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## **Pop-cultural representation of non-conforming genders and sexualities on Chinese social media**

Peng, W.

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## CHAPTER 2

### POLITICAL ECONOMY, ACTOR NETWORKS, AND GENDER

Social media platforms have revolutionised how people consume and engage with pop-cultural content, blurring the lines between producers and consumers or “end users” and turning them into the hybrid role of “produsers” that collaboratively build and extend existing content.<sup>35</sup> This phenomenon has given rise to new forms of user participation in the era of globalisation, where individuals actively contribute to creating, distributing, and valorising cultural products. In this chapter, I will review relevant literature to explore concepts and perspectives that can shed light on user participation in China’s unique social media ecology.

Notably, applying Western-originated theories to the Chinese digital ecology requires careful consideration. While utilising many advantages of capitalist marketing strategies, China’s market economy development has followed a unique trajectory deeply rooted in the country’s socio-political structure. Interrogating the relevance and validity of these theories for the Chinese context will provide a foundation for the analysis of how some of the most popular “non-conforming” gender and sexual images are represented and how audiences participate in reproducing them.

This chapter presents a literature review of three interconnected theoretical frameworks that can advance our understanding of gender representation and user participation in Chinese social media. First, I will explore political economy perspectives on digital capitalism and platform networks, focusing on how the core logic of communicative capitalism manifests within China’s state-led market system. This analysis will reveal how platforms function simultaneously as sites of user empowerment, value extraction, and state control mechanisms. Second, I will draw on actor-network theory and digital affordances to

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35. Axel Bruns. *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2008. 2.

understand how human and non-human actors interact within Chinese platform ecosystems, shaping user engagement patterns and meaning-making. Finally, I will examine the evolution and construction of gender in the Chinese context, from traditional Confucian models to contemporary reconfigurations influenced by globalisation and digital culture. By synthesising these theoretical strands, this review will establish the groundwork for analysing how Chinese internet users negotiate and reconstruct gender representations through digital practices while remaining attentive to the tensions between individual agency, platform dynamics, and broader power structures.

### **2.1 Digital Labour in China's Communicative Capitalism Ecosystem**

China's digital landscape presents a fascinating case study, as it operates within a distinct socio-political and economic framework that sets it apart from its Western counterparts. There has been scholarly debate over whether China's economic model should be categorised as "state capitalism" or "socialist market economy".<sup>36</sup> Yet what is clear is that China's system is characterised by substantial state intervention. This has led to a social media ecosystem—an interconnected and interdependent system of digital platforms, users as producers, and regulatory frameworks within a heterogeneous, continuously evolving, and often symbiotic network of different components of China's digital sphere at large. Within this ecosystem, user participation in consuming and reproducing pop-cultural content on Chinese social media platforms is shaped by state policies, market forces, and cultural practices. These various factors interact, creating a unique digital environment that adheres to state content censorship guidelines that promote specific social values while complementing market principles. In other words, the role of the government has shifted from direct content governance to influencing the broader framework of cultural production through soft controls

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36. See Philip C.C. Huang, 'Profit-Making State Firms and China's Development Experience: "State Capitalism" or "Socialist Market Economy"?', *Modern China* 38, no. 6 (2012), 591–629.

and market mechanisms. Cultural production involves collaborative efforts among diverse actors.<sup>37</sup>

Notions such as prosumer/produser, digital capitalism, digital labour, communicative capitalism, platform capitalism, and digital affordances of the platforms under scrutiny here offer valuable insights into the complexities of user engagement and the monetisation strategies employed by Chinese social media platforms. These concepts help us understand how users actively participate in the economic valorisation of their favourite celebrities and how fan interactions mirror broader practices in Chinese society.

### *2.1.1. Caught between Socialism and Capitalism*

As mentioned, scholarly discussions have long been ongoing about whether the Chinese market has been transformed into a de facto capitalist one after Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up Policy in 1978. Deng asserted that socialism could incorporate a market economy without becoming capitalist. He emphasised the importance of combining Marxism with China's specific reality to construct "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics".<sup>38</sup> Pragmatic politico-economic theories have formed the ideological bedrock underpinning China's economic development ever since the inception of the Opening-Up policy.

The Chinese political elites' perception of a modern state is that it should be capable of pursuing wealth and power efficiently and serving the people's needs, which can be achieved through science and technology,<sup>39</sup> particularly information technology.<sup>40</sup> The

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37. Florian Schneider, *China's Digital Nationalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 218.

38. Deng Xiaoping, *邓小平文选* [Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping], vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1994), 281  
Deng, vol. 3, 3, 373.

39. Zheng Yongnian, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2008), 23

40. Jiang Zemin, *论中国信息技术产业发展* [On Development of Chinese Information Technology Industry] (Beijing; Shanghai: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe; Shanghai Jiaotong Daxue Chubanshe, 2009)

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been implementing this ideology to maintain its political legitimacy, a phenomenon which, according to Max Weber, is derived from three types of legitimate authority: legal authority, traditional authority, and charismatic authority.<sup>41</sup> Scholarship on legitimacy in China has adopted this general framework to show how the CCP today relies on a “mix” of legitimization strategies that span performative, ideological, and personal characteristics.<sup>42</sup>

To maintain dynamic political legitimacy,<sup>43</sup> Deng Xiaoping’s reforms introduced economic decentralisation, encouraging various social groups to contribute to economic development.<sup>44</sup> This brought China into a new era of economic boom<sup>45</sup> and integration into global capitalism, coinciding with the neoliberal policy-accelerated expansion of transnational capital<sup>46</sup> and leading to China’s increasing participation in global economic governance structures, particularly in finance and trade.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the CCP leadership launched the Informatisation of the National Economy (INE) program in the 1990s to support scientific and technological development, which it considered the foundation of economic

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41. Max Weber, A. M. Henderson, and Talcott Parsons, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization: Transl. by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 328.

42. See Heike Holbig, “Ideological Reform and Political Legitimacy in China: Challenges in the Post-Jiang Era,” 13–34; Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert, “Introduction: Institutional Change and Political Stability in Contemporary China,” 1–9; Gunter Schubert, “Village Elections, Citizenship and Regime Legitimacy in Contemporary Rural China,” 55–78; and Thomas Heberer, “Institutional Change and Legitimacy via Urban Elections? People’s Awareness of Elections and Participation in Urban Neighbourhoods (Shequ),” 79–106, in *Regime Legitimacy in Contemporary China: Institutional Change and Stability*, ed. Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert (London: Routledge, 2009).

Heilmann, Sebastian. *Red Swan: How Unorthodox Policy Making Facilitated China’s Rise*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2018.

43. Zheng Yongnian, 24.

44. Xiao Donglian, *探路之役: 1978–1992 年的中国经济改革* [A Battle of Pathfinding: Chinese Economic Reform 1978–1992], *改革开放研究丛书* (Beijing: 社会科学文献出版社 [Social Sciences Academic Press], n.d.), 29–62.

45. *Ibid.*, 21.

46. Hong Yu, 2.

47. Sampson, Michael, and Wang Jue. ‘Status-Quo Enhancing versus Status-Quo Challenging Change in Global Economic Governance: The Case of China in Finance and Trade’. *International Relations* 37, no. 4 (December 2023), 613–33.

growth, and also initiated the “Strengthening China Through Science and Education” [科教兴国] policy at the start of the new millennium, emphasising information science.<sup>48</sup> Zheng Yongnian characterises this strategy as “neo-technationalism”,<sup>49</sup> and asserts that this guided China’s construction of an information society supported by the rapid telecom infrastructure development.<sup>50</sup>

Building on this foundation, China’s internet population has grown from 620,000 in 1997<sup>51</sup> to 989 million in 2020, or 70.4% of the population, with 99.7% accessing the internet via smartphones<sup>52</sup> (this was when I first undertook my case studies). By 2024, the number of users reached 1,108 billion or 78.6% of the population, with smartphone penetration consistently high at 99.7%.<sup>53</sup> This reflects a mature mobile internet ecosystem, where smartphone adoption has plateaued near saturation, forming a substantial information society. Internet-driven economic development has led to mutual empowerment between the state and enterprises, enabling the Chinese government to maintain or enhance its legitimacy<sup>54</sup> by advancing citizens’ material well-being, among other things.

The accumulation of capital by internet corporations in China has been legitimised through a symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship with the government. This stands in contrast to the experience of many other countries, such as the United States, where neoliberal and market-oriented policies have primarily driven the development of internet corporations.<sup>55</sup> This dynamic is exemplified by the growth of companies such as Baidu,

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48. Zheng Yongnian, 27.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 28-9.

51. *1st China Statistical Report on Internet Development*. Report. CNNIC. No. 1. 1997.

52. *47th China Statistical Report on Internet Development*. Report. CNNIC. No. 47. 2020.

53. *55th Statistical Report on China’s Internet Development*. Report. CNNIC. No. 55. 2025.

54. Zheng Yongnian, 36.

55. Dan Schiller, *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* (Cambridge (Ma); London: MIT Press, 1999), xiv.

Alibaba, and Tencent into massive corporations and the development of not quite as humongous but significant social media platforms that this dissertation will examine, such as Sina Weibo, Bilibili, and Douyin. As a result, driven by the nature of capital and supported by the government for mutual empowerment, digital capital within the Chinese market has flourished.

Hong argues that the state's deployment of communication industries and policies to relieve structural imbalances and combat global crises has accelerated China's convergence into global digital capitalism. The pace of networking in the nation is intensifying, forming what Dan Schiller terms China's "state-directed digital capitalism" paradigm. This model simultaneously competes, cooperates, and intersects with the US-led framework of global digital capitalism.<sup>56</sup>

From a comparative perspective, the communication industry has become the epicentre of transformation, driven by the intersection of neoliberal structural adjustments and the rise of digital technologies. This convergence presents critical challenges for political economy analysis: digital enclosure, media concentration, flexible employment systems, consumerism, the predicament of materiality, etc.<sup>57</sup> While China's political and economic system is distinct, shaped by strong state involvement and unique socio-economic conditions, its digital media landscape exhibits phenomena akin to systems influenced by neoliberal ideologies—where human well-being is pursued through individual entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework of substantial private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The state's role is to create and maintain this framework while minimising market

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56. As cited in Hong, 11.

Dan Schiller, 'Digital Capitalism: Stagnation and Contention', *Open Democracy*, 13 October 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/digital-capitalism-stagnation-and-contention/>.

57. Graham Murdock, '批判政治经济学与传播资本主义：传统、挑战和抗争 [Critical Political Economy and Communicative Capitalism: Legacies, Challenges, and Struggles]', trans. Jianhua Yao and Sisu Xu, *新闻记者 [Journalism Review]*, no. 6 (2019), 9–14.

intervention.<sup>58</sup>

With government support, tech giants in China have established near-monopolistic positions in their core business areas,<sup>59</sup> effectively enclosing digital spaces by acquiring core innovation results from public investments and user labour value. While protecting their trade secrets through IP provisions, they have strengthened their oligopolistic control and amassed vast amounts of user data for commercial gain. Through strategic mergers and acquisitions, these corporations have concentrated media power in the hands of a few enterprises,<sup>60</sup> leading to concerns about the lack of competition and their potential to shape public discourse and consumption patterns.

Such corporate power and platform architectures, however, do not exist in isolation but within what Creemers refers to as a “strategic nexus” involving the state, platforms, and users, marked by an increasingly close and mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship between the Chinese government and large private internet companies.<sup>61</sup> The distinctive attributes of private internet corporations are harnessed to address perennial challenges confronting the Party-state.<sup>62</sup>

This can be seen as a dialectical relationship between state control and market liberalisation in Chinese media, prompting what Stockmann conceptualises as “responsive authoritarianism”—a system where the authoritarian state selectively tolerates some social space and pressure to enhance regime stability.<sup>63</sup> Whilst political controls remain strong,

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58. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

59. Jia Lianrui and Dwayne Winseck, ‘The Political Economy of Chinese Internet Companies: Financialization, Concentration, and Capitalization’ *The International Communication Gazette* 80, no. 1 (2018), 31, 50.

60. Wang Yi and Joanne E Gray, ‘China’s Evolving Stance against Tech Monopolies: A Moment of International Alignment in an Era of Digital Sovereignty’, *Media International Australia* 185, no. 1 (2022), 79–92.

61. Rogier Creemers, ‘Disrupting the Chinese State: New Actors and New Factors’, *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 5, no. 3 (17 September 2018), 169.

62. *Ibid.*, 171.

63. Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*

economic reforms have led to a proliferation of commercial media outlets, creating more space for diverse content. The government must balance tolerance and control to maintain stability.

Stockmann argues that in such a system, the limited autonomy granted to market-based media allows them to cater to audience demands and provide societal feedback to the state. This arrangement serves a dual purpose: it enables the media to function commercially while also acting as a conduit for public opinion, allowing the government to gauge societal sentiment. Simultaneously, the enhanced credibility of commercial media makes them more effective tools for disseminating official messages and guiding public opinion.<sup>64</sup> Recently, the government has adapted its approach to media management, emphasising media self-regulation and legal mechanisms rather than direct censorship.<sup>65</sup> This shift reflects a more sophisticated strategy for maintaining influence in an increasingly heterogeneous media landscape.

As a result, the booming marketisation of pop-cultural products representing non-traditional genders and sexualities can be understood as occurring within dialectical interactions between market forces, societal change, and state control. This system allows market-driven content that responds to audience demands and societal changes but still operates within boundaries set by the state.

In other words, the proliferation of such cultural products reflects a selective tolerance of diversity in media representation on Chinese media platforms, potentially serving as a barometer of public opinion on evolving social norms. The authorities may permit or tacitly encourage representations of non-traditional images that meet the market's demand to demonstrate responsiveness to changing social attitudes, particularly among urban and

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(Cambridge University Press, 2013).

64. Ibid., 255-6.

65. Ibid., 259-60.

younger demographics. Concurrently, they retain the capacity to intervene in such content if they perceive it as challenging core ideological tenets or social stability.

### 2.1.2. User-Participatory Activities

The concept of digital labour offers a critical lens for analysing how user activities on Chinese social media—from fan-driven data generation to meme reproduction—are commodified under platform capitalism. The nature of audience and user participation in the age of Web 2.0<sup>66</sup> has been a topic of interest among scholars in media studies and political economy. This extends discussions that started as early as the 1950s when Dallas Smythe raised the issue of radio and television offering a complex of “products”, known as “station time” or “audience loyalty”, which is sold to advertisers.<sup>67</sup> Smythe argued that Western Marxist theorists had not given enough attention to the complexity of communication’s role in capitalism.<sup>68</sup> His “audience commodity” theory posits that mass media monetise audiences’ waking hours as labour, selling their attention to advertisers.<sup>69</sup> He conceptualised this attention as a creative human product,<sup>70</sup> laying the groundwork for analysing user-generated content as exploited labour.

Jhally extended this framework, arguing that television viewing constitutes work producing surplus value.<sup>71</sup> He likened broadcast networks to factory owners: audiences sell their “watching power”, with programming serving as “wages” to sustain their capacity to watch.<sup>72</sup> Advertising time became the “working day”, split between socially necessary and

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66. See Tim O’Reilly, *What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software*, 30 September 2005, <https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>.

67. Dallas W. Smythe, ‘The Consumer’s Stake in Radio and Television’, *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 6, no. 2 (1951), 110.

68. Dallas W. Smythe, “Communications: Blindspot of Western Economics,” *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1, no. 3 (1977), 1-27.

69. *Ibid.*, 3.

70. *Ibid.*, 233.

71. S. Jhally, *Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (Pinter., 1987), 83.

72. *Ibid.*

surplus watching<sup>73</sup>—a precursor to today’s algorithmic optimisation of engagement metrics.

Later, Dan Schiller’s concept of digital capitalism<sup>74</sup> updates these critiques for the internet age, arguing that digital networks deepen market penetration into social/cultural spheres—a process of the “deepening of the market”, quoting Edward S. Herman.<sup>75</sup> Contrary to utopian claims of digital liberation,<sup>76</sup> platforms like Facebook exemplify how capitalism subsumes online activities into supranational profit circuits.<sup>77</sup>

This frames contemporary “digital labour”—the unwaged, immaterial work of users generating content and data for platforms. From Smythe’s “audience commodity” to concepts like “free labour”, “unwaged immaterial labour”, “non-collar class”, and even “digital slaves”, these theories expose how Web 2.0 platforms extract value from participatory practices.<sup>78</sup> Crucially, Schiller’s framework anticipates China’s unique digital economy, where state-market contingencies reshape these dynamics.

Christian Fuchs’ Marxist analysis of digital capitalism reveals how corporate platforms exploit users’ unpaid labour through content creation and data generation.<sup>79</sup> Building on Smythe’s audience commodity theory and Kücklich’s concept of “playbour”,<sup>80</sup> Fuchs demonstrates how everyday online activities—from social media engagement to content sharing—constitute value-producing labour under platform capitalism. This digital labour differs fundamentally from traditional media models through its reliance on

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73. Ibid., 77.

74. Dan Schiller, *Digital Capitalism Networking the Global Market System* (Cambridge (Ma) ; London: MIT Press, 1999), xvii.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid., xiii.

77. Ibid., xiv.

78. See, for instance, the work of Christian Fuchs, Trebor Scholz, Andrew Ross, Tiziana Terranova, Ursula Huws, Frank Pasquale, Sergio Bellucci, Jaron Lanier, and Lisa Nakamura.

79. Christian Fuchs, ‘With or Without Marx? With or Without Capitalism? A Rejoinder to Adam Arvidsson and Eleanor Colleoni’, *TripleC* 10, no. 2 (2012), 237.

80. See Julian R. Kücklich, ‘Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry’, *The Fibreculture Journal*, 2005.

comprehensive algorithmic surveillance<sup>81</sup> and real-time behavioural data commodification, where user attention is continuously mined and monetised through pay-per-view or pay-per-click advertising systems.<sup>82</sup>

Fuchs identifies three core antagonisms in this system: (1) economic conflicts between user-generated value and corporate profit extraction; (2) political tensions between privacy demands and surveillance infrastructures; and (3) social contradictions between democratic discourse potential and corporate/state platform control.<sup>83</sup> These manifest through three exploitation mechanisms: ideological coercion (compelling platform dependence), alienation of user-generated content, and asymmetric value distribution through data commodification.<sup>84</sup>

Fuchs particularly dismantles neoliberal fantasies of cyberspace as a utopian democratising force, arguing instead that platform capitalism reproduces inequality through ideological coercion, labour alienation, and asymmetric value extraction. In particular, where theorists celebrate participatory culture, Fuchs exposes its contradictions: user agency exists within architectures designed to commodify attention.<sup>85</sup> As a result, Fuchs' framework provides crucial tools for analysing how queer symbolism becomes both hypervisible and politically inert within algorithmic capitalism, where ostensibly transgressive gender

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81. Zuboff describes surveillance capitalism as a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for extraction, prediction, and sales. It operates through unprecedented asymmetries in knowledge and power, imposing a new instrumentarian power that challenges market democracy. This "coup from above" aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty, marking a rogue mutation of capitalism that threatens human autonomy in the digital age.

Shoshana Zuboff, "Definition", "Home or Exile in the Digital Future", and "A Coup from Above", in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, 1st ed. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 3-24, 495-525.

82. Christian Fuchs, "Social Media and the Public Sphere," *Triple C: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 12, no. 1 (2014), 79.

83. Ibid., 89.

84. Christian Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014). 95-6

85. Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014).

performances circulate as “data commodities”.

The theoretical foundations of digital capitalism and digital labour elucidate how corporate platforms exploit users’ unpaid work. Recent scholarship on China’s platformised cultural production reveals three constitutive tensions critical to understanding the interplay of state governance, market logic, and user agency in shaping digital labour relations.

First, the state-market dynamics of platforms, facilitated through algorithmic architectures, simultaneously enable grassroots creativity and enforce ideological conformity. Lin and de Kloet demonstrate how Kuaishou’s algorithmic design encodes state-platform contingency, subsuming grassroots creativity while enabling marginalised youth to negotiate state/market governance as “unlikely” entrepreneurs to achieve creative and financial goals. They argue that this process corresponds with the state’s “entrepreneurial solutionism” agenda, which positions digital innovation as a solution to socio-economic challenges.<sup>86</sup> This logic parallels Craig, Lin, and Cunningham’s analysis of *wanghong* (internet celebrity) aesthetics as “light-hearted resistance”—performative transgressions that coexist with structural compliance under Xi-era state-market collaboration.<sup>87</sup>

Zhao examines the *wanghong* phenomenon in China’s online video space, using the concept of liminality to analyse creators’ experiences across multiple dimensions, arguing that *wanghongs* move through ambiguous borders between professional and amateur status, authenticity and performance, public and private spheres, and being both disciplined and harnessed by state and corporate entities, revealing an inherent dialectic of agency and precarity in China’s evolving digital creative economy.<sup>88</sup> Hou and Zhang further analyse

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86. J Lin and B de Kloet, ‘Platformization of the Unlikely Creative Class: Kuaishou and Chinese Digital Cultural Production’, *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4 (2019), 1–12.

87. David Craig, Jian Lin, and Stuart Cunningham, *Wanghong as Social Media Entertainment in China*, Palgrave Studies in Globalization, Culture and Society (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

88. Elaine Jing Zhao, “Wanghong Liminal Chinese Creative Labor,” in *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment*, ed. Stuart Cunningham and

entrepreneurialism's governmental roles in co-opting underclass users into productive digital relationships while disciplining self-representation, arguing that its digital entrepreneurship reshapes “underclassness” by enforcing conformity to confront systemic inequalities while strategically performing poverty stereotypes for economic gain. Yet subtle resistances emerge in “minor videos”.<sup>89</sup>

Second, intersecting gendered class dynamics that underpin platformised labour regimes and postfeminist entrepreneurialism structure the experiences of female content creators navigating China's microcelebrity economy. Guan examines Chinese beauty bloggers' roles as both entrepreneurial platform labourers and algorithmically managed workers, analysing their symbiotic growth with e-commerce platforms and social media ecosystems. Her study exposes tensions between self-branding imperatives and algorithmic exploitation within China's platform-dependent celebrity economy.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, Guo examines non-contract female lifestyle bloggers on Xiaohongshu as embodiments of Chinese “postfeminist entrepreneurialism”, analysing how their aspirational practices—consumption-focused femininity and self-branding—reflect gendered neoliberal subjectivity within China's platform economy.<sup>91</sup> These tensions intensify in Fu, Fung, and Leo-Liu's examination of Douyin dancers, whose affective labour requires constant persona modulation across public-private boundaries to convert symbolic capital into economic value—a precarious balancing act between creative agency and platform exploitation.<sup>92</sup> Guo examines

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David Craig (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 211–31.

89. Hou Jiayi, and Zhang Yanhui. ““Selling Poverty” on Kuaishou: How Entrepreneurialism Disciplines Chinese Underclass Online Participation”. *Global Media and China* 7, no. 3 (September 2022), 263–82.

90. Guan Zexu, ‘Chinese Beauty Bloggers: Amateurs, Entrepreneurs, and Platform Labour’. *Global Media and China* 12, no. 2 (2021): 326–32.

91. Guo Jia, ‘The Postfeminist Entrepreneurial Self and the Platformisation of Labour: A Case Study of Yesheng Female Lifestyle Bloggers on Xiaohongshu’, *Global Media and China* 7, no. 3 (2022): 303–18.

92. Fu Han, Anthony Fung, and Leo-Liu Jindong, ‘Women as Dancing Wanghong on Douyin: Affective Affordances and Gender Performativity’, in *Routledge Handbook of Chinese*

how living-alone female wanghongs on Chinese social media challenge the stigmatised “leftover women” discourse while simultaneously transforming singleness into a neoliberal/postfeminist object within urban middle-class consumer culture, identifying themes of economic independence, self-care/self-discipline, and enjoyable loneliness and arguing that these representations both resist and conform to existing gender-class orders in Chinese social media popular culture.<sup>93</sup>

Third, value extraction regimes underpin platform capitalism’s harvesting of user-generated content as digital capital. Fung, He, and Cao discuss why content creators continue to engage on the Chinese short video platform Douyin despite precarious labour conditions, arguing that the platform allows users to flexibly pursue and convert between different forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) in ways that fulfil diverse desires and motivations beyond just monetary gain.<sup>94</sup> Meanwhile, Cao’s urban analysis demonstrates how platforms commodify user emotions and experiences to accumulate “digital capital” that drives new forms of urban growth.<sup>95</sup> Mirroring the fan labour hierarchies central to one of my case studies, Zhai and Wang’s investigation of Weibo “data fans” and the collective reporting phenomenon on Weibo shows how fan leaders direct ordinary fans’ undercompensated labour to boost idols’ visibility, revealing the hierarchies within China’s idol industry.<sup>96</sup>

Besides the studies listed above, scholars have further explored China’s platform

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*Gender & Sexuality*, 1st ed., vol. 1, 2024, 307–20.

93. Guo Jia, ““Living-Alone” Wanghong: Women’s Singleness as a Wanghong Genre and the Configuration of Chinese Postfeminist Wanghong Culture”, *Global Media and China* 0, no. 0 (30 August 2024), 1–19.

94. Anthony Fung, He Wei, and Cao Shule, ‘Cultural Capitals and Creative Labour of Short Video Platforms: A Study of Wanghong on Douyin’, *Cultural Trends* 32, no. 3 (27 May 2023), 264–79.

95. Cao Liu, ‘From Online to Onsite: Wanghong Economy as the New Engine Driving China’s Urban Development’, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 56, no. 4 (June 2024), 1061–76: 1061–76.

96. Zhai and Wang.

political economy through various lenses, such as the “urban-digital spectacle cycle” underpinning wanghong urbanism’s speculative urban political economies;<sup>97</sup> the professionalisation of wanghong labour and platform ecosystems that reshape digital commerce;<sup>98</sup> the rural health tourism development via wanghong-driven social media strategies;<sup>99</sup> foreign wanghong’s cultural negotiation tactics on Douyin;<sup>100</sup> the multimodal intimacy techniques for monetising influencer personae;<sup>101</sup> and the anti-fan de-celebration practices as sites of class and feminist tension.<sup>102</sup>

Stepping back from this enumeration of recent scholarship allows me to identify valuable insights into the constitutive relations of user participatory labour and value creation within the Chinese social media landscape (aside from observing that the broader subject matter in question constitutes a thriving subfield). The studies discussed above demonstrate how social media users, be they content creators or regular users in fan communities, provide labour intertwined with the governance, regulation, and commercialisation strategies employed by powerful platforms within the mutual influence of state regulation, market forces, and user practices that characterise the Chinese digital economy. In other words, the Chinese digital economy operates within a state-led/capitalist complex, characterised by a contingent relationship between the state, platforms, and digital labourers. As such, it is different from its Western counterparts.

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97. Zhang A., A. Roast, and C. Morris. ‘Wanghong Urbanism: Towards a New Urban-Digital Spectacle’. *Mediapolis* 7, no. 4 (2022).

98. Han Xiaofei. ‘Historicising Wanghong Economy: Connecting Platforms through Wanghong and Wanghong Incubators’. *Celebrity Studies* 12, no. 2 (3 April 2021), 317–25.

99. Gai Luofan, Yonggang An, and Weiwei Sun. ‘Research on Forest Health Industry Based on Wanghong Economy—Taking Forest Health Industry of Sucun Township as an Example’. *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 1622, no. 1 (1 September 2020), 1–4.

100. Jonathan Sullivan, and Wang Weixiang. ‘Becoming Wanghong: How Foreigners Achieve Internet Celebrity in China’. *East Asia* 41, no. 3 (September 2024), 201–22.

101. Todd L. Sandel, and Wang Yusa. ‘Selling Intimacy Online: The Multi-Modal Discursive Techniques of China’s Wanghong’. *Discourse, Context & Media* 47 (June 2022), 1–10.

102. Yang Xinying. ‘De-Celebrifying the Problematic Wanghong: Interlocking Tensions in Chinese Digital Anti-Fandom’. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 0, no. 0 (21 July 2024), 1–21.

Surplus value is harvested from users' digital labour within this distinctive structure. Platforms construct their digital affordances and provide the infrastructure for users to form discursive spaces, continuously stimulating users to engage in productive labour and generate meaning, thereby optimising value extraction. This labour creates value for the platforms and shapes the discourses, narratives, and cultural trends circulating within these digital spaces.

### *2.1.3. A Lack of Energy for Change*

In the platform capitalist model, digital platforms rely heavily on users' labour to generate content, data, and engagement, which fuels the platforms' growth and profitability. Users actively participate in the production and circulation of content, contributing to the ever-expanding information flows that characterise the digital landscape. As a result, digital platforms further amplify the importance of information flows by prioritising content that generates engagement and circulation. This reinforces the capitalist communication logic, rewarding content that contributes to the overall flow of information over content of political or social significance. The generation and circulation of information become the primary focus, endangering meaningful dialogue and democratic participation. As users engage in digital labour to contribute to these information flows, they inadvertently support the very structures that undermine the potential for genuine communication and political discourse. In the following, I will discuss several contributions to scholarship on these matters, with special attention to the work of Jodi Dean. While her work concerns social media in the context of the US political system, it offers valuable perspectives and conceptualisations for my project.

As Ingrid Hoofd posits, the ceaseless influx of information in our media-saturated society diminishes meaning as it exhausts itself in simulating communication. New media technologies exacerbate individuals' illusions of genuine communication while primarily disseminating replicas of the same content—a proliferation of the economic

conceptualisation of the “active subject”.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, Hoofd uncovers a recurring paradox across these different domains of activism. As left-wing activists passionately advocate for freedom, creativity, and individual self-actualisation, they become entangled in the very neo-liberal values that drive contemporary capitalism. This entanglement leads to the creation of “activist regimes”, wherein individuals are compelled to be active, creative, and free. Consequently, resistance becomes stressful, hierarchical, and resource-intensive, ultimately reproducing neo-liberalism rather than challenging it,<sup>104</sup> while primarily disseminating replicas of the same content.

Jodi Dean argues that the concept of the public sphere, as theorised by Jürgen Habermas, is not only inapplicable to the internet but is actually damaging to practices of democracy in contemporary technoculture, which Manuel Castells describes as “capitalism in the information mode of development” and Dean conceptualises as “communicative capitalism”.<sup>105</sup> Expanding on Habermas’s model of communicative action and the notion of communicative rationality, Dean defines communicative capitalism as a political-economic formation characterised by talk without response, where the practices associated with governance by the people actually serve to consolidate and support the inequities of corporate-controlled capitalism.<sup>106</sup>

While many celebrate networked communications for enabling universal participation and contribution, Dean argues that they create a fantasy of participation where people believe their contributions matter. In reality, the registration effect—the phenomenon where people believe their online contributions are significant and impactful—supports this fantasy in

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103. Ingrid M. Hoofd, *Ambiguities of Activism: Alter-Globalism and the Imperatives of Speed* (New York: Routledge, 2012). 18-9.

104. Ibid., 7-8.

105. Jodi Dean, ‘Why the Net Is Not a Public Sphere’, *Constellations* (Oxford, England) 10, no. 1 (2003), 95.

106. Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 24.

cyberspace.<sup>107</sup> Communicative capitalism, the dominating power behind this fantasy, “eats up democracy’s use value” in cyberspace, where the current technoculture underpins networked communication, and the market principle dictates the fantasies of participation and abundance.<sup>108</sup> In other words, the extent to which a message propagates in cyberspace, rather than its political meaning, determines its significance. The expansion of communication networks and new media technologies has served the interests of global capital rather than genuinely enhancing democracy. The ideals of publicity, inclusivity, and transparency associated with the notion of the public sphere have taken material form through these technologies, but in a way that upholds and reinforces capitalist institutions and practices.

From a more fundamental perspective of communication principles, traditional communication models, such as Shannon and Weaver’s Mathematical Model of Communication, a linear process of sender (source), encoder (transmitter), channel, noise, decoder (receiver) and receiver (destination),<sup>109</sup> as well as Norbert Wiener’s cyclical feedback model,<sup>110</sup> suggest that senders transmit messages to elicit a response from the receiver.<sup>111</sup>

However, Dean contends that messages contribute to circulating content in communicative capitalism rather than actions eliciting specific responses. The focus shifts from a message’s use value to its exchange value, determined by its ability to circulate, be forwarded, and be counted. Unlike a message requiring understanding, a contribution merely

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107. Ibid., 30-1.

108. Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism This Is What Democracy Looks like,” *Journal of Communication and Languages*, no. 51 (2019), 33.

109. Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, Illini Books., [New ed.], Illini Books ; 13 (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1964). 7.

110. Norbert Wiener, ‘Feedback and Oscillation’, in *Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, Reissue of the 1961 second edition (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2019). 129-57

111. Jodi Dean, “Occupy Wall Street: Forcing Division”, *Constellations (Oxford, England)* 21, no. 3 (2014), 383.

adds to the ongoing discussion. Individuals contribute their opinions or ideas to the discourse depending on a fundamental communicative equivalence. This renders each message as a contribution with equal communicative value, with the content becoming secondary to the act of saying something and adding an indefinable “something” to the overall information flow.<sup>112</sup>

Moreover, on analysing how networked communications and democratic rhetoric serve global capitalism, Dean contends that—within the U.S. political and cultural background that her research is based on—networked communication technologies have materialised democracy as a political form, channelling political energies into communicative engagements. While these technologies are celebrated as crucial for political inclusion and democratic participation, they reinforce neoliberalism’s dominance and the privilege of the wealthiest 1%.<sup>113</sup> In other words, the convergence of neoliberalism and democracy and the materialisation of democratic ideals in the technologies underpinning global corporate capitalism create a context where everyone is entitled to their opinion and encouraged to express it forcefully.<sup>114</sup>

Dean holds that today, the ideals of openness, publicity, and revelation drive the expansion of networked technologies, entrenching communicative capitalism. The adoption and intensification of these technologies are championed by all sides as essential for democratic participation, as though a lack of participation was the main challenge facing democracy.<sup>115</sup> The ideal of publicity serves the interests of global capitalism, which relies on networked technologies and consumers who believe their online actions are radical rather than simply entertaining. Communicative capitalism harnesses democracy’s faith in

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112. Ibid.

113. Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 47-8.

114. Ibid., 95.

115. Ibid., 148.

transparency as a lure, giving subjects a sense of agency while reinforcing the status quo. Revelation is celebrated precisely because it is ineffective, producing merely mediological results.<sup>116</sup>

Dean further submits that the expansion of networked media bolsters the hegemony of democratic rhetoric. Communicative capitalism fetishises speech, opinion, and participation, solidifying a mindset in which online popularity metrics are seen as markers of success, while substantive issues such as depth of commitment, corporate influence, access to decision-making, and the narrowing of political contestation become the tedious preoccupations of older generations. Communicative capitalism co-opts democratic ideals to strengthen neoliberalism, resulting in a deadlocked democracy incapable of progressive transformation. The real issue is not a lack of democratisation but the left's inability to think beyond democracy and articulate a vision of equality and solidarity.<sup>117</sup>

In sum, from a macro perspective, communication systems play core and irreplaceable roles in the interrelationships between politics, economics, and culture: These systems manage infrastructure, enabling capitalists to control global value chains; provide channels for product promotion through advertising-funded media to meet growing consumer demand and strive to avoid crises caused by overproduction; offer symbolic resources for social and political participation; and serve as major industrial complexes, controlling production and marketing activities while employing numerous workers. As a result, the multifaceted contributions of communication systems to contemporary capitalist organisations demonstrate that Dean's concept of "communicative capitalism" can be understood as more comprehensive than alternative concepts such as "informational capitalism", "digital capitalism", or "cultural capitalism".<sup>118</sup>

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116. Ibid.

117. Ibid., 17-8

118. Graham Murdock, '批判政治经济学与传播资本主义：传统、挑战和抗争' [Critical

The scholarly landscape increasingly demonstrates that theorists are inclined to gravitate towards either cultural and semiotic studies or political economy. I contend that while historical-materialist meta-narratives play a crucial role in analysing transnational media platform corporations and their exploitation of labour power, the subjective experiences of individuals, encompassing emotional dimensions, are also significant in such studies. To bridge these divergent approaches, this thesis adopts an analytical lens that synthesises them, offering a more holistic account of digital phenomena. This integrative approach seeks not only to acknowledge the economic underpinnings of media platforms but also to give due consideration to the human experiences and cultural contexts that shape and are shaped by these digital environments.

## **2.2 Digital Affordance, Actor-Network Theory, and Platform Communication**

Corporate social media platforms facilitate their virtual space of meaning-making with their digital affordance, which provides both the functional and relational framework for participatory activities and, simultaneously, the construction of users' identities. This section synthesises theories of digital affordance and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to establish a theoretical foundation for understanding how Chinese social media platforms mediate participatory practices and non-conforming gender/sexuality representations. By framing platforms as socio-technical assemblages, this framework bridges ecological, material, and constructivist perspectives to interrogate the relations of user agency, algorithmic governance, and state-market contingencies.

James J. Gibson's concept of affordance emerged in ecological psychology to describe the actionable possibilities an environment offers to an organism.<sup>119</sup> Gibson framed

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Political Economy and Communicative Capitalism: Legacies, Challenges, and Struggles]', trans. Jianhua Yao and Sisu Xu, *新闻记者 [Journalism Review]*, no. 6 (2019), 5.

119. James Jerome Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York, London: Psychology Press, 2015). 119

affordances as relational, arising from the interactions between an actor's capabilities (e.g., perception, mobility) and the environment's material properties.<sup>120</sup> For instance, a tree branch affords sitting for a human but affords climbing for a squirrel. This relational perspective sparked debates about whether affordances are inherent to objects or dynamically constituted through interaction—a tension that persists in digital adaptations of the concept.<sup>121</sup>

In digital contexts, affordance theory has been reworked to analyse how platform features (e.g., interfaces, algorithms) frame user behaviour. The concept has diversified into subtypes, including technology affordances (user-centred action possibilities),<sup>122</sup> social affordances (opportunities/constraints in interactions),<sup>123</sup> imagined affordances (perceived possibilities shaped by user expectations and design),<sup>124</sup> emotional affordances (affective experiences enabled by material/digital environments),<sup>125</sup> the perhaps most commonly-used digital affordances (almost axiomatic applied in networked communication studies), and others.

However, inconsistencies in usage hinder theoretical cohesion.<sup>126</sup> Evans et al. (2017) identify three key issues: (1) isolated descriptions of affordances without scholarly dialogue, (2) undefined “lists” of affordances, and (3) misapplication of the term.<sup>127</sup> To address these,

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120. Ibid., 130.

121. Grint Keith and Steve Woolgar, *The Machine at Work: Technology, Work and Organization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997). 28-38.  
Hutchby, 441–56.

122. William W. Gaver, ‘Technology Affordances’, in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1991, 79–84.

123. Barry Wellman, ‘Physical Place and Cyberplace: The Rise of Personalized Networking’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25, no. 2 (2001), 227–52.

124. Peter Nagy and Gina Neff, ‘Imagined Affordance: Reconstructing a Keyword for Communication Theory’ 1, no. 2 (2015), 1–9.

125. Christoph Bareither, ‘Capture the Feeling: Memory Practices in between the Emotional Affordances of Heritage Sites and Digital Media’, *Memory Studies* 14, no. 3 (2021), 578–91.

126. Sandra K. Evans et al., ‘Explicating Affordances: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Affordances in Communication Research’, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 22, no. 1 (2017), 35–52.

127. Ibid., 36.

they propose threshold criteria: affordances must be relational (not inherent to objects), non-outcome, and variable.<sup>128</sup> These criteria ensure conceptual rigour, providing a shared foundation for analysing platform dynamics. Also, this framework informs how platform functionalities, such as Douyin’s recommendation algorithms or Weibo’s super-topics, provide frameworks for participatory practices.

Later, developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law in the 1980s, Actor-Network Theory (ANT)<sup>129</sup>, or “sociology of associations”,<sup>130</sup> challenges sociological dualisms (e.g., human/non-human, structure/agency) by positing that social phenomena emerge from heterogeneous networks of “actants”—entities (human or non-human) that possess agency and collectively shape outcomes through their associations.<sup>131</sup> Unlike classical sociological frameworks that privilege human intentionality or abstract “social forces”, ANT insists on analytical symmetry between all actants, whether algorithms, policies, users, or infrastructural elements. This approach challenges the notion of a pre-existing “social realm”, instead advocating for empirical tracing of how actants—through processes of negotiation, conflict, and alignment—form temporary stabilisations that we recognise as “the social”.<sup>132</sup>

A central critique within ANT targets traditional sociology’s tendency to impose rigid theoretical categories (e.g., “power structures” or “cultural norms”) onto complex interactions. Latour argues that such abstractions distort the fluid, contingent nature of social

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128. Ibid., 39-41.

129. See Michel Callon, “Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieux Bay,” in *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?*, ed. John Law (Keele: Sociological Review Monograph, 1986), 196-229.

Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

John Law, “On the Methods of Long-Distance Control: Vessels, Navigation and the Portuguese Route to India,” in *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?*, ed. John Law (Keele: Sociological Review Monograph, 1986), 234-263.

130. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 9.

131. Ibid., 7, 63-86.

132. Ibid., 43

processes, replacing empirical richness with deterministic models. Instead, ANT emphasises translation—the continuous negotiation through which actants define roles, interests, and meanings within networks.<sup>133</sup> Take the cases in this dissertation as examples. A platform’s content moderation system (a non-human actant) might translate market trends and state policies into algorithmic frameworks, which then interact with user practices (human actants) to shape discourse. This focus on translation rejects essentialism: actants have no inherent properties but gain significance through their relational positions.

Critics, however, highlight tensions in ANT’s treatment of agency. While claiming anti-essentialism, ANT occasionally risks attributing autonomous agency to non-human actants, inadvertently veering toward technological determinism. For example, framing algorithms as independent actors might obscure the human decisions embedded in their design. Scholars like Whittle and Spicer argue that ANT’s refusal to prioritise human intentionality can lead to politically neutral analyses, sidestepping questions of power and inequality.<sup>134</sup> On the contrary, the anti-essentialist perspective pushes the constructivist view further by treating technologies as “texts” open to interpretation. What is technology, and what effects have arisen from specific readings and representations rather than inherent essential features? There is no definitive “truth” about a technology independent of representation.<sup>135</sup> This stance reflects anti-essentialists’ commitment to taking anti-realism to its logical conclusion.

Nevertheless, ANT’s strength lies in its capacity to map socio-technical assemblages, such as digital platforms, where commercial imperatives, state ideologies, technical

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133. Ibid.

134. Andrea Whittle and André Spicer, ‘Is Actor Network Theory Critique?’, *Organization Studies* 29, no. 4 (April 2008), 613-7.

135. Keith and Woolgar, 28-38.  
Hutchby, 441–56.

infrastructures, and user creativity intersect.<sup>136</sup> In the context of this dissertation, ANT provides a framework to dissect how Chinese social media platforms function as actor networks. By tracing associations between actants—such as Weibo’s ranking systems, the “positive energy” campaigns, and fan labour practices—the analysis avoids reducing platform dynamics to top-down influence or bottom-up reactions. Instead, it reveals how gender and sexuality representations emerge from contested negotiations among heterogeneous actors, each exerting agency within the platform’s ecosystem.

Bridging affordance theory and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) from a digital media perspective, in the case of this dissertation, requires reconciling their shared relational ontologies while addressing their distinct analytical emphases. Affordance theory, rooted in ecological psychology, foregrounds the actionable possibilities that emerge between users and digital environments<sup>137</sup>—such as how a platform’s interface design enables specific modes of engagement. ANT, conversely, expands the lens to trace how these user-technology interactions are embedded within broader socio-technical assemblages, where human and non-human actants (e.g., algorithms, policies, cultural norms) collectively shape outcomes.<sup>138</sup> While affordance theory illuminates the immediacy of user-platform dynamics, ANT contextualises these interactions within sprawling networks of power, ideology, and materiality.

Hutchby’s “third-way” perspective offers a synthesis that critiques the polarised paradigms in technology studies—social constructivism and technological determinism<sup>139</sup>—and provides a vital theoretical bridge for integrating affordance theory with Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in the context of Chinese social media platforms. Centring on

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136. Florian Schneider, “Conclusion” in *Studying Political Communication and Media in East Asia: A Playful Textbook* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2025), 339–66.

137. Gibson, 119.

Hutchby, 447–8.

138. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 44–6.

139. Ibid., 444–445.

affordances as both material constraints and relational possibilities, this “way” coheres with ANT’s core tenet that social phenomena emerge from heterogeneous networks of human and non-human actors. Hutchby’s conception of affordances emphasises their material grounding,<sup>140</sup> such as the physical design of a printer cable or the algorithmic architecture of a social media platform. While not deterministic, these material properties establish boundaries for action—echoing ANT’s recognition of non-human actants as active network participants.

On Douyin, for instance, video-editing tools afford creative gender performances through filters and effects, yet their design (e.g., preset templates) homogenises expressions to cohere with platform algorithms. Here, affordances operate as non-human actants that frame, but do not dictate, user practices. ANT’s symmetry between human and non-human actors thus complements Hutchby’s framework: material affordances and user agency are mutually constitutive, each influencing how networks stabilise or transform.

Critically, this synthesis avoids reducing platforms to either user-dominated “spaces of resistance” or top-down “structures of control”. Instead, it acknowledges that digital affordances—such as Weibo’s super-topic rankings or Bilibili’s bullet comments—are co-constituted through translation processes (per ANT) where actants continuously redefine roles and meanings. For example, a hashtag’s affordance for visibility depends not only on its technical design but also on its entanglement with algorithms, fan labour practices, and platform monetisation strategies. This relational perspective underscores the variability and contingency of affordances, extending Evans et al.’s criteria<sup>141</sup> while enriching them with ANT’s emphasis on networked agency.

Integrating these theories, the dissertation finds a middle ground between technological determinism and social constructivism. Affordance theory provides tools to

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140. Ibid.

141. Evans et al., 35–52.

dissect how users perceive and exploit platform features, while ANT traces how these features are stabilised or destabilised within larger socio-technical ecosystems. This dual lens is particularly apt for analysing Chinese digital spaces, where state-market hybrid governance, platform capitalism, and grassroots creativity intersect. Subsequent chapters will operationalise this framework, examining how gendered and queer representations emerge from the dynamics of affordances and actor networks without presupposing their political valence as inherently resistant or co-opted.

### 2.3 Gender and Sexuality and Their Comparative Dynamics

The digital processes examined above and the perspective of affordance theory and Actor-Network Theory demonstrate that technology is fundamentally implicated in the co-construction of our social world. This is profoundly true for the category of gender, which is not merely represented but actively shaped and negotiated within digital networks. Building on this premise, this section turns to the specific theoretical frameworks of gender and sexuality that are essential for analysing how such socio-technical construction occurs—a core concern of this study’s focus.

Early biological essentialist claims, such as Goldberg’s neuro-endocrine model of masculinity,<sup>142</sup> have been challenged by social constructionist perspectives that emphasise the role of power and culture in shaping gendered and sexual identities.<sup>143</sup> More broadly speaking, the limitations of traditional sexology have become increasingly apparent ever since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Social constructionist theories have challenged the notion of universal, ahistorical sexual categories and practices, instead emphasising the historical and cultural specificity of sexuality.<sup>144</sup> The 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of feminist and

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142. Steven Goldberg, *Male Dominance: The Inevitability of Patriarchy* (London: Abacus, 1979).

143. Richard G. Parker and John H. Gagnon, ‘Conceiving Sexuality’, in *Conceiving Sexuality: Approaches to Sex Research in a Postmodern World* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 7-10.

144. Parker and Gagnon, 8-10.

lesbian/gay studies, which critiqued the androcentric and heteronormative biases of earlier research and called attention to how gender inequality shapes sexual experiences and identities. The study of gender and sexuality became increasingly decentred, reflecting a greater appreciation of cultural diversity and the multiplicity of sexual cultures around the world.<sup>145</sup> Academia has moved beyond singular notions of identity and orientation to embrace a more fluid and contextually situated understanding of sexual desire and practice.

Here, Foucault's work remains pivotal. He positions the body not as a biological entity but as a perpetually contested site where discourses and power relations are enacted. He argues that the body is "the inscribed surface of events", shaped by language, institutions, and material practices, collectively rendering it intelligible within specific historical contexts.<sup>146</sup> Crucially, his notion of discourse transcends the purely linguistic: it encompasses episteme (the "historical a priori" governing knowledge)<sup>147</sup> and dispositifs—heterogeneous systems of discursive and non-discursive elements that enable and constrain meaning production.<sup>148</sup> For Foucault, the body's "inscription" is not a passive imposition of ideas but an ongoing process of materialisation,<sup>149</sup> where power relations and cultural norms dynamically constitute bodily realities.

This framework is extended through his analysis of disciplinary power, which examines how institutions like prisons or schools optimise bodies through surveillance and standardisation.<sup>150</sup> Such techniques break down bodily movements into analysable

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145. Ibid., 12-3.

146. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 156.

147. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), xxiii.

148. Michel Foucault, 'The Confession of the Flesh', in *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194-5.

149. Michel Foucault, 'Body/Power', in *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 55-62.

150. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan,

components, manufacturing “docile” subjects that internalise norms.<sup>151</sup> This “political anatomy” of discipline represents a shift from overt domination to subtle coercion, reshaping both individual and social bodies.<sup>152</sup> These insights inform analyses of how digital platforms regiment bodily performances—a key concern for this study.

Butler challenges the potential reinforcement of Cartesian dualism by reframing the body-discourse relationship. She argues that bodies are neither passive slates nor static entities but materialise through the reiterative citation of norms. Sex, as a category, emerges through discursive power and performative acts that actively construct—and potentially destabilise—gender norms.<sup>153</sup> For Butler, materiality is an effect of signification: bodies “cite” norms, participating in their own regulation while opening spaces for subversion and transformation. This process is inherently unstable; failing to embody norms fully creates opportunities for resignification.<sup>154</sup>

Butler’s deconstructive approach moves beyond the “constructivism vs. essentialism” binary. She posits that subjects emerge within gendered matrices, asking not “what constructs gender?” but “through what regulatory norms is sex materialised?”.<sup>155</sup> While discourse constructs intelligible bodies, its “outside”, excluded materialities, haunts margins, revealing the contingency of naturalised categories.<sup>156</sup> This perspective proves vital for examining how digital spaces mediate gender performativity, as will be discussed in this dissertation.

### *2.3.1 Orthogonal Masculinities and Femininities in the Making*

The conceptualisation of masculinity and femininity as orthogonal dimensions—conceptual

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Discipline & Punish (New York: Vintage Books, 2012). 137-42.

151. Ibid., 136-52.

152. Ibid., 137-8.

153. Judith Butler, ‘Introduction’, in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (London, New York: Routledge, 2011), xi–xxx.

154. Ibid.

155. Ibid., xvi- xii.

156. Ibid., xvii.

variables on separate, perpendicular dimensions that vary independently rather than opposite poles of a single axis<sup>157</sup>—challenged traditional perspectives of gender as a unitary, bipolar construct. In 1973, by reviewing major adult masculinity-femininity (M-F) tests, Anne Constantinople contended that both judgmental/rational and empirical factor analyses indicate the multidimensionality of the Masculinity-Femininity construct.<sup>158</sup>

Meanwhile, Sandra L. Bem developed the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), introducing a new perspective on masculinity and femininity as separate dimensions rather than opposite poles on a single spectrum. Bem selected masculine and feminine personality traits based on judgments of their social desirability for men and women. Statistical analyses confirmed the uncorrelated nature of the BSRI's Masculinity and Femininity scores, contrasting with previous single-continuum inventories that had confounded instrumentality-expressiveness and male-femaleness.<sup>159</sup> This empirical validation served as a foundation for subsequent research exploring the multidimensionality of gender identity as social and cultural scholars investigated how these distinct constructs relate to other variables.

For instance, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously challenges conventional linkages drawn between masculinity and maleness, arguing that masculinity should not be automatically equated with or presumed to pertain directly to men. Building on Bem's work, Sedgwick emphasises the orthogonal relationship between masculinity and femininity—high masculinity does not predict low femininity, and individuals may score high on both dimensions. Furthermore, Sedgwick suggests that traits like effeminacy, butchness, and femmeness may also represent additional dimensions, not predictable based on

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157. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Gosh Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity', in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 15-6.

158. Anne Constantinople, 'Masculinity-Femininity: An Exception to a Famous Dictum?' 15, no. 4 (2005), 385-407.

159. Sandra L Bem, 'The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny', *J Consult Clin Psychol* 42, no. 2 (1974), 155-62.

masculinity/femininity.<sup>160</sup> Likewise, Sedgwick complicates gender categorisation by arguing that some individuals are simply “more gender-y” than others, regardless of masculinity or femininity specifically.<sup>161</sup>

These theories illuminate the multidimensionality of gender, a concept pivotal to this study’s investigation of non-conforming representations on Chinese social media. By rejecting essentialist binaries, they provide a foundation for analysing how users negotiate, remix, subvert, and meanwhile reinforce gender norms within platform-mediated environments.

- 2.3.1.1 *Masculinities in Western Scholarship*

Social constructionist theories have challenged the “metaphysics of substance” and “identitarian categories of sex” inherent to essentialist gender frameworks.<sup>162</sup> Despite this, Connell notes that so-called “common-sense” knowledge prevails in society, according to which men and women act differently. She also states that gender is how social practice is ordered and organised in relation to an arena defined by human reproduction’s bodily structures and processes. She refers to this as the “reproductive arena” instead of the “biological base”, as gender is a historical process involving the body instead of a fixed set of biological determinants.<sup>163</sup>

This perspective underpins contemporary masculinity studies, which emerged alongside feminist and queer critiques in the late 20th century.<sup>164</sup> The term “masculinity” is a relatively recent historical construct, emerging in the last few hundred years alongside the growth of colonial empires and capitalist economic relations.<sup>165</sup> This suggests that it is

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160. Ibid.

161. Ibid., 16.

162. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 23-4.

163. Connell, *Masculinities*, 71.

164. Hannah McCann, *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism and the Politics of Presentation*, 1 Edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 18-20.

165. Ibid., 67-8.

intrinsically tied to specific historical and cultural contexts rather than a timeless universal. Connell concludes that, rather than attempting to define masculinity as an object, we need to focus on the processes and relationships through which individuals conduct gendered lives. Masculinity encompasses men's position in gender relations, the practices men and women use to engage with masculine norms, and the effects these practices have on bodies, personalities, and culture.<sup>166</sup>

Central to Connell's theory is "hegemonic masculinity"—the culturally exalted form that defends patriarchy by ensuring women's subordination through collusion with institutional power, not necessarily through visible individuals but via cultural ideals.<sup>167</sup> Hegemony operates through discursive authority rather than direct violence, securing consent to unequal gender relations.<sup>168</sup>

Connell acknowledges the abstract nature of masculinities categories but delineates three relational positions:<sup>169</sup>

1. Subordination: Heterosexual dominance over homosexual men, enforced through political exclusion, legal violence, economic discrimination, and symbolic feminisation of gay identities. While homosexual masculinities are primary targets, certain heterosexual men also face ostracisation.<sup>170</sup>

2. Complicity: Most men benefit from the "patriarchal dividend" - advantages gained from women's subordination - without fully embodying hegemonic masculinity. These complicit men maintain respectful relationships with women (wives, mothers) and avoid direct violence while still dismissing feminists as extremists. They secure patriarchal benefits

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166. Ibid., 71.

167. Ibid., 77.

168. Ibid.

169. Raewyn Connell and Liu Yan, 'Masculinities and the Social Structure of Gender: Conversations with Raewyn Connell', *Foreign Literature Studies*, no. 5 (2013), 3.

170. Ibid., 78-9.

without confronting its contradictions.<sup>171</sup>

3. Marginalisation: Gender intersects with class and race to create hierarchical relationships between masculinities. Marginalised masculinities exist in subordinated classes or ethnic groups relative to the dominant group's hegemonic masculinity. For example, under white supremacy, black masculinities are alternately celebrated as hyper-masculine (e.g., athletes) or demonised (e.g., the racist "black rapist" stereotype), serving white patriarchal interests.<sup>172</sup>

This theoretical framework provides critical grounding for examining the "composition/decomposition" dialectic in platform-mediated representations of non-conforming masculinities. It enables analysis of how these gender performances simultaneously subvert hegemonic masculinity, reinscribe complicit masculinities, and confront marginalisation. These complex negotiations of Chinese digital masculinities ultimately manifest the "historical composition" of gender relations under platform capitalism.

Connell further outlines a three-fold structural model of gender relations that maps onto the widely accepted sociological distinction between economy, state, and civil society, commonly found in Hegelian and Marxist sociology:<sup>173</sup>

Labour: Gendered occupational divides direct women to professions with fewer skills and authority, facilitating solidarity among men.<sup>174</sup>

Power: Institutionalised violence in the military-industrial complex and familial patriarchy naturalise male dominance.<sup>175</sup>

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171. Ibid., 79-80.

172. Ibid., 80-1.

173. Malcom Waters, *Modern Sociological Theory* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993), 278-80.

174. Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 99-106; 76-79.

175. Ibid., 107-11.

Cathexis (emotional relations): Heteronormative desire positions women as objects of male erotic consumption,<sup>176</sup> thus informing this dissertation’s examination of how digital platforms—as sites of labour (content creation), power (algorithmic governance and grassroots power networks), and cathexis (desire-driven engagement)—reshape gendered practices in China’s social media landscape.

As a result, gender relations constitute an intricate social structure that transcends simplistic notions of “sexual division of labour”.<sup>177</sup> This structure resists reduction to any single determinant or “generative nucleus”, instead emerging through an active historical process of “composition” where distinct yet interrelated elements combine. The system’s coherence fluctuates according to dominant groups’ control and resistance from subordinated groups, whose efforts to “de-compose” oppressive arrangements may precipitate crises in gender relations.<sup>178</sup>

Hegemonic masculinity operates relationally, legitimising gender inequality through cultural dominance rather than coercion. It positions itself against both subordinated masculinities and “emphasised femininity”, securing consent to patriarchal structures through discursive means.<sup>179</sup>

Meanwhile, John Macinnes offers a comprehensive critique of masculinity and its historical origins in transitioning from traditional patriarchy to modern capitalist society. Macinnes argues that masculinity emerged as an ideological construct in the 18th and 19th centuries as a way for men to rationalise and legitimise their continued social and political dominance over women in the face of Enlightenment ideals of human equality and individual

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176. Ibid., 111-6.

177. Ibid., 116.

178. Ibid., 116-7.

179. James W. Messerschmidt, ‘The Salience of “Hegemonic Masculinity”’, *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 1 (2019), 85–91.

rights,<sup>180</sup> illuminating the constitutive tension evident in masculinity performances examined in later chapters.

According to Macinnes, the notion of masculinity allowed men to attribute their greater power and status to socially acquired gender identities rather than innate biological superiority. However, masculinity has been plagued by an inherent contradiction since its inception—it simultaneously denies and affirms a connection to biological sex differences.<sup>181</sup> This has led to a “crisis of masculinity” as the same universalist principles of modernity that initially necessitated the invention of masculinity have progressively undermined patriarchal structures and destabilised traditional gender roles.<sup>182</sup>

Macinnes contends that theories of gender socialisation, from Freudian psychoanalysis to anthropological theories of kinship and the “traffic in women”, have attempted to resolve this paradox by positing a mechanism whereby biological sex naturally leads to acquiring masculine or feminine personalities. However, these theories invariably smuggle essentialist notions of sex difference back in to explain why socialisation reliably produces gender-differentiated outcomes.<sup>183</sup>

Instead, Macinnes proposes that masculinity fetishistically displaces existential anxieties and dilemmas rooted in the universal human condition of sexed natality and infant dependency (which he calls “sexual genesis”) onto fantasies of completing the self through a merger with a complementary gendered “other” (which he calls “sexual difference”). In doing so, masculinity systematically confuses the social and psychological legacy of patriarchal power relations with the biological realities of sexual dimorphism.<sup>184</sup>

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180. John Macinnes, *The End of Masculinity: The Confusion of Sexual Genesis and Sexual Difference in Modern Society* (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1997). 1-23.

181. Ibid., 10-1.

182. Ibid.

183. Ibid., 100-11.

184. Ibid., 24-44.

As a result, the concept of masculinity has evolved significantly in Western scholarship over the past few decades, from early notions of innate sex differences to more sophisticated theories of historical and social construct and performativity. Despite ongoing debates, the hegemonic masculinity theory and its relational nature remain highly influential across the social sciences, exerting significant influence in various cultural contexts. As will be demonstrated through later case studies, platformed masculinities negotiate the fetishising of gendered difference while undermining traditional patriarchal structures. Future scholarship must further interrogate how these dynamics intersect with other axes of identity and power, particularly within non-Western digital contexts.

- *2.3.1.2 Masculinities in the Chinese Context*

In the Chinese cultural context, the social construction of gender differs from that perceived by the aforementioned Western scholars, even today, when China's market economy-driven media market has undergone extensive integration with the neoliberal-driven international media landscape.

Kam Louie's "*wen-wu*" [文-武, cultural attainment-martial valour] paradigm offers a foundational framework for understanding Chinese masculinity as a processual construct that has evolved through changing socio-historical contexts.<sup>185</sup> In this framework, *wen* has generally been accorded higher status than *wu*, with the ideal masculine figure embodying excellence in both domains while prioritising cultural refinement.<sup>186</sup> While elites may have had more access to *wen* via education, *wu* was an achievable masculine ideal even for men of lower social strata. Louie highlights the totalising nature of the "*wen-wu*" paradigm, which has functioned as a masculine ideal applicable across social classes. Critically for the platform representations in this study, women have been categorically excluded from the

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185. Louie, 4.

186. Ibid., 10.

wen-wu domain,<sup>187</sup> establishing a gendered boundary that contemporary non-conforming representations implicitly challenge and reinforce simultaneously.

Louie illuminates the mutually constitutive relations of gender, class, and political discourses in constructing Chinese masculine ideals by analysing iconic figures like Guan Yu [关羽] (?–220AD), worshipped as the God of War, and Confucius [孔子] (c. 551–c. 479 BC), the epitome of wen masculinity. Guan Yu, deified as the God of War, embodies wu ideals—valour, loyalty, and moral righteousness—rooted in the repression of sexuality and femininity to assert patriarchal power and masculine self-mastery.<sup>188</sup> His cross-class appeal as a folk deity underscores how sublimated desire reinforces homosocial bonds and imperial power, resonating with men across social classes through a model of wu masculinity based on brotherhood, honour, and righteous violence.

In contrast, Confucius, the “Sage of Literature”, exemplifies wen masculinity through cultural refinement and civility. Louie examines how this masculine ideal evolved across different eras.<sup>189</sup> In imperial China, Confucius was revered as the “teacher for all ages” whose philosophy was foundational to education and governance. Scholar-officials embodied the pinnacle of wen masculinity, cultivated through disciplined self-improvement and societal stewardship.<sup>190</sup>

This reverence fluctuated throughout Chinese history, notably during, for example, the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 AD) and times of social upheaval. The May Fourth movement of the early 20th century attacked Confucianism as hindering modernisation and perpetuating social oppression. During the Cultural Revolution, Confucius was condemned as reactionary and feudal.<sup>191</sup>

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187. Ibid., 12.

188. Ibid., 78.

189. Ibid., 92.

190. Ibid., 22.

191. Ibid., 72-3.

In post-Mao China, Confucian values resurged as markers of cultural identity. Confucius has been reimagined as a model of entrepreneurial masculinity, with the scholar-official ideal evolving into the scholar-entrepreneur. This transformation demonstrates wen masculinity's adaptability to sociopolitical changes while maintaining its gendered exclusivity<sup>192</sup> and how traditional masculine ideals are reconfigured to serve changing economic imperatives. This configuration parallels the commodification of gender non-conformity I examine in my case studies.

Louie also explores the impact of globalisation and transnational cultural flows on Chinese masculinities, arguing that traditional “wen-wu” ideals are now thoroughly entangled with global media representations and consumerist desires.<sup>193</sup> While Western influences create hybrid masculine ideals in China, there's a simultaneous nationalist resurgence of traditional masculinity, promoting “manning up” and the martial wu masculinity as resistance to perceived cultural effeminacy and Western influence.<sup>194</sup>

Furthermore, Louie examines the “female gaze” on masculinity in modern Chinese literature, highlighting how female-authored fiction has both challenged and internalised patriarchal gender norms. He argues for the need to develop new “feminine fictions” that transcend the binary of male dominance and female subordination and embrace a more fluid, polysexual conception of gender identity.<sup>195</sup>

Ultimately, his analysis reveals how Chinese masculinity negotiates global influences while preserving cultural distinctiveness, demonstrating interactions between gender, class, and national identity. It is a dialectic revealing the tension between indigenous gender constructs and transnational commercial aesthetic influences, and how subversive digital

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192. Ibid., 115.

193. Ibid., 145.

194. Ibid., 150.

195. Ibid., 175.

masculinities often retain traces of traditional gender hierarchies.

Meanwhile, Song Geng critiques colonial discourses that feminised Chinese masculinity to legitimise Western dominance, arguing this Orientalist construct persists in contemporary Chinese cultural anxieties over the “lack” of *yang-toughness* [阳刚].<sup>196</sup> Song argues that, distinctively, Chinese gender discourse does not rely on the male/female and masculine/feminine dichotomies historically. Instead, the yin/yang framework, which has broader connotations than just gender, prioritises fluid hierarchical relations over rigid biological binaries and also allows for the homoerotic tradition.<sup>197</sup> The modern gender binary is a product of Westernisation in the 20th century.<sup>198</sup> Consequently, Chinese masculinity must be studied in the context of bisexuality and homosociality.<sup>199</sup>

Song traces the feminisation of Chinese scholarly masculinity through an intertextual genealogy that begins with the poetic persona of Qu Yuan [屈原] (c. 340 BC – 278 BC) and reflects broader pre-modern norms of androgyny.<sup>200</sup> The “fragile scholar” aesthetic in masculinity from the scholar-beauty [才子佳人] romance model<sup>201</sup> in pre-modern Chinese literary culture that emerged from Song dynasty (960-1279) examination culture and yin/yang gender politics represented a striking contrast to modern masculine ideals—the pale, lovesick youth of works like *The Western Wing* [西厢记] (c. 1300) was celebrated as an erotic ideal rather than stigmatised.<sup>202</sup>

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196. Song Geng, *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003). 9-10.

197. Ibid., 15-16.

198. Ibid., 12-13.

199. Ibid., 17.

200. Ibid., 43-67.

201. The scholar-beauty romance model, standardised in *Yuan zaju* drama and flourishing in Ming-Qing fiction, features a talented scholar and a cultured maiden overcoming parental opposition through a servant's aid and the scholar's examination success.

Ibid., 19-41.

202. Ibid., 60-7.

This *caizi* [才子, scholar] archetype embodied a tension between Confucian orthodoxy, exemplified by the *junzi* [君子, gentleman] masculinity, and romantic individualism in pursuing personal desire, including toward women,<sup>203</sup> while ultimately being reincorporated into patriarchal structures through examination success and marriage. The scholar's sentimental excess and "effeminate" weakness were tolerated as temporary markers of exceptional talent that would be sublimated into virtuous service.<sup>204</sup>

The production of this scholarly masculinity was deeply tied to textual disciplines. During the Song dynasty's era as an "empire of text", the civil examination system created Foucauldian "docile bodies" through rigorous classical training.<sup>205</sup> Candidates' bodies were physically transformed by years of study - their pallor and slenderness becoming markers of elite status that contrasted with aristocratic martial ideals.<sup>206</sup> The masculinity of the textualised scholar-officials was thus produced through their immersion in textual rituals and disciplines. Despite its flaws, the civil service exam system represented a relatively "fair" and merit-based path to power previously unseen in other civilisations. As a result, from a Foucauldian view, power in Song-dynasty China was exerted not through brute punishment but through the prestige and privileges bestowed on the educated elite, linking bodily discipline to bureaucratic power, creating a compliant scholarly class through meritocratic means. The "civilised" education system thus allowed the state to control men's minds and bodies.<sup>207</sup>

On the relationship between the aesthetics of the fragile male body and same-sex desire in pre-modern Chinese culture, Song argues that the relative tolerance of homosexuality and lack of homophobic discourse enabled the reception of the effeminate

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203. Ibid., 88-97.

204. Ibid., 97-104.

205. Ibid., 45-6.

206. Ibid., 80-3.

207. Ibid., 83-4.

caizi image as a romantic ideal.<sup>208</sup> This receptivity stemmed from the absence of Western-style sexual binaries, as gender was conceived through a fluid yin/yang matrix where power positions shifted contextually.<sup>209</sup> The Daoist cosmological view permitted dynamic gender transformations, while Confucianism framed yin/yang as relational power roles – a minister could occupy a submissive yin position with his ruler while maintaining yang dominance domestically.<sup>210</sup> This framework led to elite male homosocial traditions where same-sex relations between emperors and their favourites (eunuchs, catamites, actors) were tolerated, as participants assumed symbolic feminine roles without precipitating identity crises.<sup>211</sup>

The continuity of these dynamics becomes evident in contemporary pop-cultural formations. The “*attacker-receiver*” [攻受] dyad<sup>212</sup> prevalent in danmei and baihe cultures—a narrative framework originating in Japanese BL (Boy’s Love) culture that codifies male-male, or female-female relationships into dominant/top (“attacker”) and submissive/bottom (“receiver”) roles—echoes the relational logic of yin/yang while reproducing its power-coding. Though this binary structure often replicates heteronormative hierarchies, its East Asian proliferation since the 1990s reflects a broader cultural negotiation of same-sex intimacies as pop-cultural imaginative constructs rather than lived queer realities. This connection will be examined in the later chapters’ analysis of platform-mediated presentations.

Early modern China thus enabled a distinctive model of masculinity epitomised by the caizi—one that accommodated aesthetic androgyny, sentimental expressiveness, and

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208. Ibid., 127-132.

209. Ibid., 47-50.

210. Ibid., 129-132.

211. Ibid., 125-156.

212. Ning Ke, ‘中国耽美小说中的男性同社会关系与男性气质 [Male Homosocial Bonding and Masculinity in the Chinese Slash Fiction]’, *PhD Thesis* (Nankai University, 2014). 2-3.

homoerotic flirtation without losing prestige.<sup>213</sup> The Chinese case points to the historical contingency of sexual binaries and their varying imbrication with gender orders across cultures. It suggests alternate possibilities for configuring male identity beyond modern heteronormative models, even as it also reveals the limits of subverting patriarchal power.

The early modern *caizi* thus embodies a profound ambivalence. As an ideal of masculinity, it expands the possibilities of male self-fashioning beyond “macho” stereotypes of prowess and stoicism.<sup>214</sup> But it does so by ironically reinscribing patriarchal notions of feminine dependency and objectification. This tension between conservative gender politics and individual male subjectivity animates its cultural reception and historical permutations, and offers a vital lesson for the present.<sup>215</sup> As later analysis will show, this tension persists in digital performances, where algorithmic and commercial pressures reshape, instead of eliminating, traditional gender relations.

Fang Gang’s research extends Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity into the Chinese context through his innovative study of male sex workers’ gender practices while emphasising the diversity and hierarchy of masculinities and the Chinese *wen-wu* masculine ideals.<sup>216</sup> His work reveals how these men operate with competing masculine ideals, from the subservient “customer is God” performance required in sex work to the “real man” persona demanded in peer groups. Fang develops an original analytical framework that maps masculinity along two intersecting axes: a relational axis (tracking operations of power between dominant and subordinate masculinities) and a personality axis (measuring performances between tough [刚] and soft [柔] masculinity). Crucially, he conceptualises these as fluid spectrums rather than fixed categories, demonstrating how individuals

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213. Ibid.

214. Ibid., 125-156.

215. Ibid., 1-18.

216. Fang Gang, *男公关: 男性气质研究* [Male Sex Workers: A Study on Masculinities] (Beijing: 群众出版社 [The Mass Publishing House], 2011). 18-9.

strategically shift their masculine performances across different social contexts.<sup>217</sup>

Gai Qi, from a contemporary Chinese media cultural perspective, outlines the aesthetic gap of masculinities, examining the phenomenon of “effeminate/niangpao shaming” [娘炮羞辱] and “male anxiety”,<sup>218</sup> providing crucial context for understanding the socio-political tensions surrounding digital gender performances. She introduces the case study of the variety show “*First Class of School*” aired on China Central Television (CCTV) in September 2018, which triggered public criticism of young male artists for their perceived effeminacy, with their “red lips”, “powdered faces”, and “painted eyebrows” becoming focal points of debate. This incident reveals how mainstream media, reflecting a significant portion of public sentiment, reinforces narrow ideals of yang-toughness by fuelling moral panics about national “degeneration”.<sup>219</sup>

The term “*niangpao*” [娘炮, literally meaning “effeminate cannon”] (analogous to “sissy” and “faggot”),<sup>220</sup> while not explicitly targeting queer identities, denotes a perceived feminised presentation in men. In other words, to be accused of a niangpao, a man must hold a masculine social identity while exhibiting traits socially coded as feminine.

Gai situates China’s modern masculinity debates within global historical currents, drawing on Leo Braudy’s study that 19th-century modernity—a Western-derived framework

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217. Ibid.

218. Gai Qi, 151–55.

219. Xin Shiping, ““娘炮”之风当休矣” [The Trend of “Effeminates” Should Stop], 新华网 [Xinhuanet], September 6, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-09/06/c\\_1123391309.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-09/06/c_1123391309.htm), quoted in Qi Gai, 151.

Gui Conglu, “什么是今天该有的;男性气质” [What is the Masculinity That Should Exist Today], quoted in 《人民日报》评论部公众号 [People’s Daily Commentary Department Public Account], September 7, 2018, quoted in Qi Gai, 151.

Qian Zongyang, “中国少年，阳刚之气不可消” [The Yang-Masculine Spirit of Chinese Boys Must Not Fade], 中国国防报 [China National Defense News], September 7, 2018, 1st edition, quoted in Qi Gai, 151.

220. Ibid.

marked by nationalism, social Darwinism, and wartime militarism<sup>221</sup>—reshaped gender roles to prioritise robust, “biopolitical” male bodies. This contrasts sharply with pre-modern Chinese ideals that valorised wen (civil refinement) over martial prowess, epitomised by scholar-officials embodying Confucian-Taoist virtues.<sup>222</sup> However, late 19th-century Chinese intellectuals, influenced by Western eugenics, reconceptualised masculinity as instrumental to national survival, replacing wen with “yang-toughness spirit” [阳刚之气] as opposed to “yin-softness spirit” [阴柔之气] through militarised physical training.<sup>223</sup> This shift, driven by anxieties about “national degeneration”, entrenched an enduring link between male physicality and state power—a discourse weaponised in contemporary vilification of “niangpao” as unpatriotic effeminacy.<sup>224</sup> This links to an embodied nationalist imaginary where male physical power signifies national strength. Many kung-fu films like *Wolf Warrior*<sup>225</sup> mobilise such body nationalism.

Yet Gai identifies a generational rupture: where older generations socialised in agricultural/industrial contexts enforced rigid gender opposition, urbanised youth increasingly prioritise intellect and empathy across genders. This unconscious shift, driven by feminist influences, professional demands, and globalised modernity, manifests in gender-

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221. Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003). 217-34, 335-87.

222. Gai, 153.

223. Ibid.

224. Ibid., 154-5.

225. The masculine image constructed by the film *Wolf Warrior 2* has generated significant discourse in Chinese online media and sparked considerable scholarly debate. Moreover, the film’s impact extends beyond cinema, as the term “wolf warrior diplomacy” has even become a label for China’s diplomatic approach within Xi Jinping’s broader diplomatic strategy.

See Stephen Teo, “The Chinese Film Market and the Wolf Warrior 2 Phenomenon,” *Screen* 60, no. 2 (2019), 322-331.

Shi Wei and Liu Shih-Diing, “Pride as Structure of Feeling: Wolf Warrior II and the National Subject of the Chinese Dream,” *Chinese Journal of Communication* 13, no. 3 (2020), 329-343.

Xiang Yu and Wang Jinpu, “Nationalism and Heroism with Chinese Characteristics: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Wolf Warrior II,” *Continuum* 36, no. 5 (2022), 751-762.

Tan See Kam, Dai Yongde, and Yang Qiuwei, “Iron Patriotism, Xuexing-Masculinism, Wode-ism: From Iron Soldiers to Wolf Warriors,” *Screen* 64, no. 2 (2023), 187-212.

neutral aesthetics and appreciation of softer masculinities. While consumerism accelerates this trend, it also risks reducing liberated gender expressions to market commodities. Contemporary debates thus reflect an ideological schism between residual disciplinary ethics and emergent post-industrial values.<sup>226</sup> This tension between disciplinary norms and emergent identities will help underscore how platform cultures both challenge and reproduce historical gender logics.

- 2.3.1.3 *Femininities in Western Scholarship*

Femininity, like masculinity, is recognised in Western scholarship as a performative construct rather than an innate essence. Building on Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that one "becomes a woman" through civilisational conditioning.<sup>227</sup>

Judith Butler's pivotal work frames femininity as a stylised repetition of acts that produce the illusion of a stable inner gendered core within a "heterosexual matrix"—a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model that assumes coherence between sex, gender and desire,<sup>228</sup> where compulsory heterosexuality demands that individuals perform genders according to this binary framework. Femininity has no ontological status apart from the acts that constitute it.<sup>229</sup> Even "sex" itself is a gendered category, a product of discourse and power relations.<sup>230</sup> The idea of true femininity is a "fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies".<sup>231</sup> But this is an illusion constantly prone to disruption and subversion, as in the dissonance produced by drag, cross-dressing and lesbian identities. These practices expose the contingent and unstable nature of femininity as a cultural construct.

Butler's framework remains indispensable for analysing digital gender performances,

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226. Ibid., 155.

227. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Lowe & Brydone, 1956). 281.

228. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185-6, 191.

229. Ibid., 185.

230. Ibid., 10.

231. Ibid., 186.

where platform-mediated self-presentations – such as algorithmically disciplined Douyin personas – hyper-visibly reconstitute performative femininity through endless citational loops that simultaneously reinforce and expose gendered norms’ fragility.

By studying the divergent histories and theoretical underpinnings of masculinity studies and women’s studies, Hannah McCann points out that masculinity has been studied with greater nuance than femininity,<sup>232</sup> underscoring the need to challenge the pervasive association between femininity and oppression that permeates much of feminist thought.<sup>233</sup> She emphasises the urgency of her central question—how might we engage femininity as a complex lived practice, acknowledging individuals’ attachments to feminine styles without reducing them to passive victims or empowered agents?<sup>234</sup> There remains a theoretical gap in considering femininity outside of notions of oppression, masquerade, or masculinity.<sup>235</sup> By bridging McCann’s call to disentangle femininity from binary frameworks with the realities of platformed societies, my later chapters discuss how digital mediation reshapes—but does not resolve—the tensions between individual agency and structural power in the performance of femininity.

Meanwhile, in exploring old age and its intersections with gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, Toni M. Calasanti and Kathleen F. Slevin posit that the ideal form of masculinity emphasised by hegemonic masculinity is about “doing”. In contrast, hegemonic femininity is about appearance, although women and men can cross these boundaries, though in gender-defined ways.<sup>236</sup> For older women, emphasising appearance is key to dealing with age-based bodily changes, as they struggle to appear feminine and not

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232. McCann, 18-20.

233. Ibid., 16.

234. Ibid., 2.

235. Ibid., 139-140.

236. Toni M. Calasanti and Kathleen F. Slevin, *Gender, Social Inequalities, and Aging* (Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York, Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2001), 65.

old. By examining how ageism and sexism interact, the authors further state that new forms of oppression have emerged, including the requirement for women of all ages to be preoccupied with appearing youthful and feminine. Older people, especially women, are presumed to share the same ideals as the young, resulting in growing discrepancies between current and ideal bodies. Consequently, they are more inclined to conceal ageing and feel obliged, like teenage girls, to police their bodies to avoid appearing old.

However, the relationship between women and the beauty industry aimed at perpetuating youthfulness is complex, and women are not “cultural dopes”. They, who conform to ideals of youthful attractiveness, are not passive consumers of culture. Instead, their engagement with beauty practices is frequently tied to self-invention, fulfilment, transcendence, and feeling cared for. Many can perceive the oppressive conditions while they go along with them. Yet commercial and social pressures make it increasingly impossible to envision bodies ageing naturally. Internalising the youthfulness norm discourages solidarity from forming between young and older women.<sup>237</sup>

This framework illuminates how platformed societies absorb even subversive gender expressions into commercial logics that privilege palatable, non-threatening aesthetics. Ageist and sexist ideals thus persist in mutated forms, necessitating new analytical tools to map femininity’s contested visibility in digital spaces.

As a result, while femininity has been conceptualised in various ways within Western scholarship, from psychoanalytic notions of lack to stylistic bodily properties, as we turn to examine femininities within the Chinese context, it is crucial not to presume that Western frameworks neatly map onto non-Western cultures, just as the concept of masculinity discussed earlier. We should be open to the culturally contingent diversity of feminine styles while considering the global circulation of aesthetic ideals under capitalist media production.

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237. 65-8.

#### 2.3.1.4 Conceptualising Femininities in the Chinese Context

Contact with the West profoundly changed Chinese conceptualisations and experiences of gender. Still, it maintains a distinct character, with sexuality less central than in the West—a dynamic central to understanding digital gender performances today. The current moment is complex, but exploring China and gender can enrich cultural history and theoretical understanding.

According to Li Xiaojiang, the Chinese word *nüren* [女人, woman] reveals its ontological sense through its etymology. The ontological component *ren* [人, human] refers to human subjectivity, separate from sex [性] or gender [性别]. *Nü* [女] denotes explicitly the female sex in humans, unlike *ci* [雌], which applies to females of other species. The terms *nüren* and *nanren* [男人, man] inherently imply human beings with a socially developed sexual character. Notably, *nüren* is not attached to the term *nanren* like the linguistic case in the English word woman, which is predicated on man. As a result, the Chinese terms' recognition of the social construction of sex differences renders the introduction of the Western concept of gender [社会性别] into the Chinese language redundant, except perhaps to facilitate communication between China and the West.<sup>238</sup>

Moreover, asking “With what discourse do we reflect on women?”,<sup>239</sup> Li discusses various other Chinese terms used to refer to women, such as “*furen*” [妇人], “*nüzi*” [女子], “*nüxing*” [女性], and “*funü*” [妇女], which all mean “women” yet each carries specific

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238. Li Xiaojiang, ‘With What Discourse Do We Reflect on Chinese Women? Thoughts on Transnational Feminism in China’, in *Spaces of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, trans. Yajie Zhang (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 262.

239. *Ibid.*, 263.

connotations and ideological backgrounds that define women's positions in different historical eras.<sup>240</sup> Li identifies three discursive phases shaping Chinese femininity:

1. Traditional discourse: or native discourse—reflected in terms like “*xiao nǚzi*” [小女子, little woman] and “*lao furen*” [老妇人, old woman]—reinforced patriarchal Confucian-Daoist norms that women internalised through texts like *Commands for Women*.<sup>241</sup>

2. Western-influenced discourse: emerging in the early 20th century through ideological imports from the imperialist West. Two dominant discourses took shape:

a) Enlightenment humanist discourse on natural rights, individual freedom, democracy, and equality. This led to a new discourse on the “*xin nǚxing*” [新女性, new woman], centred on individual liberation from feudal family and morality.

b) Socialist Marxist discourse emphasised class struggle and the collective over individual and gender attributes. Key terms included revolution, liberation, and equality.

Male Chinese intellectuals used these discourses to critique traditional societal structures. Though diverging in individual-collective emphases, they operated as progressive and interconnected forces until Cold War geopolitics weaponised them, eroding their critical reflexivity.<sup>242</sup>

3. Maoist discourse (1949–1976): conflating personal and political spheres. Women occupied dual roles as both objects and agents of revolutionary transformation, leading to a “genderless ideology” [意识形态无性征] and “asexual” [非性化] consciousness. Slogans like “times have changed, so men and women are the same” [时代不同了, 男女都一样] and

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240. Ibid., 261-2.

241. Ibid., 264-5.

242. Ibid., 265-7.

“Women Hold up Half the Sky” exemplified this discourse.<sup>243</sup> The Maoist discourse led to a) a lack of sex education and gender consciousness;<sup>244</sup> b) equality as a political given rather than a goal to be reflected upon;<sup>245</sup> and c) liberation as a promise from society rather than a personal responsibility.<sup>246</sup>

Post-Mao China saw women reclaim agency through self-recognition movements, using lived experiences to “search for selfhood” [寻找自我] beyond reliance on family, men, society, and the state,<sup>247</sup> mirrored in today’s digital spaces where users negotiate identity through platform affordances.

Li cautions against importing Western feminist concepts: “liberation” [解放] in China is inherently tied to revolution and class, with a collective spirit and genderless character,<sup>248</sup> while “consciousness” [意识] centres individuality, agency, and gender, in contrast to the political consciousness [觉悟] associated with class and revolution.<sup>249</sup> “Women’s studies” [妇女研究] in China have a political nature and focus on agency and subjectivity, while gender studies are more academic and methodological.<sup>250</sup>

In addition, political slogans carry distinct implications in China: “The personal is political” diverges from Western contexts since in China the traditionally feminine familial sphere has long been politicised by state power, positioning women as both subjects and agents of state appropriation.<sup>251</sup> Similarly, “women’s rights are human rights” originated as

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243. Ibid., 268-9.

244. Ibid., 269.

245. Ibid. 268-9.

246. Ibid., 269-270.

247. Ibid., 270-2.

248. Ibid., 273.

249. Ibid.

250. Ibid., 274-5.

251. Ibid., 275.

a critique of women's systemic exclusion from traditional Western human rights frameworks. In contrast, in China, women's rapid acquisition of state-guaranteed rights over a short period has paradoxically engendered apathy towards broader societal rights struggles. This necessitates "human rights are women's rights"—a discursive inversion to shift mindsets from passive entitlement to active advocacy,<sup>252</sup> echoing digital campaigns that reframe rights as participatory yet remain bounded by platform logics.

Likewise, Li also critiques "Sisterhood is power" as incompatible with China's "Unity is strength" with China's 'Unity is strength' ethos—a paradigm demonstrably effective in advancing women's rights over recent decades, wherein progress hinges on broad societal mobilisation rather than atomised solidarity.<sup>253</sup> This pattern echoes in fan communities, which are characterised by their prioritisation of collective engagement above individual activism.

Going further, Brownell and Wasserstrom also caution against uncritically applying Western-derived categories like sex/gender to Chinese contexts.<sup>254</sup> While the West's sex-gender distinction emerged from Enlightenment-era biological essentialism (per Laqueur), China historically inverted this hierarchy – social gender norms determined perceptions of biological sex.<sup>255</sup> Behavioural gender performance often superseded anatomical realities in defining personhood.<sup>256</sup> [3] Unlike Western binary oppositions, Chinese gender symbolism prioritised relational hierarchies (yin/yang complementarity in Taoism) over biological essentialism, with sex being merely one variable among kinship, age, and class in

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252. Ibid., 274-275.

253. Ibid., 275.

254. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, 'Introduction: Theorizing Femininities and Masculinities', in *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, ed. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 1.

255. Ibid., 25.

256. Ibid.

determining social position.<sup>257</sup>

Historian Tani Barlow proposes that (1) modern women are a subject inside a long and discontinuous history of political and general theory, and (2) the placement of women in systematic or general arguments is what differentiates feminism from ordinary sympathy.<sup>258</sup> Imperial China's kinship roles (daughter [女], wife [妇], mother [母]) lacked an overarching concept of "woman", which emerged only during the 1919 May Fourth Movement as a Western-inspired yet locally fraught category (nǚxìng [女性]).<sup>259</sup> Her materialist-nominalist approach calls for further historicisation of "woman" as a contested construct rather than a reflection of a pre-given social reality. This approach reads sources for their ideological construction of gendered categories to enable certain political and epistemic operations in particular historical junctures.<sup>260</sup>

By applying these insights, my dissertation reveals how China's unique gender legacies shape digital mediation, where communicative capitalism commodifies femininity within culturally specific boundaries.

### 2.3.2 *The Lesbian Continuum*

Adrienne Rich's "lesbian continuum" reframes female intimacy as a spectrum of "woman-identified" resistance to patriarchal domination, encompassing emotional, intellectual, and political bonds beyond sexual acts.<sup>261</sup> This concept critiques compulsory heterosexuality's erasure of lesbian existence and its suppression of female solidarity.<sup>262</sup> This framework challenges the systemic erasure of lesbian experiences from feminist discourse, arguing that patriarchal systems isolate women by trivialising or obscuring the radical potential of female

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257. Ibid., 26-8.

258. Tani E Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). 356.

259. Ibid., 316.

260. Ibid., 15-36.

261. Rich, 27-9.

262. Ibid.

solidarity.

Central to Rich's theory is the critique of heterosexuality as a political institution that enforces male dominance by suppressing knowledge of women's historical and cross-cultural resistance. She identifies examples such as the medieval Beguines' celibate communities, marriage resistance sisterhoods in China, and creative partnerships like that of poet H.D. and Bryher as manifestations of the continuum—instances where women prioritised bonds with one another over heterosexual norms. These connections, Rich contends, generate an “erotic power” that fuels feminist consciousness and collective action, even when devoid of sexual expression.<sup>263</sup>

Rich further critiques the conflation of lesbian existence with male homosexuality, arguing that lesbian experiences entail distinct oppressions and liberatory possibilities rooted in female-specific socialisation. By situating lesbianism on a continuum rather than a binary, she destabilises the hetero/homo divide, asserting that all women exist under the shadow of compulsory heterosexuality, regardless of sexual identity.<sup>264</sup> This reorientation invites feminists to reclaim female intimacy—whether platonic, erotic, or political—as a site of resistance, transcending patriarchal definitions of sexuality.

Rich's work underscores how compulsory heterosexuality operates not only through overt violence but also via epistemic erasure: the suppression of the lesbian continuum's history isolates women from their collective power, naturalising heterosexuality as an immutable norm.<sup>265</sup> This theoretical intervention has profound implications for feminist scholarship, urging a re-examination of how female bonds—from friendships to creative collaborations—are politicised or depoliticised across contexts.

Rich's framework provides a critical lens for analysing the feminist representations in

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263. Ibid.

264. Ibid.

265. Ibid.

digital spaces. While her work highlights the subversive potential of female solidarity, this dissertation interrogates how such expressions are celebrated as “empowerment” yet repurposed as algorithmic commodities mediated by communicative capitalism. The lesbian continuum’s emphasis on woman-identified resistance thus informs this study’s exploration of how platforms neutralise radical potential while commodifying its aesthetic remnants.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This literature review has examined the networks of political economy, affordance dynamics, and gender constructions in shaping the Chinese digital ecosystem. It has situated these phenomena within the broader context of global communicative capitalism whilst highlighting the distinctive features of China’s state-led/capitalist hybrid system.

Drawing upon key concepts from political economy, such as digital capitalism, digital labour, and communicative capitalism, this review has examined how social media platforms exploit user-generated content and data to generate surplus value while simultaneously serving as conduits for state-mandated content regulation and ideological promotion. The theorisation of digital affordances and actor-network theory has provided a framework for understanding the complex interactions between human and non-human actors within these platform ecosystems, highlighting how these technologies’ material and functional properties shape user practices and meaning-making processes. As I will demonstrate in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, these interactions are crucial for understanding how digital platforms facilitate and constrain how users engage with and reconstruct gender representations, whether through female fans’ engagement with male-male character pairings, the memetic construction of the lesbian continuum, or commodifying cross-dressing performances.

Furthermore, this review has delved into the constructions of gender and sexuality within the Chinese context, tracing the historical evolution of masculinity and femininity ideals from traditional Confucian models to modern reconfigurations shaped by Western

influences and the country's revolutionary legacy. By examining key concepts such as the wen-wu paradigm, the fragile scholar discourse, and the Maoist "genderless ideology", this review has highlighted the culturally specific modes of constitution of gender construction in China while also acknowledging the increasing impact of globalisation and transnational cultural flows on contemporary Chinese gender norms and identities. These theoretical frameworks will prove particularly salient in the subsequent chapters' analyses of how Chinese netizens actively negotiate and reconstruct traditional gender paradigms through digital practices.

Notably, whilst this review has not extensively engaged with trans theory, this deliberate choice reflects the dissertation's analytical focus. In Chapter 5, I will demonstrate how, under communicative capitalism's symbolic circulation, trans performers, as one of the subjects under observation, are problematically subjected to similar patterns of visual consumption as performers engaging in commercial cross-dressing performances despite their distinct identities and experiences. The theoretical implications of this phenomenon will be examined in Chapter 5.

This literature review has revealed several gaps and areas for further investigation. Firstly, while existing research has examined the political economy of Chinese social media platforms and the relationships of user labour and value creation, there is a need for more in-depth case studies that analyse how these processes unfold within specific platform ecosystems and how they intersect with the construction and negotiation of gender and sexual identities. Secondly, although the reviewed literature has provided valuable insights into the historical and cultural specificities of Chinese gender constructions, there is scope for further exploration of how these traditional gender ideals and discourses are being reconfigured and contested within the contemporary digital landscape, particularly regarding the circulation of non-normative or subversive gender and sexual representations.

Moreover, this review points to an important theoretical consideration regarding the relationship between Foucauldian/feminist discourse and (micro)sociological perspectives in the vein of ANT in examining digital gender practices. While these approaches might appear in tension—with Foucauldian and feminist analyses often emphasising constructions and abstract forces of “power” and “discourse”, and ANT insisting on tracing specific networks of agency and action—they can be productively synthesised. ANT’s methodological emphasis on identifying concrete actors and their networks can help understand individuals’ active engagement in “doing gender” through everyday digital practices. At the same time, Foucauldian and feminist insights situate these practices within broader power structures and discursive formations. This theoretical synthesis suggests a way forward that neither reduces gender to purely individual actions nor dissolves agency entirely into abstract structures. Instead, it examines how people actively negotiate and challenge gender norms through specific interactions with platforms, technology, institutions, representations, the theoretical implications of this phenomenon, and other actants while remaining attentive to the systemic power relations that frame these interactions. This integrated perspective will be particularly valuable in the following chapters’ analyses of how Chinese netizens engage with and reconstruct gender representations through digital practices.

The next chapter, which presents the first case study of this dissertation, will address some of these gaps by providing an in-depth analysis of a specific Chinese social media platform and examining how the structural constraints and incentives of the political economy, actor-network interactions, and gender discourses identified in this literature review are being played out and negotiated within this particular digital ecosystem.