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# Jacinda Ardern and the *limits of gender* on the Chinese-language Internet: a critical discourse analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores Chinese Internet users' discussions about Jacinda Ardern's maternity leave in the wake of her being elected as the Prime Minister of New Zealand, based on an analysis of postings retrieved from the most popular Chinese community question-answering (CQA) site—Zhihu. Drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA), with the assistance of content analysis (CA), we reveal that Zhihu users' assessments of Ardern's electoral success are of a gendered divide in which women and men largely constitute the opposing opinion camps. In particular, male Internet users chiefly direct the discussion, attempting to rationalise the unsuitability of female politicians in Western-style democratic elections. In this process, they also legitimise the return of patriarchal orders to China, reflecting a domestic orientation of their engagement with international politics. The research findings shed light on the gender-politics nexus established in Chinese-language social media discourses.

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## Introduction

Despite notes of discord from the right, Jacinda Ardern's succession as the Prime Minister of New Zealand in 2017 is often celebrated by liberals as a symbolic feminist accomplishment in Western-style democratic politics (Kate Kushner 2018). In particular, Ardern is one of the few female world national leaders, who have taken maternity leave while in office. Her effective handling of the Covid-19 crisis makes her an excellent example that being a woman does not restrict one's ability to provide strong political leadership in a contemporary political context (Suze Wilson 2020). Her electoral success is indeed symbolic of the achievement of left-leaning progressive political agendas, despite the wider political culture remaining patriarchal in the Global North.

In Western societies, appreciation of left-wing, liberal values is often associated with well-educated middle-classes. However, previous research has sketched out a different picture in China, where mainstream public opinion is often at odds with left-leaning liberals in the West (Altman Yuzhu Peng, Xianwen Kuang and Jenny Zhengye Hou 2022). In recent years, this phenomenon is most tellingly revealed by many Chinese intellectuals'

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idolisation of Donald Trump and well-informed, middle-class Chinese Internet users' appropriation of Western right-wing populist rhetoric in public debates (Yao Lin 2021), despite the political ideologies they epitomise being hostile to China. The engineering of this paradoxical phenomenon reflects both the historical process of China's modernisation and its current relations with major Western democracies in international politics.

As one of the first national leaders to give birth and take maternity leave while in office, Jacinda Ardern has come to represent the potential for gender equality goals in the context of Western democracies and women's political participation more broadly. For the ongoing health of New Zealand's trade capacities, her government relies on strong bilateral relations with China. Vice versa, Chinese trade and sizeable diaspora communities in New Zealand mean the Oceanic nation is visible in the Chinese social media sphere. However, different from other major Western democracies, New Zealand politics is not considered to have a major impact on China's domestic politics, meaning that conversations about Ardern's electoral success on Chinese social media platforms are less likely to be targeted by the CCP's top-level censor. Accordingly, Chinese Internet users' assessments of Ardern's maternity leave in the wake of her electoral success provide a useful case study for exploring how the notion of gender intersects with the Chinese assessments of Western democracies and their political leaders.

In light of Max Weber (1949) prescription of an ideal-type research design, we purposively selected Ardern as the case study to foreground how Chinese Internet users assess a female Western politician's electoral success in relation to her maternity leave. To this end, we also draw on critical discourse analysis (CDA), with the assistance of content analysis (CA), to scrutinise relevant postings retrieved from the most popular Chinese-language community question-answering (CQA) site. With Harriet Evans (2008) conceptualisation of the *limits of gender* in mind, the article specifically accounts for how Chinese notions of gender are disconnected from a constructionist understanding and how this disconnection facilitates the perpetuation of patriarchal orders. The analysis accordingly reveals 1) how Ardern's electoral success has caused divided opinions between female and male Chinese Internet users, and 2) how gendered discourses are invoked by these Internet users to rationalise Ardern's political achievements.

In what follows, we continue with a discussion of Chinese perceptions of Western democratic politics and their intersection with gender politics in post-reform China. This is followed by a review of critical discourse analysis (CDA) literature, which points towards the theoretical and methodological approach of the article. We then present our analysis of the empirical data and conclude by summarising the most salient findings of the research.

## Literature review

### *A Chinese gaze at Western democratic politics*

Similar to postcolonial countries, the modernisation of Chinese society is inseparable from the Western powers' global expansion during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The defeats of the Chinese regime of that time by foreign invaders have created a narrative of history that emphasises the importance of China learning from the West (Riyun Cong 2009). In this process, a complex Chinese discourse of the West is established, constructing Western nations as

a desirable imaginary of industrialisation and modernity (Lisa Rofel 2007). This discourse is particularly popular with many liberal-leaning Chinese intellectuals, who are often overly optimistic about Euro-American socio-political systems, as a result of their need for an idealised model to rationalise their criticisms of China's party-state polity (Lin 2021). This evolves against the backdrop of a Cold-War-style, dualistic narrative of world politics perpetuated in Chinese society that defines major Western democracies as being first and foremost a *capitalist* homogeneous block. As such, a misperception exists that liberal values can threaten the continuity of Western civilisation, with liberal-leaning Chinese intellectuals gazing upon progressive social movements in the original Western contexts as challenges to the capitalist systems, rather than reflections of democratic political life (Lin 2021).

Yet, Chinese understandings of Western democratic politics do not always relate to the original contexts. They are also invoked as a means of asserting domestic nationalist political agendas that focus on the Sino-US competitions on the world stage (Lin 2021). Specifically, China's four-decade government-led reforms have created a flourishing market economy, which has indeed improved Chinese people's living standards, and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) effective propaganda campaigns have simultaneously encouraged nationalist sentiments amongst the population (Chenchen Zhang 2022). Increasingly more Chinese people, who identify with the nationalist sentiments, believe that their home nation, with its own rich history and prosperous present, has a unique, superior cultural system compared with the outside world (Zhang 2022). Western democratic politics is often assessed by this camp of people through a competitive frame of international politics, which considers Euro-American nations' promotion of democratic values as an ideological tool aiming to destabilise their competitors (Chen and Lu 2011). Amid China becoming a new superpower, this competitive frame rationalises the perceived decline of the US superpower as a result of internal partisan divides caused by the so-called "liberal elites" (Lin 2021). In this way, the Chinese middle-classes' appropriation of right-wing populist rhetoric also points towards their attempt to advance nationalist political agendas in the domestic context. This unique socio-political trend, which manifests as the middle-class population's rejection of progressive liberal values, forms a toxic aspect of mainstream public opinion in China today (Peng 2022).

Existing studies of Chinese engagement with international politics tend to focus on Sino-foreign disputes (Cong 2009). While recent scholarship has started exploring how Chinese understandings of Western democratic politics unfold outside of the context of these disputes (Lin 2021; Zhang 2022), their quest is largely specific to state politics, paying limited attention to the gender-politics axis in the process. In particular, women's political participation represents an important agenda for Western liberal political movements. With women being severely underrepresented within China's domestic political infrastructure (Jude Howell 2006), its middle-class population's acceptance of such a progressive agenda has implications for the future of feminist movements in the country.

### ***The limits of gender in the Chinese context***

According to Evans (2008), the *limits of gender* describes how gender issues in contemporary China are shaped by the CCP's politics. As Cara Wallis (2015) explains, this concept captures how the Chinese notion of gender "exists without a simultaneous engagement

with the concept of gender as the social and cultural power relations that undergird conceptions of masculinity and femininity". As an outcome of the second wave feminist movements, a constructionist approach to gender, which considers gender identities as "instituted through a stylised repetition of acts" (Judith Butler 1988, 519), has largely become a consensus shared by Western left-wing liberals. The constructionist approach emerges as a criticism of sex/gender essentialism, which invokes the biological myth of womanhood to rationalise asymmetrical gender power relations in society (Evans 2008). Drawing on the constructionist approach, the *limits of gender* specifically unpacks how an essentialist understanding of sex is perpetuated in China as the result of "the government's strategic bargain whereby greater consumption and lifestyle choices are offered to the populace in exchange for the suppression of political rights" (Wallis 2015, 226–227).

While acknowledging the progress of gender equality during Mao's era, contemporary scholarship suggests that the post-reform labour market restructuring has disadvantaged Chinese women (Siyuan Yin 2021). Since the late 1970s, the CCP has launched a series of policies primarily based on the marketisation of industries to reform China's economic sectors. In this process, an essentialist understanding of sex has been invoked to argue for a reduction in women's inclusion in the market economy, due to their perceived weaker physicality in comparison with men (Fengshu Liu 2014). Having a stake in the prosperity of the market economy, the CCP shows no attempt to effectively tackle gender inequality in the labour market. Rather, claims that women's liberation has "outpaced" China's capacity for productivity are publicly endorsed by officials to legitimise the overwhelmingly disproportionate layoffs of female employees (Wang Zheng 2003). In this sense, the perpetuation of sex/gender essentialism in the Chinese context is twofold, showcasing how the *limits of gender* is both politically and economically engineered within a party-state polity (Altman Yuzhu Peng 2021).

In terms of political engineering, the CCP's post-reform official propaganda involves strategically avoiding critical discourses of gender because of the implications they entail on its political legitimacy and economic agenda (Evans 2008). In line with this propaganda strategy, the CCP has not only silenced the voices of liberal-leaning feminists (Zheng Wang 2015), but also promoted a wide range of female role models, such as "women scientists, entrepreneurs, celebrities, and workers [having] won recognition in mundane and low-pay work", who manage a felicitous work-home balance in their everyday lives (Liu 2014, 21). This blatant promotion of patriarchal values in official propaganda legitimises the market economy by highlighting the sexualised bodies of women as an indicator of individual investment and personal achievement. In such gender representations, "consumption and displays of overt sexuality" are not simply portrayed as conforming to traditional feminine traits but associated with the "expressions of urban, globalised modernity" (Wallis 2015, 227). In this way, the business manipulation is disguised with a veneer of empowerment, which exploits contemporary Chinese women's rejection of the state control over their bodies in Mao's era to make it more appealing to women (Peng 2021). With an ability to assist profit generation by shaping women's consumer behaviours, the *limits of gender* showcases its viability in both the political infrastructure and the market economy (Wallis 2015).

It is undeniable that the global MeToo movement has energised China's local feminist activism, with a series of high-profile sexual harassment being exposed through social media platforms that signifies a glimpse of hope in recent years (Sara Liao and Luwei Rose

Luqiu 2022; Shan Huang and Wanning Sun 2021; Siyuan Yin and Yu Sun 2021). The MeToo momentum on the Chinese-language Internet is indicative of the resilience of digital activism within a paternal state, where civic engagement is not always strictly prohibited unless it poses threats to the stability of the party-state polity (Yu Sun, Todd Graham and Marcel Broersma 2020). However, with the *limits of gender* being established as a defining characteristic of China's public discourse, the current MeToo momentum, alongside grassroots women's campaigns for self-autonomy and agency in everyday-life contexts, has evidently antagonised a large cohort of Chinese Internet users, who are often men and misogynistic in their worldview. The extent to which their backlash against feminist agendas has persisted in their discursive practices in the Chinese-language social media sphere represents a research trajectory that urges intellectual intervention (Jing Zeng 2020).

Considering the pivotal role political participation plays in feminist agendas, the representation of women in politics offers the necessary scope to foreground the *limits of gender* in Chinese-language social media discourses. As Helen Xiaoyan Wu's (2014) research reveals, the discourse of women-as-sexual temptations often unfolds in media portrayals of corruption scandals that bring down the careers of otherwise reliable high-ranking male politicians. The discourse is often the mistress-cum-whistle blower that ends up categorised as a "self-assertive mistress" in the scandal aftermath (Wu 2014, 45). This discourse excuses implicated male politicians simply as beholden to their mistress' immorality and opportunism in times of political turmoil due to the access they have to ill-gotten state secrets. While suggesting that these male politicians are the "victims" of woman's sexual and political corruption, it masks the simple position of power that senior male officials have to take mistresses or expect sexual exchange from their female subordinates in the first place (Elaine Jeffreys 2008). This alludes to the use of sexual seduction often aligned with women who have achieved success, facilitating the spread of sexualised (mis)perceptions of women in power within Chinese society.

Nationwide general elections do not exist in the political infrastructure of China. This, however, by no means suggests that discussions about women's participation in democratic elections are absent in the country. Rather, Western democracies are necessarily the fodder for such discussions, as the CCP's selective Internet censorship provides social media users with the room to engage with international political affairs that are not directly linked to domestic issues (Tessa M. Pfafman, Christopher J. Carpenter and Yong Tang 2015). In this way, an analysis of Chinese Internet users' discussions about high-profile female politicians in Western democratic elections may inform a dialogue between Chinese (mis)perceptions of women's political participation and Chinese assessments of democratic politics. This enables us to fully account for the transnational cultural exchange of liberal ideas in terms of equality and diversity in an increasingly globalised world.

### ***A critical discourse analysis approach***

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides both a theoretical and methodological approach to elucidate the *limits of gender* being perpetuated in Chinese Internet users' discursive practices. First coined the term, Norman Fairclough (2001) first coined the term, CDA, to describe his attempt to establish the relationship between language use and the exercise

of power. In the same vein, for John E. Richardson and Ruth Wodak (2009, 252) have advanced a discourse-historical framework, which advises a step-by-step analysis of 1) the “immediate, language, or text internal co-text”, 2) the “intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses”, 3) the “extra-linguistic social/sociological variables and institutional frames of a specific ‘context of situation’”, and 4) the “broader socio-political and historical contexts, within which the discursive practices are embedded”. With an explicit critical stance, CDA scholarship by no means rules out the possibility of incorporating quantitative methods. However, instead of generating representative findings of any kind, it purposively examines asymmetric power relations embedded in language use to unpack how domination and subordination are perpetuated through various discursive strategies (Richardson and Wodak 2009).

A discursive strategy involves a stylised repetition of textual production that justifies a specific trajectory of sensemaking (Judith Baxter 2017). Amongst the various types, referential, predicational, and argumentation strategies are commonly found in discursive practice in action. Referential strategies refer to how a person or an object is named, and it serves as a starting point that permits an in-group/out-group membership to be defined (Majid KhosraviNik and Nadia Sarkhoh 2017). A predicational strategy involves making a statement through the attribution of specific characteristics to a subject, which renders the “discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, events/processes and actions” (Wodak and Meyer 2014, 94). An argumentation strategy refers to how “content-related warrants (‘conclusion rules’)” are developed to bridge arguments and conclusions in a particular manner, “and hence provide justification of the latter” (Richardson and Wodak 2009, 255). These discursive strategies are constantly devised in differing forms of textual production, which facilitate the communication of ideology-specific meanings.

Echoing established CDA scholarship, feminist researchers, such as Michelle M. Lazar (2007), strive to articulate how discursive practices intersect with “various forms of social inequality and oppression” to provide a critical account of the “interconnections between and the particularities of discursive strategies” that facilitate or hamper women’s agency. In particular, the feminist lens encourages researchers to account for grassroots involvement in political processes (Lazar 2007), moving beyond the paradigm of traditional CDA literature, which usually exhibits a particular interest in elite discourses (e.g., news reports and political speeches) (Gwen Bouvier and David Machin 2018). With the feminist lens in mind, this article adopts John Richardson and Ruth Wodak’s (2009) discourse-historical CDA framework to scrutinise Chinese Internet users’ postings, focusing on how their discursive strategies reflect the *limits of gender* being perpetuated in Chinese understandings of women’s participation in Western democratic politics.

### **Jacinda Ardern as a case study**

Considering the CCP’s strict censorship policy, grassroots feminist movements are extremely difficult to organise in China (Wang 2015). As such, social media platforms, where citizens are aggregated in a relatively decentralised structure of power, provide the opportunity for gender politics to unfold, despite freedom of speech on the Chinese-language Internet being heavily restricted as well (Yin and Yu 2021). Zhihu, the most popular Chinese-language community question-answering (CQA) site similar to its English-language equivalent—Quora, forms an important social media public

sphere, where well-informed, well-educated Chinese middle-classes are assembled (Altman Yuzhu Peng et al. 2020). The CQA site offers us scope to explore how a gender-politics axis shapes Chinese understandings of Western democratic politics.

Addressing how the *limits of gender* plays out in Chinese middle-classes' understandings of Western democratic politics, we use Zhihu users' discussions about Jacinda Ardern's succession as the Prime Minister of New Zealand as a case study. This case study selection resonates with Weber's (1949) prescription of an ideal-type research design, which aims to offer an in-depth analysis of the key issues under investigation rather than generating representative research findings, which often allude to a grand narrative. Specific to the Ardern case, her Labour Party's electoral success in 2017 is generally recognised by Western left-wing liberals as a feminist achievement in contemporary democratic politics (Kushner 2018). In particular, taking maternity leave within three months after assuming office, alongside her effective handling of several high-profile crises, has made her a symbolic feminist figure in the Global North (Wilson 2020). However, mainstream Chinese public opinion exhibits a distinctive feature, which is characterised by sex/gender essentialism (Evans 2008) and aggression towards Western left-wing liberals (Lin 2021). In this way, Zhihu users' postings about Ardern's electoral success emerge as an ideal-type case study that allows us to determine the extent to which the feminist portrayal of Ardern is received or rejected on the Chinese-language Internet.

In the data collection, we sampled a question on Zhihu, which relates to Ardern's maternity leave after the 2017 New Zealand general election (*How do you see New Zealand Prime Minister Ardern requests a maternity leave immediately after being elected?*).<sup>1</sup> The question was sampled because it explicitly references the name of Ardern, which prompted Zhihu users' discussions about the female politician's political achievements and her maternity leave. While there were other questions, where Ardern or New Zealand politics was collaterally touched upon, our extended search showed that these questions did not attract much public attention.<sup>2</sup> We collected all posts answering the sampled question and excluded the follow-up comments underneath each post, which were generally short and composed in a non-argumentative format that did not permit an in-depth analysis. This sampling resulted in a total of 134 posts in response to the question about Ardern: 35 provided by women, 85 men, and 14 anonymous Zhihu users. The posts were written in the Chinese language, and we translated the original texts to English for analysis.

Informed by a feminist lens, we primarily used Richardson and Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical CDA framework, focusing on various discursive strategies, such as referential, predicational, and argumentation strategies, reflected in Zhihu users' postings about Ardern. In light of the number of posts collected, we also used content analysis (CA) techniques to code the sampled texts before implementing the CDA procedure. As a replicable, quantitative study method, CA allows researchers to compress large volumes of textual data into defined categories (Kimberly A. Neuendorf 2017). We used CA techniques to code the posts and then performed a statistical analysis to determine the relationship between Zhihu users' gender and their assessments of Ardern's electoral success. The CA stage enabled us to provide an overview of the trends in Zhihu users' postings. This paved the way for the CDA stage of analysis, which examines the socio-cultural processes behind Zhihu users' postings to uncover how discourse is contextually shaped by China's socio-political trends.

## CA measurement and results

The CA coding scheme consisted of three different variables, including 1) the gender of a Zhihu user, and whether a post shows 2) a positive attitude or 3) a negative sentiment towards Ardern. The gender of a Zhihu user was determined by how they identified themselves in their Zhihu profile (woman, man, or anonymous). The anonymous users, whose gender identity was undetected ( $n = 14$ ), were excluded from the data set for the sake of comparing female and male Zhihu users' postings. This resulted in a sample with a total of 119 posts, including 35 generated by women (29%) and 84 posted by men (71%). We further coded whether support for, or disapproval of, Ardern was present in each post (yes or no). A total of 33 posts (28%) were in some way approving of Ardern, while 48 posts (40%) were critical of the current Prime Minister of New Zealand. The number of posts falling into the neutral or non-applicable category was 38 (32%). The coding results revealed Zhihu users' mixed feelings about the results of New Zealand's 2017 general election, with more posts leaning towards being critical of Ardern.

We were interested in whether female and male Zhihu users expressed different opinions on Ardern's electoral success and employed cross-tabulation tests and chi-square tests of independence to determine whether such gender differences existed in the sampled posts. As can be seen in [Table 1](#), the cross-tabulation tests showed that female users' posts more often contained support for Ardern (54.3%) than male users did (1.7%). On the contrary, male users' posts more often included criticism of Ardern (51.2%) than female users did (14.3%). The chi-square tests of independence showed that the differences determined were statistically significant (supportive of Ardern:  $\chi^2 = 8.947$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ; critical of Ardern:  $\chi^2 = 6.775$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ), meaning that the results did not occur by chance. The CA results revealed divided opinions between female and male Zhihu users in their discussions about Ardern's maternity leave immediately after her electoral success. It became apparent that it was mainly men who contributed to commentaries critical of the New Zealand politician. Such results were probably predictable, provided the gendered nature of the topical issue. It was how male Zhihu users argued against Ardern's succession as the Prime Minister of New Zealand that interested us, and this was analysed in detail at the CDA stage of the research.

## CDA analytical discussion

In the CDA process, we identified three key discursive strategies adopted by male Zhihu users, which respectively involve the 1) referential and 2) predicational strategies they adopted to portray the image of Ardern in Western democratic politics, and the 3)

**Table 1.** Gender differences in Zhihu users' attitudes towards Ardern.

Attitudes towards Ardern	Gender		<i>p</i> -value
	Women	Men	
Supporting Ardern	54.3%	14.3%	**
Criticising Ardern	1.7%	51.2%	**

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

argumentation strategies they employed to rationalise the implications of the Ardern case in the contexts of both international geopolitics and China's domestic issues. In the analysis, we also accounted for female users' responses to such strategies.

### **Referential strategy: naming Ardern**

Jacinda Ardern was not a household name in China when she was newly elected in 2017. This determined that her name was not mentioned in many Zhihu users' postings beneath the sampled question. Yet, in a few instances in which her name was mentioned, a gendered referential strategy surfaced from our scrutiny of male Zhihu users' lexical choices.

A107, man: Maybe Peters' [New Zealand] First Party already knew Sister Ardern (阿登姐 *Adeng Jie*) was pregnant when they decided to work with her Labour Party? There must be a conspiracy?

At a textual level, referential strategy refers to the lexical choice that names "a [...] subject, usually in the form of proper nouns, nouns, and pronouns" (Baxter 2017, 35). It emerges as an important linguistic feature of textual production, which facilitates the definition of the subject's social membership (KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh 2017). As the above extract revealed, amongst the instances in which "Ardern" was explicitly mentioned, her name was often collocated with the word—"sister", forming a gendered appellation invented to address the current Prime Minister of New Zealand.

In social media postings, it is conventional for Chinese Internet users to invent nicknames for celebrities by combining their original name with a monosyllabic word describing certain family members. This nicknaming convention is gendered in its nature, as it offers typical word choices, such as sister (姐 *jie*) and brother (哥 *ge*), for women and men, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Adhering to this nicknaming convention, the referential strategy male Zhihu users apply to Ardern constituted an emphasis on the gender of the New Zealand politician. This emphasis continued as they referred to Ardern by her political position, using phrases, such as "female Prime Minister" (女总理 *nv congli*) or even "pretty female Prime Minister" (美女总理 *meinv congli*) to replace the actual name of hers.

A3, woman: She is the youngest female Prime Minister born in the 1980s. Apart from the "pretty female Prime Minister" label, there are other two words that can describe her – "confident" and "sunshiny".

The emphasis on Ardern's biological sex alone did not constitute biased opinions on the current Prime Minister of New Zealand. As could be seen in the above instance, this referential strategy was also used by male users, who showed relatively positive sentiments towards Ardern. Yet, beneath the sampled question, the gendered referential strategy applied to Ardern emerged against the backdrop of such a referential strategy being absent in the instances of male politicians. For example, the Deputy Prime Minister under Ardern in her first term—Winston Peters was referred to as "Peters" (皮特 *Pite*) or "Old Pete" (老皮 *Laopi*), and his political position was never collocated with a gender designation. As Judith Baxter (2017) notes, powerful political positions are taken as masculine by default and women possessing such positions are largely considered an abnormal phenomenon. Under these circumstances, popular ways of addressing female politicians almost always comprise gender designations, which are dispatched to underscore the uniqueness of their achievements in politics (Baxter

2017). The referential strategies spotted in both female and male Zhihu users' postings clearly conformed to this rule, pointing towards the gendered lens through which they appropriated to understand the rise of a particular female politician in New Zealand politics.

### ***Predicational strategy: understanding Ardern's political achievements***

As previously mentioned, the sampled posts revealed that female and male Zhihu users generally expressed different sentiments towards Ardern. These differences were, to a certain degree, a result of their distinct assessments of female politicians' work capacity, which allowed them to rationalise Ardern's electoral success that spoke of their own gender identities.

A11, man: The first female Prime Minister announces that she has been pregnant for over three months and asks the Deputy Prime Minister to replace her; this is purely a political deal. Why is it so difficult to admit that women are incapable of handling certain jobs because of the biological differences between women and men?

As the above extract reveals, Ardern's request for maternity leave was specifically invoked by male Zhihu user—A11 as an example to advocate an essentialist understanding of sex. This sex/gender essentialism was most tellingly revealed by his lexical choice, using the phrase —“biological differences” to predict the need for maternity leave as a biologically determined feature differentiating women and men in public lives. Such a predicational strategy has persisted in the posts generated by many male Zhihu users, who revealed hostile sentiments towards the current Prime Minister of New Zealand. As Majid KhosraviNik and Nadia Sarkhoh (2017) note, a predicational strategy is a commonly used linguistic device, which frames a subject by associating it with certain consequences. In these posts, gender and work capacity predicated women's incapability of performing “masculine” tasks because of their particular needs associated with the body structure. The misogynist nature of such postings was blatant, yet well-received by many male Zhihu users.

With voices critical of Ardern being on the majority side in the Zhihu community, many female users were also provoked to join the debate from the opposite standpoint. Yet, their participation in the debate largely took on a defensive tone, which was dramatically different from their Western counterparts hailing the “feminist” success of Ardern on social media platforms (Kushner 2018). In these postings, a predicational strategy that assessed the connection between work capacity and womanhood was also found, although it served to advocate arguments for women's political participation.

A65, woman: [Participating in] politics requires brains rather than muscles. What is the problem with giving birth to a baby? [...] I am curious whether male leaders never get sick at all? [Why not] just consider women delivering a baby and men getting sick as the same? What makes you think their Prime Minister has to take care of her child all by herself?

In female user A65's post, for instance, gender traits and masculine ones were compared by using “brains” and “muscles” as a pair of metaphors. This pair of metaphors constituted a response to male Zhihu users' prejudice about female politicians. It also formed a predicational strategy, which collocated with another set of metaphors that compared “delivering babies” to “being sick”, to rationalise the similarities between women and men. In the predication, the logic was that “delivering babies” and “being sick” could both lead to one's temporary unavailability at work. With the latter scenario applying to both women and

men, it neutralised gender differences in such a way that downgraded its impact on a politician's work capacity. Yet, it became apparent that such a predicational strategy did not challenge the essence of the *limits of gender*, which considers women and men as two categories of gendered beings. As such, it implicitly suggested that female politicians' leadership ability was associated with their privileged socio-economic status, which allowed them to hire childcare services to overcome the disadvantages caused by their gender attributes. In this way, the understanding of women and men as inherently different from one another was perpetuated, despite it assisting a pro-female-politician argument in this specific instance.

Without formulating an argument effectively challenging sex/gender essentialism, female Zhihu users' support for Ardern was largely dismissed by male Zhihu users, with a rather conspiratorial predication being invented by the later cohort to rationalise their imagination of women's political participation in Western democratic politics.

A107, man: [This is] conspiracy! [She] knew she was pregnant and still went on to the campaign. This is because Deputy Prime Minister Peter would become the [Deputy] Prime Minister during her maternity leave.

In the Westminster political system, the Prime Minister serves as the head of government. The Deputy Prime Minister, if there is one in the government, would act as the Prime Minister's deputy when s/he is temporarily unavailable. The government of New Zealand formed after the 2017 general election was based on a coalition between two major parties, which were steered by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, respectively. By explicitly referring to the word—"conspiracy", male Zhihu user A107 reinterpreted the motives behind Ardern's maternity leave by describing the move as collusion between her and the Deputy Prime Minister in order to help the latter secure the office without winning a majority in parliament. The male Zhihu users' conspiratorial predication went on exploiting the notion of sex/gender essentialism to undermine Ardern's leadership ability. It once again fed into the traditional, gendered evaluation of women's incapacity in politics (Kathleen A. Dolan 2014), implying that they were puppets manipulated by male colleagues on the front stage to achieve certain political agendas. Such a predication strategy did not take place in isolation but served to endorse misogynist arguments against the elevation of women's status, pointing towards the convergence between international and domestic politics in Zhihu users' postings.

### ***Argumentation strategy: rationalising women's unsuitability in politics and beyond***

In the Zhihu community, the conspiratorial predication that male users adopted to rationalise Ardern's electoral success was not limited to the context of New Zealand politics. Instead, it departed from female users' defence mode of postings that focused on the Ardern case, forming part of an argumentation strategy, which allowed the male cohort to legitimise the male dominance of society in more general terms.

A9, man: Small countries and big countries have different political environments. To China, America, and Russia, this incident showcases the risks of having a female leader; it proves that [we] should never have a female president/chairwoman. Big countries like us would most

likely have been invaded [...] with consequences of thousands of deaths and family separations if we allow our president/chairwoman [to leave her position] for [...] giving birth to a baby.

As revealed in the above extract, male Zhihu user A9's statement dramatised the problems that a country would encounter if its government were led by women, redirecting the discussion about the relationship between gender and politics to the uniqueness of Chinese society. Having been referred to as a "big country" and a "small country" respectively, the political arenas of China and New Zealand were compared by the male user. This comparison suggested that the masculine traits required for managing the complex political system of a "big country", such as China, have stretched well beyond female politicians' work capacity. Such a comparison continued to exploit the essentialist, predication association between women's body features and socio-culturally constituted work ability. Yet, in this specific case, this predication was re-appropriated to address the gender issues in the Chinese context, justifying the historical and continuous absence of senior female politicians in China's political hierarchy. Ardern's maternity leave, however, was not simply understood in terms of political leadership but also employability in the labour market.

A101, man: Get pregnant three days after starting a new job and then resign after delivering a baby. This is [typical of how women] take advantage in the workplace.

In user A9's post, another conspiratorial predication was devised, describing women's maternity leaves as an abuse of the protection of women's rights in China's labour law. The protection of women's rights during maternity leave is symbolic of the social care for women (Nan Jia, Xiao-Yuan Dong and Yue-Ping Song 2018). However, the CCP's implementation of maternity policy has a complex impact on gender dynamics in the restructured labour market. Superficially, news coverage shows that the absence of protection over men's rights in the CCP's current maternity policy has provided men with a (mis) perception that this policy merely serves women's interests.<sup>4</sup> Yet, beneath its feminist semblance, the women-focused maternity leave policy signals that the parental responsibility, which historically represents a vital aspect of female duties in China's women-interior traditions (Liu 2014), is still assigned to women in the post-reform era. Such a tradition is paired with the current socio-political milieu in which the CCP has eased its once strict birth control and provided women's longer maternity leave to increase the fertility rate of the country (Jia, Dong, and Song 2018). Yet, with feminist voices being systematically suppressed in the public sphere (Wang 2015), this new policy has paradoxically amplified the impacts of sex/gender essentialism by discouraging businesses to employ women of childbearing age (Isabelle Attane 2016). Against this backdrop, Ardern's maternity leave served male users' justification for a patriarchal organisation of China's labour market by linking it to anecdotal evidence of women's abuse of the maternity leave policy. In this way, the imagery of Ardern portrayed by the male Zhihu users was disconnected from the original context of international politics and re-appropriated to legitimise the existing gender hegemony in the workplace within China. It formed an argumentation strategy that relies on an essentialist understanding of sex to dismiss the need for improving women's status in China, either politically or socio-economically.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how the *limits of gender* is reflected in Zhihu users' discussions concerning Jacinda Ardern's maternity leave request after her electoral success in 2017. It emerged from the CA results that female and male Zhihu users largely share divided opinions on the female politician, with men often showing hostile attitudes towards her succession as the Prime Minister of New Zealand. The CDA findings further reveal a focus on the gender of Ardern persists throughout how female and male Zhihu users respectively rationalise their support for or criticism of the high-profile, female Western politician, singling the perpetuation of sex/gender essentialism in the contemporary Chinese discourse of gender.

Specifically, we noted a large number of male Zhihu users refer to Ardern's feminine characteristics to explain her success in New Zealand politics. In this way, Ardern's political achievements are rationalised from an essentialist perspective, which utilises women's body features to justify their unsuitability for both seniors in politics and, generally speaking, the workplace. Albeit with a limited voice, counterarguments, which are often developed by female users to reject the patriarchal assessments of women's political participation, also exist on Zhihu. Such counterarguments have not completely moved away from an essentialist understanding of sex, which categorises women and men as different, gendered beings. As such, they do not pose effective challenges to blatant misogynist views, paving the way for male users to steer the direction of the current debate on Zhihu. The absence of critical assessments of gender in the Zhihu community shows how popular perceptions of gender are shaped by the *limits of gender* in Chinese society, where the marginalisation of gender as a category of analysis has restricted both women and men's ability to overcome gendered values (Evans 2008). With Zhihu being a Chinese-language CQA platform, where well-informed, well-educated middle-class Internet users are aggregated (Peng et al. 2020), the research findings depict the dilemmas and hurdles that future feminist movements may encounter in the Chinese context.

Based on an ideal-type case study, the research findings are not meant to be representative. Instead, it focuses on how the *limits of gender* influence key stages of the discursive processes to shape the Chinese portrayals and perceptions of women's political participation in the wake of a high-profile, liberal-leaning female politician's electoral success in Western democratic politics. The revelation of the current study is twofold.

On the one hand, the research findings underscore how the *limits of gender* reinforces an essentialist understanding of sex deeply held in Chinese culture that continues to influence female and male Internet users' negotiation of gender power relations on social media platforms. Amid the perpetuation of sex/gender essentialism in the post-reform era, normative woman- and manhood become internalised by women and men in their everyday cultural consumption, creating differing gender-specific social pressures laying on their shoulders (Liu 2014). In this process, gender boundaries become highlighted, as a result of women and men's negotiation of gender power relations in Chinese society (Xiao Han and Giseline Kuipers 2021). With the institutionalisation of such gender boundaries in their everyday lives, both Chinese women and men, including those who belong to the most well-informed, well-educated group of the Chinese population, show a degree of acceptance of the essentialist understanding of sex. Such a socio-cultural

milieu discourages critical inquiry into gender issues, providing the space for misogynist voices to prevail on the Chinese-language Internet. In the present case, this is reflected in how the political achievements of a female politician in the Global North are dismissed by male Internet users, with female users being unable to form an effective challenge to such biased discourses.

On the other hand, the research findings also shed light on how Chinese Internet users appropriate gendered discourses to sub-textually push for political agendas. As Kecheng Fang and Maria Repnikova (2018, 2,167) argue, both nationalistic and liberal political discourses converge in their masculine design and appeal because “the actors supposedly inhabiting opposite ideological spectrums converge when it comes to their vision of women as inherently unequal to men and incapable of expressing a coherent national narrative in Chinese society”. Their findings suggest that Internet users’ political engagement is an inherently “masculine affair”, which tends to subordinate and diminish women’s activism as that of uneducated, emotional, and irrational responses to political contexts beyond the comprehension of the average woman. Similarly, Cara Wallis’ (2015) study of Chinese political dissidents reveals how this group implicitly criticises the CCP by using metaphorical, sexist discourses in which women’s bodies and feminine characteristics become “the site of subordination, penetration, and insult” (Wallis 2015, 223). In line with the above studies, the research unveils male Chinese Internet users’ disapproval of liberal, progressive political agendas through constructing gendered portrayals of a high-profile, left-wing female politician, although such a political trajectory of commentary is often subtextual in the sampled data. The findings shed light on a highly toxic dimension of Chinese digital culture.

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## Notes

1. Figures by December 1 2018: 473 followers and 405,918 views.
2. Using Zhihu’s search engine, we searched various terms, such as “Ardern”, “Jacinda Ardern”, “New Zealand Prime Minister”, “New Zealand general election”, and “New Zealand politics” in December 2019. The sampled question was the only one about Ardern answered by more than ten Zhihu users.
3. Examples include Brother Sharp (犀利哥), which is the nickname of a well-known micro-celebrity invented by Chinese Internet users.
4. Retrieved May 7 2019 from <https://view.news.qq.com/original/intouchtoday/n4237.html>

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