Neoliberal feminism, gender relations, and a feminized male ideal in China: A critical discourse analysis of Mimeng’s WeChat posts

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A large body of literature has explored the interplay between neoliberal feminism and womanhood. However, little existing scholarship has tackled the impact of neoliberal feminism on women’s perception of manhood. This article presents a case study of Mimeng, an iconic Key Opinion Leader (KOL) using social media, such as WeChat, to engage with Chinese women. I employ a critical discourse analysis (CDA) method to investigate how Mimeng uses a neoliberal feminist discourse in composing posts for her WeChat account. One notable feature of Mimeng’s discourse that I identify is her attempt to construct a feminized male ideal. This discourse strategy reveals a commercial objectification of men in order to attract women followers, amid the increase of Chinese women’s consumer power. Yet, such a discourse places an emphasis on refining a woman’s capacity for housetraining her partner or husband, which is a motive embedded in the agenda of Chinese neoliberal feminism. The outcomes of the research shed light on the revival of patriarchal values in contemporary China and beyond.

Keywords: China; KOL; Mimeng; neoliberal feminism; male ideal; CDA

Introduction

In the West, we have witnessed the rise of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) who broadcast self-created content in attempts to attract followers on social media platforms (Pruchniewska 2018). These KOLs often brand themselves as “feminist” as a strategy to target women audiences, but the values promoted in their content largely follow a
neoliberal rationale (Pruchniewska 2018, 810). This phenomenon attests to “the compatibility of mainstream feminism with the market value of neoliberalism” (Rottenberg 2014, 419). Neoliberalism refers to a capitalist ethos that encourages people to be responsible for their own wellbeing (Harvey 2007). In relation to gender issues, it promotes neoliberal feminism, a type of pseudo-feminism emphasizing women’s self-responsibility in pursuing gender equality (McRobbie 2013). Yet, the agenda of neoliberal feminism advocates the construction of interdependent gender relationships in which women and men play complementary roles (Rottenberg 2018). In this way, neoliberal feminism heightens women’s oppression in contemporary Western societies by means of promoting women’s management of a “felicitous work-family balance” without tackling the structural oppression that women experience every day (Rottenberg 2014, 422).

Western neoliberal feminism has found a counterpart in contemporary China in the form of women-focused KOLs on Chinese social media (He 2017). Having blocked Chinese users’ access to popular Western services, government censorship has created a domestic social media market monopolized by platforms operated by Chinese companies (Peng 2017; Fuchs 2015). Launched by the giant Chinese Internet company – Tencent, WeChat is currently the most popular Chinese social media platform, with over 850 million users (Peng 2019). WeChat provides a major platform for women-focused Chinese KOL businesses. In common with their Western counterparts, these KOLs also use a ‘feminist’ self-branding strategy to target Chinese women (He 2017).

Existing Chinese scholarship in the field of neoliberal feminism focuses on womanhood (Wallis and Shen 2018; Tse 2017), with little research exploring the impact
of neoliberal feminism on Chinese women’s perception of manhood. This is a major omission: research reveals the rising popularity of a feminized male ideal among Chinese women (Louie 2012; Song and Hird 2014). Louie (2012) suggests that the construction of this feminized male ideal represents a pseudo-empowerment of Chinese women by the consumer market in connection with their increased buying power. Building upon Louie’s (2012) scholarship, I argue that neoliberal feminism, which rationalizes women and men’s complementary social roles, may well promote this feminized male ideal to Chinese women to address their expectations of men in interdependent gender relationships. The promotion of this male ideal diverts women’s attention away from the gendered socio-economic structure of Chinese society, both articulating the core value of neoliberal feminism and reflecting its cultural compatibility with patriarchal values in China. Thus, the aim of this article is to redress the paucity of literature on the intersections of neoliberal feminism and manhood by exploring the appropriation of neoliberal feminist discourse by women-focused Chinese KOLs.

This article focuses on the WeChat account of Mimeng, one of the most successful women-focused Chinese KOLs in the second decade of the 21st century. Before being shut down in February 2019 following her involvement in a fake news scandal (BBC 2019), Mimeng’s WeChat account accumulated over 8 million followers and her posts attracted more than 100,000 daily views (He 2017). Yet, Mimeng’s popularity among women came alongside controversies. Long before the fake news scandal, she had been criticized by the Chinese media for providing women with ‘toxic’ advice (BBC 2019). Despite the deactivation of Mimeng’s WeChat account, Mimeng still serves as an important case study through which to understand and interrogate notions of
neoliberal feminist discourse in China. This is because Mimeng was both immensely popular among women and iconic in the development of KOL businesses more broadly in China. In this regard, she developed a style of posting that has become a template for other Chinese KOLs posting on social media such as WeChat.

In the light of the interplay between neoliberal feminism and manhood in women-focused Chinese KOLs’ social media posting, I examine three research questions (RQs) by conducting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) study of Mimeng’s WeChat posts.

- RQ.1 How does Mimeng employ a neoliberal feminist discourse in her WeChat posting?
- RQ.2 How does she employ this discourse to target women followers?
- RQ.3 To what extent does Mimeng’s discourse strategy involve an attempt to construct a feminized Chinese male ideal?

In the following sections, I first discuss the rise of neoliberal feminism in post-reform China and then contextualize my case study of Mimeng’s WeChat account by elaborating on the interplay between neoliberal feminism and manhood. After introducing my data collection and research methods, I analyse the representation of neoliberal feminism in Mimeng’s discourse strategy. I conclude by summarizing my principal findings and by discussing the intersections of neoliberal feminism and the construction of a feminized male ideal in contemporary China.

**Neoliberal feminism and gender issues in contemporary China**

Neoliberalism was initially used to describe a capitalist mode of governance, one that advocates the privatization of industries and the transferal of responsibility for social
governance from the state to the market (Harvey 2007). Beyond economic sectors, neoliberalism also promotes individualism in everyday culture: by providing abundant consumer goods to the market, a neoliberal society encourages people to adopt an individualistic lifestyle (Giddens 1991). This lifestyle cultivates people’s self-reflexivity, encouraging them to appreciate personal choices (Rofel 2007). It emphasizes individuals’ full responsibility for themselves, which discourages collective movements towards the common good (Rottenberg 2018). Nowadays, the neoliberal rationale has created a discourse that “links moral probity even more intimately to self-reliance and efficiency, as well as to individuals’ capacity to exercise their own autonomous choices” (Rottenberg 2014, 421).

Neoliberal feminism is a term used by Western feminist theorists, such as McRobbie (2013) and Rottenberg (2018), to describe a type of pseudo-feminism that is aligned with neoliberal capitalism and advocates women’s full responsibility for their self-care. Neoliberal feminism presents itself as progressive and recasts issues of social justice in individualized terms (McRobbie 2013). It defines women as autonomous individuals and pays little attention to institutionalized gender inequality (McRobbie 2013). The neoliberal feminist agenda encourages women to pursue a “felicitous work-family balance”, which is, paradoxically, one of the causes of women’s structurally oppressed position in Western societies (Rottenberg 2014, 422). As Pruchniewska’s (2018) work shows, this form of neoliberal feminist discourse has become a key part of self-branding tactics deployed by Western KOLs to build-up their popularity among women followers. With this point in mind, the question can be asked: to what extent might this also be the case in China?
The extent to which neoliberalism is practised in China is an on-going debate. Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has launched a series of reform policies based on the Western experience of social governance (Harvey 2007). The reform has primarily been grounded in the marketization of industries (Rofel 2007). Focusing on its economic structure, Wu (2010) claims that China does not practise neoliberalism, because its market-oriented reform does not mean that the authoritarian government has loosened its control over society. However, when considering China from a cultural perspective, Wallis and Shen (2018) argue that contemporary Chinese culture adheres to certain neoliberal tenets, despite its generally distinct features. This is consistent with Rofel’s (2007) scholarship, which identifies the penetration of neoliberal ethos into Chinese society.

In Chinese society, traditional womanhood required Chinese women to act as a “virtuous wife and good mother” (Liu 2014, 19). In the mid-20th century, the communist regime started recognizing the importance of women in the modernization process (Wallis 2015). Since then, Chinese women have been granted the same legal rights as men (Peng 2018). Yet, the communist feminist movement followed a nationalist rationale, advocating the *neutered women* model (Schaffer and Song 2007). A *neutered woman* serves the common good with little consideration of her personal interest (Schaffer and Song 2007). The promotion of this *neutered women* model condemned femininity and disregarded women’s free will (Liu 2014). Based on the promotion of this *neutered women* model, the communist feminist movement helped very few Chinese women break through the glass ceiling within industry and politics (Wallis and Shen 2018). This movement is generally disliked by contemporary Chinese women (Liu 2014),
and this displeasure has paved the way for the rise of Chinese neoliberal feminism (Rofel 2007).

The rise of Chinese neoliberal feminism signals the reshaping of post-reform China’s gender issues by consumer cultures (Wallis and Shen 2018). This phenomenon instantiates the capacity for patriarchy to assume a feminist semblance in a neoliberal economy in the service of business interests (Rottenberg 2018). Specifically, the post-reform consumerism has significantly strengthened Chinese women’s self-reflexivity, which enables them to appreciate the fulfilment of their own desires (Rofel 2007). This produces a post-reform consensus that the neutered women model alienated Chinese women from femininity. This has been demonstrated by the emergence of symbolic feminist figures such as Zimei Mu, who posts sex diaries to provoke debates over women’s sexual freedom (Farrer 2007). This consensus illustrates that the “(re)claiming of sex differences has taken the form of an explicit desire, and a serious pursuit” in China’s feminist agenda (Liu 2014, 20).

Chinese neoliberal feminism seems to address women’s desires for liberation, which makes it appealing to many women (Rofel 2007). It defines Chinese women as ‘autonomous’, ‘modern’ individuals who are eager for the self-expression of femininity (Liu 2014, 22). This self-expression is driven by consumerism, which aims at stimulating consumption “by turning people into consumers and changing their consumer behaviours” (Peng 2019, 3). This consumer culture encourages Chinese women to “indulge in the possibilities and pleasures of feminine expressions” (Liu 2014, 20), such as consuming fashion/beauty products to celebrate their gender identity (Wallis and Shen 2018).
However, Chinese neoliberal feminism also emphasizes women’s management of a home-work balance (Wallis and Shen 2018). This pseudo-feminism proposes that women must be self-reliant and have a life of their own, because it would be “too risky” for them to completely rely on their male partner (Liu 2014, 22). However, its pseudo-feminist agenda describes Chinese women’s self-expression of femininity as a crucial means of enhancing their sexual attractiveness to men, which allows them to tame their partner in the home and ensure ‘everlasting’ romantic relationships or marriages (Liu 2014). This pseudo-feminist agenda adheres to a capitalist, individualist logic that denies the urgency of resolving gender inequality in China’s socio-economic structure through collective mobilizations of women (Wallis and Shen 2018).

Alongside the development of neoliberal feminism in Chinese society, there has been an explicit revival of patriarchy (Wallis 2015). Liu (2014, 20) has noted a renaissance of traditional Chinese female virtues, such as ‘female gentleness’, ‘female beauty’, and the ‘virtuous wife and good mother’’. Such a renaissance is reinforced by the labour market, in which men are provided with more career development opportunities than women (Wallis and Shen 2018), and the marriage market, where women with ‘feminine’ characteristics are particularly successful (Liu 2014). Consequently, Chinese women are, once again, “urged to take on attributes of care, emotionality, communicativeness, and gentleness deriving from their role as reproducers and nurturers” (Liu 2014, 20).

The explicit revival of patriarchy has provoked a backlash from some women, especially those with careers (Han 2018). However, civic engagement is strictly regulated in post-reform China (Wallis 2015). Although feminism is not considered particularly
dangerous’ by the regime, collective feminist movements are generally forbidden, as they are seen to pose a potential threat to the government’s holistic control of society (Li and Li 2017). This control has been tightened in the present political climate, evidenced by the arrests of feminist activists (Li and Li 2017) and the censorship of feminist content on social media (Han 2018). Yet, Chinese neoliberal feminism advocates “a sense of urgency that one’s self is the most reliable source of livelihood and well-being” (Liu 2014, 22). This facet is framed in line with the regime’s neoliberal governance, in which the “responsibility of social wellbeing has shifted from the government onto the individual” (Peng 2019, 3). Amid the government’s strict Internet censorship, this feature turns the practice of neoliberal feminism into a deployable discourse strategy for women-focused Chinese KOLs.

Neoliberal feminism and manhood

Neoliberal feminism has the potential to influence how the female views the male (Pompper 2010). Western manhood was traditionally constructed upon hegemonic masculinity, the type of masculinity advocating a powerful male ideal and upholding the historical male-dominance of Western societies (Connell 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is typically invoked by liberal feminism to construct men as the enemy of gender equality (Connell 2005). Since the 1980s, however, there has been a rise of metrosexual masculinity in Western societies, which challenges the importance of hegemonic masculinity in defining an ideal man (Pompper 2010). Metrosexual masculinity is embodied by a feminized male ideal that shows softened manhood and invests much in appearance (Louie 2012). This feminized male ideal is often promoted by women-
focused cultural products, such as feminist films and lifestyle magazines, to address women’s consumption of ‘male beauty’, amid the increase of their consumer capacity (Pompper 2010). A man who adheres to this feminized male ideal does not only look sexually attractive but is also mindful of women’s desires. The capacity for being mindful of women makes this male ideal compatible with neoliberal feminism, because the neoliberal feminist agenda, which advocates the building of interdependent gender relationships, requires men to accept a level of domestication to accommodate women’s desire for a home-work balance (Rottenberg 2018).

In China, the feminized male ideal shows notable Chinese characteristics (Song and Hird 2014). According to Louie (2012), traditional Chinese masculinity is shaped by a *wen-wu* paradigm, which emphasizes both the mental/civil and the physical/martial as the essential criteria for a Chinese man. While *wu* is comparable to Western hegemonic masculinity, *wen* is associated with being gentle and mindful of women (Louie 2012). Song and Hird (2014) argue that neoliberal reform has created diversified Chinese masculinities, which depart significantly from the *wen-wu* paradigm. However, these differing masculinities are not equally valued, given their various degrees of reception in the consumer market (Louie 2012). While traditional gender norms are still invoked in the definition of contemporary Chinese manhood (Song and Hird 2014), the *wen* aspect of the *wen-wu* paradigm has provided a grounding for the construction of a feminized male ideal in China (Louie 2012).

A feminized Chinese male ideal also emerges alongside women’s “increased buying power” (Louie 2012, 930). This is recently evidenced by women’s consumption of young, effeminate male celebrities, who are described as “little fresh meats”
(xiaoxianrou) by the media (Luo 2017, 200). These effeminate celebrities have provoked a backlash from many Chinese men (Feng 2018), given that the post-reform society simultaneously encourages the performance of ‘manly’ masculinity, the sort generally accepted by other men (Song and Hird 2014). However, the celebrities who are associated with a feminized male ideal embody women’s aesthetic values and, accordingly, become popular among women consumers (Luo 2017). The promotion of these celebrities represents the consumerist pseudo-empowerment of Chinese women through the sexual objectification of men (Song and Hird 2014).

A feminized Chinese male ideal promotes men’s gentleness and their sexual attractiveness (Louie 2012). Yet, in contemporary Chinese society, sexual attractiveness is seen as the privilege of wealthy men (Song and Hird 2014). As such, the feminized Chinese male ideal continues to be imagined as a wealthy man and, therefore, encompasses male power (Song and Hird 2014). As Louie (2012) notes, this feminized male ideal is still a wealthy, powerful man, who continues to embody the wu aspect of wen-wu masculinity, although this association between sexual attractiveness, wealth and power has become implicit.

The construction of a feminized male ideal fits within Chinese neoliberal feminism. The feminized male ideal emphasizes men’s capacity for being mindful of women (Song and Hird 2014). Yet, the promotion of men’s mindfulness of women indeed follows a patriarchal logic in which women’s management of interdependent gender relationships is heavily reliant on men’s willingness to accept some increase in women’s social status. As a result, although Chinese neoliberal feminist discourse is purportedly ‘feminist’, it still privileges men over women. Its strong interest in the
construction of a feminized male ideal illustrates the ambivalent liberation of women in post-reform China, which influences how Chinese women perceive men (Rofel 2007).

**Research questions and methods**

As discussed, this research sheds light on the relationship between women-focused Chinese KOLs’ neoliberal feminist discourse and their discursive construction of a feminized Chinese male ideal. The RQs underlying the study are:

- RQ.1 What are the features of the neoliberal feminist discourse deployed by *Mimeng*?
- RQ.2 How is this discourse used by *Mimeng* to engage with women followers?
- RQ.3 Is there an attempt by *Mimeng* to construct a feminized Chinese male ideal?

To answer the RQs, I analysed 98 romantic relationship-themed posts generated by *Mimeng*. The posts were retrieved from the “romantic relationship” folder self-categorized by *Mimeng*, which comprises approximately one-fifth of the entire archive of her posts.¹ When analysing this sample, I adopt a ‘snapshot’ approach to provide a window into *Mimeng*’s discourse strategy. The sample size is small but salient, because these posts comprise the entire archive of *Mimeng*’s content specifically tackling issues of gender relations in China.

A CDA method was employed for my data analysis. CDA is both a theoretical approach to the practice of power in critical discourse studies (CDS) and a specific qualitative research approach that scrutinizes the production of media texts within specific socio-cultural contexts (KhosraviNik and Unger 2016). Fairclough (2003)
provides a three-dimensional model to analyse textual data at the textual, discursive, and socio-cultural levels. The textual analysis refers to a linguistic description of the text, which explains the features of the textual data by analysing its use of communicative devices, such as style, naming, reference, metaphor, and lexical choice. The discursive analysis involves interpretation of the relationship between the text and discursive practice, which unpacks the patterns emerging with the processes through which the textual data are produced. The socio-cultural analysis then scrutinizes the interplay between the discursive practice and socio-cultural processes, examining how discourse is contextually devised in relation to the wider society (Fairclough 2003).

Rather than considering CDA as a theoretical approach, I employed Fairclough’s (2003) model to examine the discourse strategy found in the sampled posts. I analysed how Mimeng’s posts are phrased and how these textual features intersect with the construction of a feminized male ideal in post-reform Chinese society. Given the qualitative nature of the present case study, my findings are not intended to be applicable to all women-focused Chinese KOLs. Rather, my analysis provides enlightening insight into the interplay between neoliberal feminism and manhood, and the commercial logic behind this interplay in contemporary China.

**Analytical discussion**

Through the CDA research, I identified an engaging communicative style employed by Mimeng in her WeChat posting. This communicative style helps Mimeng engage with Chinese women by addressing three themes: 1) women’s self-reliance, 2) interdependent gender relationships, and 3) a feminized male ideal. While the first theme enables
Mimeng to brand herself as a feminist, the latter two themes present the core values advocated by Mimeng. Each theme constitutes an aspect of the neoliberal feminist discourse devised by Mimeng to target Chinese women on WeChat.

An engaging communicative style

Mimeng’s engaging communicative style is constituted by her strategic use of a second-person pronoun. At a textual level, my analysis shows Mimeng’s stylized use of a second-person singular pronoun in composing her posts. The singular form of ‘you’ (ni) represents the fourth most-used word in the sampled posts, with 2,658 hits. In contrast, the second-person plural pronoun (nimen) is only used 180 times. In the short quote below, the second-person singular pronoun appears six times. The quote was retrieved from a post entitled “I Don’t Flatter the World, I Only Flatter Myself”, providing a good illustration of this textual feature of Mimeng’s posts.

Life is a process in which you fall in love with yourself and treat yourself nicely […]. Respecting yourself not only helps you to be successful in the workplace but also allows you to develop a wonderful romantic relationship.

(Mimeng, 31 March 2017, emphasis added)

In Chinese, the second-person pronoun has both a singular and a plural form, which involve different interactive connotations. Differing from its plural form, which creates a hierarchy between addressers and addressees, the second-person singular pronoun is an important linguistic device “for reinforcing the addressee’s involvement” by imitating an oral, interpersonal communicative style (Biq 1991, 307). In the extract,
the second-person singular pronoun is constantly used alongside the reflexive pronoun “yourself” (niziji). This collocation places an emphasis on the individuality of the addressee. By frequently deploying this communicative style, Mimeng’s post involves an attempt to directly engage with followers in a non-hierarchical manner. This manner of textual production prompts followers’ emotive responses by giving them the impression that each post is personal, not general.

**Women’s self-reliance**

Based on the strategic employment of a second-person singular pronoun to address her followers, Mimeng’s discourse strategy constantly underscores a theme of women’s self-reliance. This theme is presented through a stylized use of an advice frame to encourage her followers to live a life free of others’ interference. The post analysed above is also representative of this advice frame. At a textual level, this post asserts that women should live for themselves and should not sacrifice their happiness to please their partner or husband. The development of this argument discursively promotes women’s self-reliance, which shows how individualism is invoked to advise her women followers on lifestyle choices. At first glance, this discourse strategy allows Mimeng to proclaim a ‘feminist’ manifesto: it follows a “progressive trajectory” of liberal feminism (Rottenberg 2014, 422), criticizing the persisting gender inequality in contemporary China and calling for the liberation of women from patriarchy. This discursive construction of women’s self-reliance incorporates the notion of “self-worth, self-reliance, and individual autonomy”, suggesting that women should always be the “gods” of themselves, free from the control of others (Liu 2014, 21).
Mimeng’s construction of women’s self-reliance avoids touching upon the patriarchal socio-economic structure of Chinese society. As shown in the below extract, which is composed by Mimeng to offer her women followers a personalized explanation of the problems they might have with their husband.

What is the Biggest Problem between Couples? [The answer is] class […]. Do not date a man who is not from your class.

(Mimeng, 26 November 2016, emphasis added)

The word “class” is used, here, to capture the gender hierarchy of a typical Chinese marriage, in which the husband occupies a class position that is higher than, or equal to, that of his wife. Mimeng’s discursive construction of women’s self-reliance is based on a rationalization of this gender hierarchy framed in the format of a story about women’s ‘husband hunting’. Rather than criticizing the socio-economic basis of this gender hierarchy, Mimeng uses emotive language to rationalize it, following a neoliberal logic. Her definition of women’s self-reliance is thus used to highlight the urgency of women’s self-responsibility for their own wellbeing. Rottenberg (2014, 428) has noted that neoliberal feminism does not attempt to resolve the tension between liberal individualism, social justice and the “social pressures that potentially obstruct the realization of ‘true’ equality”, but instead argues that women should not rely on the “government” or on “men as a group”. Linked to wider socio-cultural trends, Mimeng’s discursive construction of women’s self-reliance, therefore, echoes her Western neoliberal feminist counterparts. This discursive practice demonstrates how Mimeng
juxtaposes feministic terms and neoliberal rationale to brand herself as ‘feminist’ while embedding patriarchal values within her ‘feminist’ discourse.

**An interdependent gender relationship**

In Mimeng’s WeChat posting, an ideological shift from feminism to neoliberal feminism is further evident in her discursive construction of interdependent gender relationships. This discourse strategy is most notable in the following two posts.

But this is no longer ancient times! This is already the 21st Century! […] I will buy lipsticks myself. What I want is your love.

(Mimeng, 30 January 2017)

True love does not exist without money […]. If you cannot talk about money [with him], it is not true love.

(Mimeng, 29 March 2014)

The first post is based on a progressive narrative of gender issues, which suggests that contemporary Chinese women are “no longer living in ancient times”, but instead the “21st century”. This progressive narrative discursively constructs contemporary China as a modernized society in which socio-economic development has provided women with sufficient career opportunities. This discourse strategy, however, reinforces the social stratification and imbalanced gender power relations of Chinese society by directing the feminist agenda towards women’s achievement of consumerist independence, which merely allows them to satisfy their consumer desires without restrictions. In the second of the above posts, such a discourse strategy is deployed through stressing consumerist gender independence: at a textual level, the post uses the word “money” as a metaphor to
materialize the basis of “true love”. This metaphorical association situates women as those who spend money, which is provided to them by men, as part of a ‘normal’ structure of Chinese family financial management. By invoking this metaphorical association, Mimeng’s discourse strategy exploits the renaissance of traditional female virtues in China and feeds into the neoliberal rationalization of Chinese womanhood. This promotes her version of ‘ideal’ gender relationships by stressing the complementariness of women and men’s social roles.

Mimeng’s discursive construction of interdependent gender relationships is also notable in the below post, entitled “You Should Be Strong but Not Tough”.

Why do you carry out manual labour by yourselves? Isn’t this for men? […] There is no need for you to be strong when facing your boyfriend, husband, or the person who you like. […] Women need to be independent but do not have to do the [masculine] work.

(Mimeng, 26 January 2017)

By appropriating the two adjectives “strong” and “tough”, Mimeng discursively dichotomizes two types of work, which are associated with masculine and feminine qualities respectively. The boundary between the two types of work, in Mimeng’s terms, is set by advising that women should not perform men’s tasks, which she specifically defines as “fixing computers, lamps and unblocking drains”. A dichotomization of feminine and masculine work contextualizes Mimeng’s discourse strategy against a specific socio-cultural backdrop. This backdrop is resonant of the association between technology and masculinity in Western culture and highlights the extent to which the ability to use technology constitutes an important aspect of heteronormative manhood in
the Chinese context. In turn, in Mimeng’s narrative, avoiding tasks that require technological skill is metaphorically associated with the performance of femininity. Placed in the context of wider Chinese society, this feminine performance not only represents a neoliberal agenda of Chinese women’s liberation (Rofel 2007), but could also be seen to be presented as a means to develop women’s sexual attractiveness to men (Liu 2014), through which women’s wellbeing is secured. Accordingly, advocacy of this feminine performance is a salient aspect of Mimeng’s discursive construction of interdependent gender relationships and women are charged with responsibility for the management of these relationships.

A feminized Chinese male ideal

Given the construction of interdependent gender relationships in which men must play a part, Mimeng’s posts inevitably involve the discursive construction of a male ideal. I found that words and phrases referring to men were frequently mentioned throughout the sampled posts. These included “man/male” (nanren/nan/nanxing: 653 hits), “boyfriend/ex-boyfriend” (nanpengyou/nanyou/qiannanyou: 477 hits), “husband” (laogong/zhangfu: 307 hits) and “young man” (nansheng: 260 hits). In Mimeng’s posts, this frequent reference to men provides room for her discussion about new manhood. This is exemplified below.

There are two men. One earns ¥100,000 but he wants to spend all the ¥100,000 on you. The other one earns ¥1,000,000 but he only spends ¥100,000 on you and saves the rest for himself. Which of them would you date? I would pick the one with ¥100,000 and earn ¥1,000,000 by myself.
Mimeng’s discursive construction of the new male ideal is firstly built upon a comparison frame. In the above extract, rhetorical questions are used by Mimeng to set up a hypothetical scenario which invites her women followers to compare two men. The two men are categorized into two types of manhood through a referential strategy which designates the men not by their name but by their annual income. Having explicitly noted, at a textual level, that the man with a lower income is the better one, the comparison forms a discursive practice consistent with Mimeng’s advocacy of ‘new manhood’. At first glance, Mimeng’s version of new manhood reduces the importance of wealth and status in defining a contemporary Chinese male ideal. Her discourse strategy has exploited the post-reform consumer culture in which the recent search for ‘little fresh meats’ by Chinese women seems to release Chinese men from the role of ‘salary warrior’. Yet, her new construction of manhood does not entail a complete departure from the existing gender hierarchy inherent in the socio-economic structure of China. In particular, by using the proportion of a man’s annual income that he spends on his wife or partner as a metaphor in these posts, Mimeng discursively compares this ‘new good man’ to a ‘selfish salary warrior’, who earns much more, but proportionally spends far less of his income on his wife or partner. Mimeng, therefore, idealizes a feminized man who is willing to continuously provide for his partner or wife in a romantic relationship or marriage. The idealization of this man is still based on his socio-economic status, although this criterion is implicitly placed upon him.

The socio-economic dimension of Mimeng’s discursive construction of a new male ideal is interspersed with her narrative of women’s ‘husband hunting’. This
discourse strategy underscores a social class subtheme of her version of the male ideal, as evidenced in the below excerpt.

> What kind of house do you own? What kind of car do you own? […] These all reveal your class […]. Do not find a husband who shares a different class with you, unless you have the charm to overcome the distinction.

*(Mimeng, 26 November 2016, emphasis added)*

Specifically, by deploying the words “charm” and “class” to define gender power relations, *Mimeng’s* post explicitly advises women to pursue a marriage in which the two partners are of the same class, unless the woman possesses the objectified feminine qualities necessary to “overcome” class distinction. This rationalization of gender hierarchy adheres to a patriarchal objectification of both women and men by post-reform Chinese consumer culture (Song and Hird 2014; Wallis and Shen 2018). By emphasizing that a woman can only date a man of a “different class” if she has the charm to overcome the distinction, it is suggested that “different” necessarily means “higher”. *Mimeng* therefore implicitly suggests that a woman should not even consider a man from a lower class. Consequently, *Minmeng’s* masculine model implicitly assumes that the feminized ‘good man’ occupies a socio-economic position that is equal to, or higher than, that of his woman partner.

Another subtheme that emerged in *Mimeng’s* discursive construction of the feminized male ideal refers to men’s mindfulness of women’s desires. This is evident below.

> In fact, Gali [a ‘good man’ character] is not gay […] He carries hand lotions because Lajiao [the woman whom Gali loves] has to wash lots of cups every
day [...]. He never talks to other women because Lajiao is the only girl meaningful to him.

(Mimeng, 7 July 2016, emphasis added)

At a textual level, the subtheme of men’s mindfulness of women’s desires is apparent in Mimeng’s use of the word “gay” in the above post. Gay men are stereotypically considered to be more feminine than heterosexual men (Blashill and Powlishta 2009). While emphasizing that the man in question is in fact “not gay”, Mimeng’s lexical choice discursively invokes the stereotype of “gay” to capture the characteristics of a hypothetical ‘good man’. This referential strategy is juxtaposed with the rhetorical employment of parallelism, as Mimeng describes the good man’s behaviour by listing a series of daily routines supposedly typical of a woman. The male ideal is romanticized through the feminization of his behaviour. Promoted by Mimeng, this feminized male ideal forms an essential part of mythologized interdependent gender relationships, wherein men constantly devote all their attention to their partner or wife’s psychological wellbeing. Following this discourse strategy, Mimeng’s construction of the feminized male ideal positions dedication to caring for women as the most important quality of a ‘good’ man; this ‘good man’ is able to meet Chinese women’s expectations of their husband or partner in an emotional dimension.

Yet, following a neoliberal rationalization, Mimeng’s emphasis on men’s mindfulness of women is never stripped from its patriarchal origins, as shown below.

A romantic relationship means that he is in charge of family finances but I decide how to spend. […] Whenever I want to buy clothes – no matter a
¥1,500 jacket or ¥1,200 shoes – he will swipe his credit card for me with no hesitation at all.

(Mimeng, 12 August 2016)

In this extract, by metaphorically associating “swiping his credit card” with a man’s willingness to care for his wife or partner, Mimeng presents a family finance model that materializes her version of the new manhood. This is simultaneously aligned with men satisfying women’s consumer desires. At a textual level, Mimeng’s advocacy of this financial model seems to support female privilege. However, linked back to the socio-economic structure of post-reform China in which patriarchy undergoing a revival, this financial model pushes women back to the position of being domesticated. By presenting this financial model as the basis of interdependent gender relationships, Mimeng’s discursive construction of the feminized male ideal paves the way for the return of a patriarchal definition of women and men’s complementary roles in contemporary Chinese society.

Mimeng’s paradoxical subordination of women is apparent in the below excerpt from a post entitled “What to Do If You See Your Husband Masturbating” in which she explicitly invokes an advice frame to explain to her women followers how to tame men in the home.

What to do if you see your husband masturbating? The correct answer is to have sex with him immediately. You may seduce him and give him a more entrancing experience – no matter if using your hands or mouth […]. Of course, this has to be pleasurable for you too.

(Mimeng, 23 September 2016)
Here, rhetorical questions are again employed by Mimeng to frame her version of women and men’s interdependence, which is built upon women’s daily management of romantic relationships or marriages with men. Such management is sexualized in Mimeng’s narrative, which uses the phrase “entrancing experience” to implicitly direct women to satisfy their husband or partner’s sexual needs. This discourse strategy figures sexual willingness as a criterion for a “new good Chinese wife”. The post suggests that women should only offer this sexual activity if they can derive pleasure from it. This manner of textual production invokes the neoliberal rationale of women’s sexual autonomy to present Mimeng’s discourse as ostensibly ‘feminist’. Yet, this semblance of feminism does not conceal the patriarchal nature of her discourse, evidenced by her advocacy of women’s use of sexual activity as a means to ‘tame’ an ‘ideal’ husband or partner. This neoliberal feminist discourse constitutes an implicit promotion of gender hierarchy, which potentially affects Mimeng’s women followers’ perception of gender power relations and manhood in the Chinese context.

Nowadays, Chinese women have largely embraced the neoliberal notion of gender identities and desires. The popularity of ‘chick literature’ amongst contemporary Chinese women and the support that many Internet users show to Zimei Mu for revealing her private sex diaries are both symbolic examples of contemporary Chinese women’s sexual liberation (Farrer 2007). These phenomena accord with Rofel’s (2007) analysis of gender in the post-reform era and exhibit Chinese women’s increased ability to express their sexual desires nowadays. Against this backdrop, the construction of a feminized male ideal is devised as an important theme in Mimeng’s neoliberal feminist discourse to address the sexual and emotional wants of Chinese women today. This discourse strategy
fulfils Chinese women’s expectations of men and family life, serving the core value of home-work balance in the neoliberal feminist agenda unique to the Chinese context. However, because Chinese women comprise the vast majority of *Mimeng*'s target audience, her promotion of the feminized male ideal has no direct impact on men. Resultantly, *Mimeng*'s attempt to reshape Chinese women’s perception of manhood provides another layer of evidence demonstrating how neoliberal feminist discourse contributes to the revival of patriarchy in contemporary China by encouraging women’s quotidian concentration on managing romantic relationships or marriages.

**Conclusion**

Through the analysis of the sampled posts retrieved from *Mimeng*'s WeChat account, I have answered the RQs by demonstrating how the KOL employs a neoliberal feminist discourse to reconstruct a feminized male ideal and how this discourse strategy enables her to target Chinese women by exploiting the neoliberal turn in contemporary Chinese society. Specifically, my analysis shows that, based on an engaging communicative style, *Mimeng* has developed three themes that constitute a discourse strategy, which concerns the promotion of women’s self-reliance, interdependent gender relationships, and a feminized male ideal. Together, these themes reflect contemporary China’s gender issues and the neoliberal rationale that is linked to these issues.

Specifically, rather than encouraging women to be really self-reliant and independent, *Mimeng*'s discourse constructs an ideal of the feminized man who is willing to spoil his partner or wife and satisfy her desires. The construction of this feminized male ideal highlights the persistence of male-dominance in contemporary Chinese
society. It addresses the key agenda of Chinese neoliberal feminism, which advocates the establishment of interdependent gender relationships in which women and men’s complementary roles are defined by patriarchal values. As a general trend, Mimeng claims to value women’s autonomy, but her idea of feminine performance paradoxically situates women in the home and promotes the sexual objectification of women. In the West, there also seems to be a tendency to reassert women’s femininity, which emerges as an expression of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg 2018). However, being distinct from the Western tendency, which “takes more subtle forms”, the objectification of women apparent in Chinese neoliberal feminist discourse treats “what would have been viewed as blatant sexism from a Western feminist perspective as ‘how things should be’ or a return to the ‘truth’” (Liu 2014, 20). This resonates with the post-reform ethos, in which women’s reclaiming of femininity is explicitly encouraged. Consequently, Mimeng’s discourse not only exploits the neoliberal rationalization of gender issues that Chinese society absorbs from Western capitalism, but also reflects Chinese women’s denial of the communist feminist movements, which is unique to Chinese society (Wallis and Shen 2018). In this sense, her discursive construction of the feminized Chinese male ideal bears distinctive features of women-focused Chinese KOLs’ practice of neoliberal feminist discourse.

The achievement of a home-work balance advocated by women-focused Chinese KOLs such as Mimeng does not challenge the core values of patriarchy, which endorse male-dominance in Chinese society. This pseudo-feminist agenda, framed within neoliberal, individualist terms, seems to serve women’s interests, but it requires no fundamental changes to the patriarchal nature of China’s socio-economic structure, which
would be immensely difficult to achieve. It instead places the responsibility on the individual by diverting Chinese women’s attention from structural problems and discouraging them from blaming the patriarchal system. The rise of Chinese KOLs such as Mimeng in post-reform China is thus symptomatic of what Rottenberg (2014, 419) terms a “cultural phenomenon in which neoliberal feminism is fast displacing liberal feminism”.

The neoliberal feminist discourse, upon which Mimeng’s social media postings are based, has obviously overlooked socio-political factors which uphold gender inequality in contemporary China. For instance, China’s birth control policy is notorious for violating Chinese women’s reproductive rights (Luo 2017) and the government’s insufficient legislation on maternal employment continues to disadvantage Chinese women in the workplace (Attane 2019). These notable issues are never mentioned by Mimeng. This omission undoubtedly reflects the market logic, as easily achievable feminist manifestos are more likely to be sold to women audiences. At the same time, this also provides a window into the present political climate, characterized by the “arbitrariness of state guarantees of rights in China” (Farrer 2007, 27). In the early 2000s, the shutdown of Zimei Mu’s sex blogs revealed that gender topics could be ‘politically sensitive’ in China, even though the discussion of these topics itself poses no real threat to the regime (Farrer 2007). More recently, incidents of state violence against grassroots feminist activists have acted as a warning to women-focused KOLs: collectively mobilized political movements are indeed suppressed in contemporary China (Li and Li 2017). This suppression of grassroots feminist movements exemplifies the government’s tightened control over Chinese people’s freedom of speech on social media.
Neoliberal feminist discourse, which shows a level of compatibility with the regime’s practices of social governance, seems to have provided women-focused Chinese KOLs with the room to promote their business interests whilst avoiding China’s political censorship. Yet, with their rising influence in Chinese society, these women-focused KOLs have inevitably attracted the regime’s attention (BBC 2019). The recent self-shutdown of Mimeng’s WeChat account was the result of a fake news scandal in which the criticisms she received from the government’s mouthpieces showed no apparent link to her engagement with gender topics. Whether this shutdown is a temporary, isolated incident or signals the end of women-focused KOL businesses like Mimeng’s on Chinese social media requires further observations. As such, I propose that future research should examine the relationship between women-focused KOLs and China’s political climate once the government’s policy on these issues becomes clearer.

Previous studies about neoliberal feminism have largely focused on the interplay between neoliberal feminism and womanhood (Rottenberg 2018; Wallis and Shen 2018; Pruchniewska 2018; Tse 2017). My research contributes to the existing literature in the field of feminism and media studies by evaluating the intersections of neoliberal feminism and the construction of a new male ideal within the discourse strategy developed by a prominent Chinese KOL. Given the case-study nature of my research, the findings do not intend to provide a grand narrative of gender issues in contemporary China. Yet, these findings are indeed enlightening, helping us to recognize the dynamic relationship between neoliberal feminism and manhood. The outcomes of my research
enable us to critique the transformations of patriarchal values and their impact on
women’s perception of manhood in China and beyond.

Note
1. The data collected for the present research represents a snapshot of Mimeng’s account up
to 7th July 2017. The other folders are named “inspiration”; “career”; “parenting”;
“social”; “lifestyle”; “collection”; “entertainment”; “complaint”; and “jokes”.

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