and trading of sanitary products that emphasize discreetness. Jiangshanjiao was introduced in February 2020 when social media platforms were exploding with concerns over female medical workers' demands for pads and tampons since their requests had been rejected by male supervisors. However, the neglect remained unresolved even till September 2022; for example, a female passenger on a high-speed train tried to buy a pad, only to be told that such "private properties" were not sold. The stigmatization of menstruation also exists on a personal level. For instance, one respondent recalled that her mother always forced her to wash her sheet immediately if it was stained with period blood, showing how this cultural stigma has been passed on generationally.

Just as disgust can reinforce stigmas, the rejection of this disgust can also be performative and transformative. As Fahs (2016) argued, "Menstruation and resistance go hand in hand, that menstruating bodies are always already infused with the potential for activism, defiance, feminism, and rebellion" (p. 3). Hence, the recurring post "Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?" is directed not only toward the virtual idol itself but also toward the broader societal and political mechanisms that constantly make women's bodily experiences

disgusting and marginalize real-life challenges. When activists openly speak of menstruation and bring it to the forefront of public discussions, they perform a different kind of speech act—one that can destigmatize menstruation and challenge the stigma and taboos associated with women's biological realities—and therefore, actively assert the importance of bodily autonomy and experiences, which has been fundamental to feminist struggles. It is a rejection of disgust; a rejection that arises from a perceived violation of the integrity of women's bodies and is mirrored in the collective outcry over the neglect of the availability of sanitary products in public spaces. It is both a personal feeling and a collective response, revealing how deeply embedded social and cultural norms can become the site of intense emotional and political contestation. This rejection compels the community to confront uncomfortable truths about how women are portrayed and treated in society, potentially reshaping the Chinese cultural and political landscapes that sustain such objects of disgust.

Fear: Acknowledging the Pervasiveness of Sexual Violence and Censorship

Ahmed (2014) articulates fear as a socially constructed emotion that acts on and through bodies, configuring relationships and spaces in ways that signify threat and safety. Fear is not just a reaction to direct threats but a deeply ingrained part of the social fabric, influenced by persistent gender-based violence and the societal and state responses (or lack thereof) to such incidents. In the case of Jiangshanjiao, fear is a critical indicator of the recognition and acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault in everyday life. Jiangshanjiao was most mentioned in Weibo posts on June 10, 2022, in the aftermath of the Tangshan barbecue restaurant attack, during which four women were violently assaulted after rejecting harassment from a group of men. In this context, Jiangshanjiao was invoked not as a distant, virtual female idol but as a state-endorsed symbol who tolerates the perpetuation of sexual violence. The personal testimonies from all 10 respondents, who shared their experiences of being sexually harassed growing up, further contributed to the understanding. One respondent explained why she put up a post, "Jiangshanjiao, do you get assaulted while walking?":

> It was several days after the Tangshan incident. I was walking on a sidewalk. There was a very fat man, and he was riding his bicycle. He suddenly stopped next to me and said to me, smiling, "Hehe, your boobs are so small." I went blank. He rode away immediately after. It took me a while to finally realize what he said. And I was speechless. I wasn't feeling particularly humiliated or ashamed. I was speechless. Why does this keep happening? Why is it happening to everyone?

This fear is not abstract but deeply rooted in women's most mundane interactions. It stems from the continual exposure and threats that women encounter in a social environment where sexual harassment and assault are often minimized, ignored, or even normalized. These narratives are not confined to isolated incidents but are pervasive and often begin from a young age and continue throughout women's lives. Questioning Jiangshanjiao if she had similar traumatic experiences becomes an explicit reminder of the omnipresent threat of gender-based violence and rejects victim blaming: If Jiangshanjiao as a female idol cannot escape violence, how is it be possible for other ordinary women in China to stay safe? If Jiangshanjiao, as a state symbol, is incapable of protecting its female citizens, how easy can it be for women to protect themselves? As one respondent noted, "When I am posing a question to Jiangshanjiao, I am echoing what others are saying and experiencing." This resonates with Ahmed's (2014) discussion of how fear is mediated through societal

narratives, which not only mark certain bodies as targets but also control how these bodies interact with space and society. The collective confrontation with this fear, therefore, aims to not only alleviate individual anxieties but also highlight the very dangers that necessitate solidarity and resistance.

Meanwhile, the expression of fear in Chinese culture, particularly related to state actions or societal norms, can carry a significant social stigma as it challenges the prescribed order and the state's authority. In the discourse surrounding feminism on digital platforms, feminist claims have often been characterized as threats and disruptions to societal harmony, scornfully labeled as "female fists," which is the homonym of "female rights (*nvquan*)" in Chinese. Such rhetoric was also expressed by authoritative entities like the Communist Youth League, which warned of the need to be cautious of these so-called female fist threats. This framing leverages fear as a technology of governance, intensifying the perceived threat of feminist activism to justify persuasive censorship measures on social media platforms. As Ahmed (2014) elaborated, the language of fear involves "the intensification of threats, which works to create a distinction between those who are under threat and those who threaten" (p. 72). Consequently, fear is not only a reaction but also a sharpened tool used by the state to delineate and control the boundaries of acceptable discourse. The immediate threat of censorship on digital platforms, therefore, compels people to masquerade their dissent in layers of irony and rhetorical questions to safeguard their expressions against suppression and the potential erasure of feminist voices.

As reviewed above, not all digital activism and collective expressions are subject to censorship. Some respondents also noted, based on their experiences with censorship on social media, that posts commenting on gender issues could, in fact, be less sensitive than critiquing the governance of the state because they do not threaten the legitimacy of the authority. However, how censorship on Weibo works is inexplicable, and no one can be sure where the red line is. Users must carefully navigate their actions and languages when criticizing the state for perpetuating sexual violence to avoid being censored. As several posts from the data set emphasized on the second day after the Tangshan attack, "Chained in Xuzhou, beaten in Tangshan, cut down in Jinshan, and deleted from Weibo. Jiangshanjiao, are you also 404 Not Found?" "Most posts were 404 when I woke up in the morning. Feelings of anger, hopelessness, and nausea come together." This reveals a complex dynamic of digital expression, where fear not only silences but paradoxically amplifies certain voices, demonstrating the nuanced interplay between visibility and the vulnerability of the fight against gender-based violence. As feminists navigate the sophisticated censorship, fear acts as both a barrier and a catalyst. On the one hand, it restricts expressions by imposing a sense of risk associated with certain topics, particularly those that directly challenge state authority. However, it also mobilizes collective action, leading to more strategic, coded forms of expression paired with expansive solidarity, where shared fears foster a stronger bond among individuals, pushing back against the threats that seek to silence them.

Feminist Attachment: Building Solidarity Through Emotions

Although the emotional underpinning around Jiangshanjiao is predominantly negative, this research also wants to highlight the unique form of solidarity that emerges within this digital feminist conversation. Echoing Ahmed's (2014) emphasis on the role of emotions in forming collective identities and movements, the shared emotions of fear, disgust, and solidarity among Jiangshanjiao participants not only strengthen their collective identity but also drive the manifestation's momentum and public engagement. In the Chinese

context, solidarity within feminist movements often walks the tightrope between collective action and state scrutiny. Although, historically, Chinese society values collectivism, this collective spirit is often channeled toward maintaining social harmony as defined by the state narratives. In this setting, the solidarity among Jiangshanjiao participants represents a subversive form of collectivism, redirecting it toward challenging and reshaping the narratives imposed by authoritative powers and advocating for recognition of gender-based discrimination and violence. As one respondent beautifully put it, "It is a moment when you realize: We have either been there or will be." The inherently problematic nature of Jiangshanjiao has bridged diverse feminist voices, establishing a common ground among varied feminist standpoints for an acknowledgment of the urgent need for change, significantly diverging from traditional forms of collective behavior in Chinese cultures that typically reinforce state ideologies. This solidarity is critical as it transforms personal vulnerabilities into collective strengths, resonating with Ahmed's (2014) notion that shared emotional responses to injustice can catalyze the push for societal change.

The digital space surrounding Jiangshanjiao allows for a safer space to share trauma, enabling individuals to articulate their experiences without direct self-disclosure, especially when trauma is often "overtly connected to the barrier of disclosure" (Whiting, Pickens, Sagers, PettyJohn, & Davies, 2021, p. 760). Ahmed's (2014) analysis underlines how emotional responses to feminist activism can illuminate the inherent risks and challenges of speaking out, particularly in environments hostile to such disclosures. Particularly in terms of communicating trauma resulting from sexual harassment and assault in a sexually conservative culture, such as that of China, there is widespread stigma victimizing individuals at both social and individual levels. These risks have concrete implications for the safety, psychological well-being, and social standing of individuals, often resulting in "stigmatized individual reports of negative treatment by others and the self-internalization of the public's beliefs or unfair treatment" (Deitz, Williams, Rife, & Cantrell, 2015, p. 602). However, the method of sharing through questioning Jiangshanjiao has created a protective veil for people to talk openly about their encounters and relate personal trauma with distant others. Except for a few very long posts describing unpleasant experiences in detail, most posts still follow the format of asking questions without giving away personal information, which skillfully masquerades traumatic experiences as political critiques. The 1,106 posts from the data set have addressed a wide array of gender issues concerning both women's online and offline experiences—period shaming, body shaming, sex preferences at birth, and misogyny experienced on social media. Some were more interactive: Many people recalled being labeled and made fun of as an extreme "female fist" when discussing gender issues online. Others were more intimate, sharing experiences of being stalked, sexually harassed as a teenager, feeling ashamed because they were on their period, not being slim, or wearing short jeans. The respondent who posted "Jiangshanjiao, do you get assaulted while walking?" mentioned she received a hug emoji under her comment from a stranger, making herself feel heard and like her concerns resonated with someone else's. Engagement with this collective conversation is not through the explicit revelation of vulnerabilities but through the shared understanding and mutual support that comes from recognizing one's experiences in the stories of others while minimizing the risks of disclosures.

Emotional ties to feminist causes and the collective identities formed around these causes have both empowered and complicated digital feminism. The aggregation of questions, critiques, and stories around Jiangshanjiao helps construct collective memory and amplify voices that might otherwise be silenced or marginalized. As Silberman, Purser, and Giaccardi (2012) wrote, "Digital technologies offer a new medium

not only for conversation and contact but also for the construction of viable, continuous 'memory communities' that creatively assemble fragments from a shared past into a dynamic, reflective expression of contemporary identity" (p. 15). Referencing Jiangshanjiao not only keeps collective memories alive but also packages single stories and news coverage of sexual harassment and assault from isolated incidents into parts of a broader narrative that connects the past and present, the individual and the structural, to solidify a communal understanding of the pervasiveness of gender-based violence. This conscious effort to counteract state propaganda also reflects a collective commitment in response to the normalization of misogyny in society, such as victimizing women but making men invisible in news coverage of sexual violence, as participating in online conversation is the most direct and powerful way to amplify women's perspectives. As many respondents noted, they feel obligated to confront any toxic narratives that frame women's realities as objects of unpleasant emotions. Instead of randomly commenting on social events, referencing Jiangshanjiao nourishes a certain expression that may attract more public attention to creatively and persistently address the unresolved gender issues. Undeniably, people forget fast—as highlighted by a respondent who could only remember she was depressed and angry every day in 2020 but struggled to pinpoint individual events due to their abundance. Nevertheless, this fleeting nature of memory only underscores the need to keep even the minutest occurrences in dialogue. Although Jiangshanjiao was mentioned most frequently when malicious acts happened, the documentation holds the ability "to safeguard memories and connect people to a distant past that has relevance to the present by making history timeless" (Liu, 2012, p. 49). Jiangshanjiao is more than just a series of posts; it could be a living entity that embodies the collective struggle, resilience, and hope of its participants.

Conclusion

Four years after the post "Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?" went viral on Weibo, participating in online discussions referencing Jiangshanjiao is still a common practice for social media users. Drawing on a data set of 1,106 posts and 10 one-on-one interviews, this research explores which emotions are expressed through Jiangshanjiao and how they are strategically circulated to challenge the status quo and mobilize feminist sentiments. Building on Sara Ahmed's (2014) framework of emotions, this research underscores the significance of collective emotional experiences—predominantly those of disgust, fear, and solidarity—in shaping feminist discourses in digital spaces. While people actively participating in conversations surrounding Jiangshanjiao may use the name for various purposes, their contribution has collectively mobilized Jiangshanjiao to confront the erasure of women's realities, acknowledge the pervasiveness of sexual violence and censorship targeting feminism, and foster solidarity among survivors and allies. These narratives not only fuel activism but also shape its impact and reception. By engaging with emotions, this research sheds light on the personal and collective experiences of trauma that drive feminist expressions in digital spaces. These emotional undercurrents facilitate a kind of solidarity that is deeply rooted in shared vulnerabilities and a collective yearning for change against patriarchal norms and state-imposed constraints. This analysis also reveals the cultural situatedness of these emotional expressions within the specific sociopolitical landscape of China. The articulation and circulation of emotions are deeply influenced by Chinese cultural norms, which prioritize social harmony and the collective over individual well-being. Yet, in the context of feminist activism, these emotions are decontextualized to serve as tools of resistance against these very norms, highlighting the culturally specific ways in which Chinese feminists navigate and negotiate their identity and agency within a restrictive social environment.

Although what was epitomized by the emotional discourses around Jiangshanjiao occurred in a context somewhat far removed from the present, it is imperative to acknowledge that gender-based violence is not a relic of the past but a persisting, deteriorating crisis across borders. Given this reality, continuous dialogues around these issues, as exemplified by the case of Jiangshanjiao, are necessary for raising awareness and demanding change. Despite the decline in mentions of Jiangshanjiao on Weibo in 2023, the significance of it as a symbol remains palpable for those who continue to use it. As the respondents shared, the mere act of receiving a comment, a like, a retweet, and being reached out for interviews because of their post are the validation of their voices and efforts being heard and recognized. Jiangshanjiao might not stand as the most significant event in the history of digital feminism or the broader feminist movements in China. However, if one were to construct a museum dedicated to this history, Jiangshanjiao's narrative would undoubtedly merit its own space for honoring the profound impact of the viral post "Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?" and the lasting impression it has left on the collective feminist consciousness. This moment, though seemingly minor, represents a shift in control, reclaiming the narrative from the state to the streets, from the oppressors to the oppressed.

References

Åhäll, L. (2018). Affect as methodology: Feminism and the politics of emotion. *International Political Sociology, 12*(1), 36–52. doi:10.1093/ips/olx024

Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective economies. *Social Text, 22*(2), 117–139. doi:10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117

Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd ed.). Croydon, UK: Edinburgh University Press.

Boler, M. (2015). Feminist politics of emotions and critical digital pedagogies: A call to action. *Publications of the Modern Language Association, 130*(5), 1489–1496. doi:10.1632/pmla.2015.130.5.1489

Brady, A. M. (2009). *Marketing dictatorship: Propaganda and thought work in contemporary China.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Cao, X., Zeng, R., & Evans, R. (2022). Digital activism and collective mourning by Chinese netizens during COVID-19. *China Information, 36*(2), 159–179. doi:10.1177/0920203X211054172

Deitz, M. F., Williams, S. L., Rife, S. C., & Cantrell, P. (2015). Examining cultural, social, and self-related aspects of stigma in relation to sexual assault and trauma symptoms. *Violence Against Women, 21*(5), 598–615. doi:10.1177/1077801215573330

Dong, Y., Wu, Y., Wu, F., Mou, Y., & Ivanov, A. (2022). From homeland-mother to Azhong-brother: A qualitative study of nation anthropomorphism among Chinese youths. *Media, Culture & Society, 44*(7). doi:10.1177/01634437221104692

Fahs, B. (2016). *Out for blood: Essays on menstruation and resistance*. New York: SUNY Press.

Feng, H., Gan, C. C. R., Leiva, D., Zhang, B. L., & Davies, S. E. (2022). COVID-19, sex, and gender in China: A scoping review. *Globalization and Health, 18*(1), 9–20. doi:10.1186/s12992-022-00804-w

George, J. J., & Leidner, D. E. (2019). From clicktivism to hacktivism: Understanding digital activism. *Information and Organization, 29*(3), 1–45. doi:10.1016/j.infoandorg.2019.04.001

Guo, J., Zhang, Z., Song, J., Jin, L., Yu, D., & Liao, S. (2022). Femvertising and postfeminist discourse: Advertising to break menstrual taboos in China. *Women's Studies in Communication, 45*(3), 378–398. doi:10.1080/07491409.2022.2053624

Gurak, L. J., & Logie, J. (2013). Internet protests, from text to web. In M. McCaughey & M. D. Ayers (Eds.), *Cyberactivism* (pp. 35–56). New York, NY: Routledge.

Han, R. (2015). Cyberactivism in China: Empowerment, control, and beyond. In A. Bruns, G. Enli, E. Skogerbø, A. O. Larsson, & C. Christensen (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to social media and politics* (pp. 268–280). New York, NY: Routledge.

Hou, L. (2020). Rewriting "the personal is political": Young women's digital activism and new feminist politics in China. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 21*(3), 337–355. doi:10.1080/14649373.2020.1796352

Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman Official. (2020). *Home* [Weibo profile]. Weibo. Retrieved from https://weibo.com/u/7333460302

Lee, S. Y. (2016). Surviving online censorship in China: Three satirical tactics and their impact. *The China Quarterly, 228*, 1061–1080. doi:10.1017/S0305741016001454

Li, J. (2020, February 18). *Communist Youth League's virtual idols: Hongqiman and Jiangshanjiao* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9qPdO__xxM

Li, T., Barwick, P. J., Deng, Y., Huang, X., & Li, S. (2023). The COVID-19 pandemic and unemployment: Evidence from mobile phone data from China. *Journal of Urban Economics, 135*, 1–17. doi:10.1016/j.jue.2023.103543

Liao, S. (2019). "#IAmGay# What about you?": Storytelling, discursive politics, and the affective dimension of social media activism against censorship in China. *International Journal of Communication, 13*, 2314–2333.

Liu, S. B. (2012). Socially distributed duration of the Bhopal disaster. In E. Giaccardi (Ed.), *Heritage and social media: Understanding heritage in a participatory culture* (pp. 30–56). Oxford, UK: Routledge.

MacKinnon, R. (2011). Liberation technology: China's "networked authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy, 22*(2), 32–46. doi:10.1353/jod.2011.0033

Massumi, B. (1995). The autonomy of affect. *Cultural Critique, 1*(31), 83–109. doi:10.2307/1354446

Mattingly, D., & Yao, E. (2020). *How propaganda manipulates emotion to fuel nationalism: Experimental evidence from China*. Social Science Research Network. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3514716

Mattingly, D. C., & Yao, E. (2022). How soft propaganda persuades. *Comparative Political Studies, 55*(9), 1569–1594. doi:10.1177/00104140211047403

McCaughey, M., & Ayers, M. D. (Eds.). (2003). *Cyberactivism: Online activism in theory and practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Miller, B. A. P. (2018). *The limits of commercialized censorship in China* (Working Paper). The London School of Economics and Political Science. Retrieved from https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101417/

Petray, T. L. (2011). Protest 2.0: Online interactions and aboriginal activists. *Media, Culture & Society, 33*(6), 923–940. doi:10.1177/0163443711411009

Poell, T. (2014). Social media activism and state censorship. In D. Trottier & C. Fuchs (Eds.), *Social media, politics and the state* (pp. 189–206). New York, NY: Routledge.

Qin, B., Strömberg, D., & Wu, Y. (2017). Why does China allow freer social media? Protests versus surveillance and propaganda. *Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31*(1), 117–140. doi:10.1257/jep.31.1.117

Roberts, M. (2018). *Censored: Distraction and diversion inside China's Great Firewall*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Silberman, N., Purser, M., & Giaccardi, E. (2012). Collective memory as affirmation. In E. Giaccardi (Ed.), *Heritage and social media: Understanding heritage in a participatory culture* (pp. 13–30). Oxford, UK: Routledge.

Tan, J. (2017). Digital masquerading: Feminist media activism in China. *Crime, Media, Culture, 13*(2), 171–186. doi:10.1177/1741659017710063

Whiting, J. B., Pickens, J. C., Sagers, A. L., PettyJohn, M., & Davies, B. (2021). Trauma, social media, and# WhyIDidntReport: An analysis of Twitter posts about reluctance to report sexual assault. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 47*(3), 749–766. doi:10.1111/jmft.12470

Whittier, N. (2021). How emotions shape feminist coalitions. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 28*(3), 369–386. doi:10.1177/13505068211029682

Wu, G., Feng, Y., & Lansdowne, H. (2018). *Gender dynamics, feminist activism and social transformation in China* (1st ed.). London, UK: Routledge.

Xu, B., & Albert, E. (2014). Media censorship in China. *Council on Foreign Relations, 25*(1), 243–249.

Yan, S., Xu, R., Stratton, T. D., Kavcic, V., Luo, D., Hou, F., . . . Jiang, Y. (2021). Sex differences and psychological stress: Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in China. *BMC Public Health, 21*(1), 1–8. doi:10.1186/s12889-020-10085-w

Yang, G. (2009). *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Yang, X., & Hu, N. (2023). #girls help girls#: Feminist discussions and affective heterotopia in patriarchal China. *Feminist Media Studies,* 1–16. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/14680777.2023.2229967

Yik, M. (2010). How unique is Chinese emotion. In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Chinese psychology* (pp. 205–220). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Yin, S. (2022). Re-articulating feminisms: A theoretical critique of feminist struggles and discourse in historical and contemporary China. *Cultural Studies, 36*(6), 981–1004. doi:10.1080/09502386.2021.1944242

Yin, S., & Sun, Y. (2021). Intersectional digital feminism: Assessing the participation politics and impact of the MeToo movement in China. *Feminist Media Studies, 21*(7), 1176–1192. doi:10.1080/14680777.2020.1837908

Zhang, H. (2022). The influence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on family violence in China. *Journal of Family Violence, 37*(5), 733–743. doi:10.1007/s10896-020-00196-8

Zou, S. (2023). Restyling propaganda: Popularized party press and the making of soft propaganda in China. *Information, Communication & Society, 26*(1), 201–217. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2021.1942954

Appendix

Table A1. Interviewees' Information.

Participants	Gender	Age	Location	Degree and Major	Status
1	Female	23	Shanghai	Graduate: Media and communication	Employed
2	Female	22	Nanjing	Graduate: Environmental engineering	Student
3	Female	22	Guiyang	Undergraduate: Biology	Employed
4	Female	19	Guangzhou	Undergraduate: Accounting	Student
5	Female	24	Nanjing	Graduate: Literature	Student
6	Female	26	Shanghai	Graduate: International relations	Employed
7	Female	23	Ningbo	Graduate: Business administration	Student
8	Female	24	Hong Kong	Graduate: Economics	Student
9	Female	28	Jinan	Undergraduate: Accounting	Employed
10	Female	22	Hangzhou	Undergraduate: Electronic engineering	Student