

**Analyse the Relationship Between Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny in Digital
Spaces in a Situated Sociocultural Context**



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In broad terms, popular feminism can be understood as widespread activism that emphasizes gender equity while resisting intersecting injustices such as economic precarity, environmental degradation, land dispossession, and racial violence (Conway & Lebon, 2021). Popular misogyny, by contrast, refers to the pervasive expression of hostility towards women, manifested through acts of blaming, labelling, shaming, and exclusion, rooted in patriarchal norms and gendered hierarchies (Arsawati & Bunga, 2022). Rather than fully developed ideologies, popular feminism and popular misogyny operate as emotive, algorithmically mediated discursive formations co-produced and circulated through online campaigns, digital platforms, and commercial media (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In Mainland China, the simultaneous intensification of both formations has become particularly evident in digital spaces such as Weibo, where discussions around gender are shaped not only by users but by platform architectures, algorithmic visibility, and affective publics. To understand contemporary gender politics in China, rather than merely analyzing laws, cultures, or online movements, it is essential to delve into the inner layers of the structure of digital platforms. This essay will critically examine the dynamics between popular feminism and popular misogyny in digital space and public opinion through two cases: public responses on Weibo to the 2023 Datong engagement rape case in Shanxi Province, and the reactions to the murder of a Chinese female student in California on 4 February 2024.

To unpack the tension between popular misogyny and feminism, this essay draws on a combination of feminist theory and digital sociology as the theoretical framework. Judith Butler's (1988) idea of gender performativity provides a fundamental theory and explains the composition and perception of gender in cyberspace, based on repeated enactments that align with societal expectations by users on social media. In Weibo, the defence of misogynistic

speech, regardless of the sex on which it is based, is often labelled as female speech as a form of rebuttal and punishment, demonstrating how the speech itself interactively shapes the user's gender and acts as a form of discipline in cyberspace. Moreover, the feminist killjoy proposed by Sara Ahmed (2010) describes how feminist criticism is portrayed as a danger to the prevailing social order in online spaces like Weibo, and how feminists are frequently seen as hurting other people's happiness solely by calling attention to sexism or injustice. To discuss gender tensions in digital space, it will also employ concepts such as networked publics (Boyd, 2010), affective publics (Papacharissi, 2016), and algorithmic amplification (Huszár et al., 2021). While feminist discourse frequently fails to gain traction, these frameworks allow for a structural reading of how misogynistic speech is both culturally relevant and technologically incentivized. When taken together, these theories support a critical interpretation of the two case studies as intersections of power, gender, and platform logic.

The online public reaction to the Datong engagement rape verdict exemplifies how platformed popular misogyny operates through algorithmic amplification and affective publics to contest feminist-leaning legal outcomes. In this 2023 case, a man in Datong, Shanxi Province, raped his fiancée after receiving a betrothal gift (*caili*), which is a traditional Chinese practice where the groom's family gives money or gifts to the bride's family as part of a marriage arrangement. In the morning session of 25 December, he was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for rape but appealed in court. However, on 16 April 2025, the court rejected the defendant's appeal and upheld the original sentence (Fu, 2023; Xing & Liu, 2025). Subsequently, in the comments section of the relevant judgement on Weibo, many netizens believed that the judgement had safeguarded women's rights and interests, mentioning that "Respect for women, only yes means yes" and that "In the twenty-first century, there are still women who are not treated as human beings". Nevertheless, these

popular feminism comments were drowned out by a flood of misogynistic comments, with references to “Ugly women have the most to do”, “If that’s the case, why does the woman need the betrothal gift?” and “This is what happens when feminism goes too far — it disrupts the law”. These commentaries do not deny the fact of rape, but instead turn to “female abuse”, “betrothal” and “having received a betrothal gift” to defend the accused.

This language, which seems to justify sexual violence with the logic of reason, is a legitimate outlet for men’s “sexual rights fantasies” and exemplifies popular misogyny in its strategic repackaging of patriarchal fear and masculinity crisis as public reason (Dafaure, 2022). Moreover, the digital space itself fuels the spread of this gendered ethos through platform algorithms and surveillance capitalism. Weibo monitors the number of follow-up comments and likes on comments in real time and puts the most popular comments at the top of the section. Surveillance capitalism brings about instrumentalism not by categorizing comments in ideological terms, as in totalitarianism, but by treating people as data-producing organisms, modifying behaviour without concern for belief (Zuboff, 2019). Therefore, the power of the platform operates through a ubiquitous digital architecture that monitors, analyses and directs the actions of netizens, amplifying popular misogynistic rhetoric in the comments section, which challenging the tool of self-expression and empowerment that networked society was conceived initially to serve as, and which has now believe to be the spaces of misinformation, polarization, and moral breakdown (Castells, 2022). Thus, it reveals how popular misogyny not only challenges feminist discourse but also reconfigures digital platforms into infrastructures of patriarchal reproduction.

The other voice in the comments section tends to question the outcome of the trial and the extent to which the chain of evidence for the public judgment is sound, such as “The question is, is there evidence of sex now?”, “Is an official judgement always correct?”. Despite claiming to protect women’s sexual autonomy, Chinese criminal law often prioritises

preserving family order and female chastity. Marital rape is unpunished mainly, and male victims are not recognised under rape statutes, revealing a legal logic that sustains patriarchal sexual authority beneath a veneer of gender justice (Lao, 2025). Challenging the outcome of a judgement is, of course, a democratic right of citizens, which can be used to monitor the fairness and independence of the judiciary, nonetheless, social media platforms serve as networked, soft storytelling infrastructures that allow users to curate, repeat, and remix stories in a collaborative manner (Papacharissi, 2016). The distinction between fact, opinion, and emotion is blurred by these storytelling structures, which are fuelled by misogynistic affective ties rather than just ideology and fact, resulting in a rhythmic, ambient kind of political discourse. Therefore, popular misogyny is not only “anti-judicial”, but in digital spaces, through affective mobilization and stigmatizing discourses, it in turn “justifies” and reinforces the legitimacy of the “chastity-centred” definition of rape in Chinese criminal law, thus reproduce the gender ideology behind the law.

While the Datong case illustrates how explicit feminist expressions are attacked through platformed misogyny, this second case reveals a subtler yet equally forceful mechanism, in which individuals are symbolically gendered and silenced based not on who they are, but on where they speak from. In particular, popular misogyny does not merely oppose popular feminism, it anticipates and pre-empts feminism by disciplining speech that emotionally or ideologically disrupts the dominant affective order. In February 2025, a Chinese female student studying art at California Institute of the Arts was murdered by a white male who knew her (Deliso, 2025). On Weibo, in addition to tributes, nationalistic and racist discriminatory remarks were common in the comments section, such as “Why date with this [white] old man?” “Good for her. She gets to stay in the great and glorious America forever” A Weibo user who called for an end to statements attacking the victim without identifying its gender was attacked by those who countered him with language weaponized

presumed femininity, interracial desire, and age-based stereotypes to shame and discipline, such as “You little bitch, which square-dancing team are you from?”, “So, how old is your white boyfriend?” and “You must be dying to marry a bunch of old white guys, huh?”.

In this case, popular misogyny manifests not through overt anti-feminist discourse but through the gendered disciplining of dissenting voices that disrupt dominant emotional orders in digital space. Unlike the Datong case, the comments being attacked in this case did not have a clear popular feminist bias, and even the gender of the attacker’s Weibo profile was shown as male, but he was still attacked as a “female”. According to Judith Butler (1988), gender is performative, which means that recurrent enactments that conform to social norms create its actuality. In this case, however, the attacker and the attacked did not interact physically, but were forcibly gendered by others in the digital space based on the “emotional gesture” of the speech. This “emotional gesture” can therefore be seen as a manifestation of feminist killjoy in digital space, in the sense that feminists are often perceived as ruining others’ “happiness” simply by pointing out sexism or injustice (Ahmed, 2010), even if the attacked person does not have any implicit feminist gestures, and is perceived as “disrupting the atmosphere of mourning” simply because of his or her emotional nonconformity and lack of engagement with dominant discourse. This reflects that the affective public does not tolerate out-of-sync emotional expression and thus punishes emotionally popular feminist discourse through affective discipline (Rantasila, 2020).

However, the success of this gendering and affective discipline can be attributed to the fact that digital platforms consider them representative. Instead of deleting these comments that abuse users as females, Weibo pushes them to the top of the comments section through an algorithmically defined amount of interaction. Therefore, the gendered shaming of users is not just a private opinion but takes place in a visible space recognized by the platform. The fact that the platform does not prevent it but amplifies it on a technical level constitutes a form of

“platformed disciplining”. Thus, in digital platforms, popular misogyny manifests not only as hostility towards feminist content but also as a structural regime that determines who may speak, how they are gendered, and what emotional positions are permissible. This case exemplifies how feminist alignment, even when implicit, is punished through platformed disciplining, emotional normativity, and symbolic gendering.

As both case studies suggest, popular feminism often struggles to respond to popular misogyny not because of a lack of legitimacy but because of its structural compatibility with platform logics. Banet-Weiser et al. (2020) suggested that popular feminism is not a mere political movement; it is rooted in neoliberal logic, such as individual responsibility and market-driven solutions over collective action or state intervention. As a result, it is fragmented, emotionally driven, and emphasizes individual emotional release. However, because of its lack of structural critique, it appears to be a voice that can easily be commercialized or commodified by the platform, which is not a force that challenges the system but is part of it. Therefore, although the Chinese feminist organization Gender Watch Women’s Voice has created creative approaches to combat online misogyny, popular feminist activity has made online misogyny worse rather than improving society (Han, 2018).

Nevertheless, despite the precariousness and commodification of popular feminism, it is still the window through which many people first encounter feminism and form public emotional connections. According to McRobbie (2007), feminism in popular culture deconstructs the feminist victories of the 1970s and 1980s by portraying them as obsolete, while simultaneously appearing to be a well-informed and well-intended response to feminism. Thus, even feminism in the logic of the marketplace can have a cultural contagion. While popular feminism does not have the power to counter popular misogyny, it is at least creating the possibility of a weak collective consciousness. It does not dismantle patriarchy,

but it leaves scratches on the surface, which are the scratches that someone else might one day trace, deepen, and turn into cracks.

To sum up, in terms of the two cases in the text, surveillance capitalism as a form of platform architecture works with algorithms to amplify misogynist discourse in digital space, making it a non-neutral but strongly patriarchal ideological space for discussion, reproducing the patriarchal logic behind social institutions, such as the law, reinforcing the foundations of patriarchal domination and undermining the power of popular feminism. Beyond platform complicity, popular misogyny operates through gendering, by assigning gender not based on identity but on the emotional position from which one speaks. The feminist killjoy, as theorised by Sara Ahmed, becomes not just a figure of critique, but a trigger for emotional discipline. In this sense, popular feminism is often pre-emptively silenced not because it speaks too loudly, but because it gestures emotionally in the wrong direction. As the cases show, popular feminism on the Chinese internet cannot easily resist the neoliberal affective order that also animates popular misogyny. However, despite its commodified and fragmented form, popular feminism remains a cultural mode through which feminist practice can enter public discourse. Its political power may be limited, but its effective traces can create more collective and sustained feminist futures.

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