

# EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF THE “FEMALE-FIST” PHENOMENON ON GENDER-EQUALITY ADVOCACY IN CHINESE CYBERFEMINISM

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## Abstract

This study investigated the effects of the controversial term “female-fist” (nǚquán) on gender-equality advocacy within China’s online feminist activism. The thesis posited that the impact of this phenomenon was structured through the recursive interaction of technological, discursive, and identity-formation processes. A single-case study design was employed, using the Wuhan University Library incident as a revelatory case to trace the trajectory from initial accusation to legal resolution. The research methodology triangulated cyberfeminism, Foucauldian discourse-power theory, and intersectionality to analyze primary social-media artifacts, institutional documents, and judicial records. Data analysis followed a three-phase procedure focusing on platform dynamics, rhetorical strategies, and intersectional social positioning. The findings suggested that the “female-fist” phenomenon generated complex, often contradictory effects by simultaneously enabling vocal resistance while constraining coalition-building through polarization. The study concluded by proposing the Platform-Discourse-Subjectivation (P-D-S) model to elucidate how these factors interrelated to shape advocacy outcomes in China’s unique socio-digital landscape.

**Keywords:** *female-fist, cyberfeminism, gender-equality, Platform-Discourse-Subjectivation, discourse-power theory, intersectionality*

## Introduction

The digital transformation has “shifted how gender politics are articulated and negotiated in public discourse” in Chinese society (Yang & Xu, 2022). Within this dynamic environment, the “female-fist” (nǚquán) concept has emerged as what Liu (2023) describes as “standing on an uncompromising position against gender inequality yet being otherwise easily maligned as an extreme or radicalist disposition by critics”. This development signals what Wang and Li (2023) identify as “one of the most significant transformations in previous forms of Chinese digital feminism... toward confrontational digital activism... directly aimed at challenging patriarchal structures in society”.

Existing scholarship presents what Zhou (2022) characterizes as “either celebratory of digital feminism's liberating potential or censoring in reaction to its excesses”. Chen (2023) specifically notes “a lack of empirical analysis studying how this specific form of activism works on the ground in the area of gender equality”.

This study addresses this gap by posing the following central research question: What are the actual impacts of the “female-fist” phenomenon on promoting gender equality in Chinese cyberfeminism?

To answer this question, the study has a singular aim: to explore the complex impact of the “female fist” on gender equality advocacy by examining how digital platforms, discursive strategies, and identity-formation processes coalesce in advocacy outcomes.

This has contributed significantly to multiple dimensions of cyberfeminism theory by developing an integrated analytical framework that connects platform architectures, discursive practices, and subject formation processes (Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1997).

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **The Academic Context**

Early Chinese cyberfeminism emphasized community building and identity exploration, aligning with Plant's (1997) conception of cyberspace as a “potentially liberatory realm”. The adaptation of global movements like #MeToo marked a shift toward more “popular feminism” (Tan,2023) that negotiates state authority and market forces. Recent research identifies how platform architectures influence discourse through “homophiles clustering “and “information cocoons” (Chen and Gui ,2023), while the concept of the “mirror city” (Tan,2023) describes the reflexive relationship between feminist and anti-feminist discourses.

### **Theoretical Triangulation: The P-D-S Model**

This study deliberately triangulates three literatures to build an analytic apparatus that links technological mediation, discursive power, and intersectional inequalities.

**Cyberfeminism (Platforms):** Cyberfeminism draws attention to how feminist politics and identity formation are embedded in technological infrastructures and platform cultures (Haraway,1991; Plant,1997; Paasonen,2011). Focuses on how affordances—such as algorithmic amplification, trending lists, and the “screenshot economy”—shape which stories become visible and what affective frames (outrage, sympathy, ridicule) are monetized by attention economies (Paasonen,2011).

**Foucault's Discourse-Power (Discourse and Subjectification):** Michel Foucault's conception of discourse and power emphasizes how language practices constitute “regimes of truth” and subjectivities (Foucault,1978). The “female-fist” label is a discursive technology that delineates which claims are credible and which are delegitimized.

Intersectionality: Intersectionality highlights that gendered experiences and credibility politics are always mediated by additional axes of difference such as “age, class, institutional rank, academic capital, and regional origin” (Crenshaw,1989).

The Platform-Discourse-Subjectification (P-D-S) mechanism is the theoretical product of integrating cyberfeminism, Foucauldian discourse–power, and intersectionality into a processual analytic. This integration motivates the Platform-Discourse-Subjectification (P-D-S) mechanism developed in the study: an analytic hypothesis that platform affordances enable discursive labeling, which in turn produces subjectification with “interjectionally distributed consequences” (Crenshaw,1989).

## Methodology

### Case Selection: The Wuhan University Library Incident

This study uses a single-case (case-study) design that aims for mechanism process tracing and theoretical development rather than statistical generalization (Yin,2018). The Wuhan University Library incident was selected as a revelatory case for five reasons:

1) Documentary completeness and public traceability: The case generated a sequence of publicly accessible artifacts: the initial longform online disclosure (October 2023), platform amplification (hot search/trending coverage), university communiques and internal investigation notices (public), the filing of civil litigation (2024), and a first-instance civil judgment (25 July 2025) later followed by institutional review and revised announcements in August-September 2025 (news and university press releases). These layered artifacts permit process tracing from initial disclosure to institutional and legal outcomes (Wuhan University,2025; Hubei court decision,2025).

2) Explicit invocation of “female-fist” (nǚquán) in public debate: Commentary and op-eds during the controversy explicitly invoked “female-fist” (nǚquán) and related pejoratives, producing a discursive cluster of delegitimizing rhetoric that is directly observable in primary media and social-media artifacts (Sina,2025).

3) Institutional Consequences: The university’s disciplinary decision (and its later revocation/reexamination), together with the court ruling, provide concrete outputs that can be linked temporally to discursive and platform events (news reports and official communiques document this sequence) (Xinhua,2025; CCTV,2025).

4) Intersectional Complexity: Public discussion invoked markers of academic status, thesis quality, postgraduate affiliation, family narratives, and health claims: each of which was used variably in retribalizing or delegitimizing accounts. The availability of such markers allows an intersectional reading of differential effects.

5) Temporal Evolution: The case’s phases: disclosure → platform peak → institutional action → legal adjudication → institutional review: supply the temporal variation required to test the P-D-S mechanism.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were triangulated from social-media artifacts, trending screenshots, mainstream media op-eds, university press releases, and the 2025 first-instance civil judgment. Analysis proceeded through three phases: (1) Cyber-feminist analysis of platform dynamics and "traffic competition"; (2) Discourse-power analysis of rhetorical strategies and truth claims; and (3) Intersectional analysis of how social positions inflected engagement.

## **Analysis: Key Factors Influencing Advocacy Impact**

### **Case Overview**

In 2023, female student Yang Mouyuan accused male student Xiao Moumou of sexual harassment in the library. After perceived inadequate institutional handling, Yang posted the accusation online in 2024, where it went viral. Under public pressure, the university punished Xiao. However, in July 2025, a court ruled that Xiao's actions—attributed to a skin disease—did not constitute sexual harassment. This judgment caused a massive reversal in public opinion toward broader disapproval of the "female-fist".

### **Platform Architecture and Algorithmic Amplification**

The original post spread rapidly due to the "hot-search algorithm" and trending lists that facilitated short, affect-laden narrative fragments. The visibility of the event is, therefore, a direct result of the architecture of the site which can be attributed to algorithmic prominence, hashtag aggregation, and the screenshot economy of circulation. Achieving this enormous visibility over the course of two days put pressure on university administrators to respond publicly. This sequence is indicative of a well-known cyberfeminism scenario: digital environments allow for new forms of disclosure but at the same time privilege short sensational extracts that incentivize moral simplification and viral outrage (Paasonen, 2011; Plant, 1997).

### **Discursive Strategies and the "Mirror City"**

The "female-fist" label thus constitutes a strong form of counter-discourse-to-the-dominant patriarchal narrative (Foucault, 1978). Tan (2023) suggests, however, that this often engenders what he calls the "mirror city" effect- one where a reflexive relation between feminist and ant-feminist discourses holds, such that the one mirrors and constitutes the other. In broader counter-mobilization, this produces delegitimizing frames, such as attributing motives of attention-seeking or careerism to discredit the advocates. The Foucauldian view of the label underwrites a "regime of truth" concerning which testimonies are worthy of belief; public attention is usually deflected from the structural issues of gender inequality toward personal attacks on mares and motives. Such a media spectacle is polarized in favor of moral clarity at the expense of deliberative dialogue, which could otherwise gain space for coalition-building.

## **Subject Formation and Intersectional Positioning**

The “female-fist” discourse, while creating different subject positions above all through the identity of the “feminist warrior” can provide psychological empowerment and solidarity for the participants in it. On the other hand, the process of subjectivation here is clearly modulated through multiple intersecting factors. The discourses catch up mainly with an urban, educated, digitally literate youth (Crenshaw, 1989). Given such a narrow demographic base, an intrinsic tension is inscribed within the universalist claims and particularistic composition of the movement. Most of the time, the way this claim is put forward does not realize that, as Crenshaw argues, “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism”; hence, black women whose subordinations are extended to class, rurality, or low education are further marginally located. Therefore, while this discourse challenges gender hierarchies, it also runs the risk of reproducing other social hierarchies within feminist activism.

## **Discussion: The P-D-S Model of Digital Advocacy Factors**

The proposed P-D-S model elucidates that the impact of “female-fist” advocacy is not determined by a single factor but emerges from the recursive interaction of three intertwined elements: Platforms, Discourse, and Subjectivation.

## **The Recursive Nature of Platform-Discourse-Subjectivation Dynamics**

The relationship among the P-D-S components is recursive and mutually reinforcing.

**Platform-to-Discourse:** Platform architectures and algorithms shape the form and spread of activist narratives, privileging content that generates high engagement.

**Discourse-to-Subjectivation:** Specific rhetorical strategies and labels (like “female-fist”) produce distinct subject positions (e.g., “feminist warrior”) that participants internalize, governing their behavior and interpretive frameworks (Foucault, 1978).

**Subjectivation-to-Platform:** These newly constituted subjects generate data signals that feed back into platform algorithms, further amplifying content that aligns with these identity formations and reinforcing the very platform conditions that enabled the discourse initially.

## **Intersectional Limitations in Subject Formation**

The P-D-S framework highlights what Crenshaw, 1989, cites as “significant intersectional constraints” that underpin the subject positions that would eventually emerge from “female-fist” advocacy. The movement shows rather homogeneously the distinctive features of discursive patterns and demographic compositions that speak to specific concerns and the way of speaking of what Chen (2023) refers to as “urban, educated elites”. This inevitably gives rise to what Tan (2023) describes as “exclusionary effects for women who do not share this social location”, thus confirming the core argument of Crenshaw (1989) who argued that “single-axis frameworks often obscure the experiences of those at the intersection

of multiple marginalizations”. It thus shows how even opposite discourses reproduce social hierarchies within their formations.

### **Platform Architecture as Structural Determinant**

The P-D-S framework understands platform architecture as a “structural determinant that both enables and constrains advocacy” (Plant, 1997). As part of Chinese social media ecosystems, commercial imperatives originating from engagement metrics create what Chen and Gui (2023) refer to as a “soft incentive structure that promotes conflict and polarization”. According to this horizontal influence, not through overt mechanisms of control but rather what Foucault (1978) would recognize as a subtle “shaping of discourse, visibility, and strategic possibilities within these digital spaces”, the technological infrastructures have thus determined the very parameters within which feminist resistance has had to navigate in China’s unique digital landscape.

### **Implications for Digital Advocacy Theory**

The P-D-S framework, therefore, is an important empirical contribution to digital advocacy theory, far beyond what Plant (1997) describes as “the limitations of technological determinism and discursive reductionism”. As Paasonen (2011) observes, “platform effects are always filtered through discursive and subjective dimensions”, which has Foucault (1978) often stated, “discursive possibilities remain materially constrained by platform architectures”. This model, therefore, reflects through Chen and Gui’s (2023) words that “activist identities are both technologically enabled and discursively constituted”. Integrated like this, it provides what, in Yin’s (2018) words, might be considered “a more sophisticated analytical tool for examining digital activism across varying platform ecologies and political contexts”, allowing scholars to develop more subtle alternatives to the general tropes that accompany understandings of contemporary feminist mobilization.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine the impacts of the “female-fist” phenomenon on gender-equality advocacy in Chinese cyberfeminism. The analysis concludes that its impact is neither uniformly positive nor negative but is fundamentally structured through the recursive interaction of technological infrastructures, discursive strategies, and subject-formation processes, as captured by the P-D-S model.

The phenomenon influences gender-equality advocacy through three key mechanisms:

**Platform Mechanisms:** The technical architecture and algorithmic logic of Chinese social media platforms incentivize confrontational content and simplify complex messages, altering how advocacy is constructed and disseminated.

Discursive Mechanisms: The “female-fist” label functions as a powerful counter-discourse that challenges patriarchal norms but also precipitates a “mirror city” effect (Tan, 2023), generating substantial counter-mobilization and curtailing opportunities for nuanced, coalition-building dialogue.

Subjectivation Mechanisms: The discourse fosters strong subject positions like the “feminist warrior,” which empowers a specific demographic (urban, educated youth) but risks marginalizing other groups, thereby perpetuating intersectional exclusions within the movement (Crenshaw, 1989).

The Wuhan University library misadventure was a revealing case precisely because it contained the sequenced events necessary to test P–D–S: platformed an assertion with explicit invocation of “female-fist”, institutional action, legal adjudication and documented intersectional contestation. The paper demonstrates how labeling can transform public priorities and institutional behavior in ways that block structural progress on gender equality, thanks to a traceable record.

Several recommendations are proposed in order to change this. We call upon organizations, advocates and NGOs to come together and: develop protocols for disclosure that preserve evidence; fund rapid legal support; coordinate media strategy for the foreground process and structural questions; promote collective safety and anonymized reporting channels that reduce individual exposure.

Colleges and universities do create transparent, evidence-based investigative procedures that resist reactive decisions driven by trending metrics; publicly commits to process timelines, publish redacted rationales to contain reputational spillover.

This is a message to the online social media platforms (such as Facebook, TikTok, Weibo etc.) that they should create trending and predictive presentations allowing access to the full text rather than privileging excerpts. Also moderate amplify of excerpted content that lack content or reference, mechanisms to slow amplification during adjudicative windows, content dispute. Interventions should be made at the platform, discursive, and institutional levels according to the P-D-S diagnosis.

In summary, the “female-fist” represents a complex and paradoxical form of Chinese cyberfeminism. Its impact on gender-equality advocacy is contingent upon the recursive interplay between platform architectures, discursive struggles, and the formation of activist subjects. The P-D-S model developed here offers a robust analytical framework for understanding not only this specific phenomenon but also the broader dynamics of digital advocacy. It underscores the intricate ways in which technology, language, and identity interact to shape contemporary social movements, highlighting that the very networks that amplify marginalized voices can also constrain the development of more inclusive and effective forms of solidarity.

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