Post-reform gender politics: How do Chinese Internet users portray Theresa May on *Zhihu*

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This article analyses Chinese Internet users' discussions about the former UK Prime Minister – Theresa May. We gathered data from China's most popular community question-answering (CQA) site – *Zhihu* and analysed how Chinese Internet users discuss May. The research findings suggest that Chinese Internet users often deploy gendered discourses in discussing May and that these gendered discourses often contain sub-textual commentary on international politics more broadly. We, therefore, point to gendered mediation of Chinese political discourses, which is shaped by the current political climate and revival of patriarchy in Chinese society. This research contributes to feminist media studies by providing a Chinese example of the growing misogynistic voices in politics across the world and highlighting the role of gendered discourses in political commentary.

Keywords: Theresa May; UK; prime minister; gender politics; women politician; *Zhihu*

Introduction

Despite the increase in women's political participation, global politics is still largely dominated by men (WPL 2018). Women are generally portrayed as political outsiders by the media and, reflecting male-dominance in politics, women politicians are represented in political news coverage as deviants from normative gender roles (Cynthia Carter 2019; Inaki Garcia-Blanco and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen 2012). In this process, political discourses are mediated by the notion

of gender (Nadia Kaneva and Elza Ibroscheva 2015). Such gendered mediation of political

discourses defines womanhood as apolitical and women as unsuitable for national leadership.

Examining the gendered mediation of political discourses, existing feminist media studies

scholarship tends to analyse how women politicians are stereotypically portrayed by the media of

their home nations (Karen Ross, Karen Boyle, Cynthia Carter, and Debbie Ging 2018; Judith

Baxter 2017), and how these gendered discourses influence people's perception of women

politicians in the society they live in (Monica C. Schneider and Angela L. Bos 2014), with the

liberal democracies of Western Europe and North America often being the focus. To date, little

scholarly attention has been paid to how women politicians in liberal democracies are perceived

outside of their own countries, especially in China, where international politics is highly visible

in the local media sphere (Chenchen Zhang 2020) and women are severely underrepresented in

the domestic political system (WPL 2018). This is a major omission given the need to account

for the cultural exchange of liberal ideas of diversity and equality, as well as the resurgence of

illiberal and misogynistic voices, in an increasingly globalized world.

This article aims to address this knowledge gap in existing feminist media studies

scholarship by using Chinese Internet users' discussion about the former UK Prime Minister –

Theresa May, as a case study. When announced as the UK Prime Minister in 2016, May became

one of the most high-profile women politicians in the world. Given the visibility of British

politics to international audiences, May's political career has been extensively discussed in

China, evidenced by the volume of comments about her that have been circulated on Chinese

social media. In particular, unlike other high-profile women national leaders, such Angela

Merkel[1] and Jacinda Ardern, on the current world stage, May's was an advocate of conservative, neoliberal capitalist politics (Baxter 2017). As such, she falls into the traditional world view of capitalist liberal democracies vs. socialist China that is deeply embedded in Chinese popular political consciousness (Lisa Rofel 2007). In this way, May's succession as the UK Prime Minister provides an opportunity to understand Chinese perspectives on women's political participation in major liberal democracies. An analysis of Chinese Internet users' discussion about May, thus, permits us to unpack the gendered mediation of political discourses established in the context of digital civic engagement in China.

Below, we continue with a critical review of existing literature on the gendered mediation of political discourses and situate the discussion in the Chinese context. This is followed by an explanation of the case study and our analysis of the empirical data. We conclude by summarizing the principal findings and by discussing the intersection of gender and political commentary in China's digital civic engagement.

Literature review

Gendered mediation of political discourses and women politicians

Existing feminist media studies literature shows that women politicians are generally portrayed by the media as a subgroup of women and are subject to a different set of stereotypes to those applied to women more generally (Schneider and Bos 2014). These stereotypes legitimize gender boundaries in the public sphere, facilitating gendered mediation of political discourses by "linking the physical and private self to evaluations of leadership viability and competency"

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[1] Merkel inhabits the centre-right in German political spectrum, but she often (mis)perceived as the liberal wing in major liberal democracies by Chinese Internet users, due to her policies in the refugee crisis (Zhang 2020).

(Linda Trimble, Angelia Wagner, Shannon Sampert, Daisy Raphael, and Bailey Gerrits 2013, 464). Such a phenomenon has crossed national boundaries and can be found in both advanced liberal democracies, such as the US (Kathleen Dolan 2014), the UK (Baxter 2017), Canada (Trimble et al. 2013), and developing economies like Puerto Rico (Isabel Molina-Guzman 2019), Nigeria (Oyewole Adekunle Oladapo 2019), and Eastern European countries (Kaneva and Ibroscheva 2015).

Scrutinizing gendered mediation of political discourses in the UK context, Judith Baxter (2017) analysed reports by the *Daily Mail*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Guardian* about May's inaugural day as UK Prime Minister, showing that May is stereotypically portrayed by the British press as both a hyper-masculine leader and a sexualized woman. Gendering May is a means by which the UK media rationalize women politicians' success in the political sphere, which remains an unusual phenomenon in male-dominated British politics (Ross et al. 2018). In this way, women politicians are disadvantaged in liberal democracies due to their portrayal as anomalies requiring explanation in terms of character traits that mark them out from normative femininity (Dolan 2014). These gendered discourses are so influential that they can even be identified in women politicians' own campaign strategies in the context of democratic elections (Kaneva and Ibroscheva 2015; Jayeon Lee and Young-Shin Lim 2016).

Mirroring male dominance in major liberal democracies, women are drastically underrepresented in Chinese politics. Statistics show that only a quarter of the members of China's national parliament are women and no women have ever served in the Politburo Standing Committee (WPL 2018), the most powerful decision-making body within the Chinese

Communist Party (CCP). However, the portrayal of women national leaders in China remains largely unexplored, with only a handful of studies touching upon the discursive construction of corrupt women politicians by the Chinese media and Chinese Internet users (Elaine Jeffreys 2008; Xiaoyan Wu 2014). This paucity of research not only reflects the lack of Chinese women politicians in powerful positions that attract public attention (WPL 2018) but is also a result of the strict control that the CCP maintains over digital discussions of senior government officials (Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts 2013). While popular perceptions of Chinese women politicians remain a subject for further research, this article begins to address this knowledge gap by examining Chinese Internet users' discussion of women politicians in major liberal democracies, which, as will be argued, entails sub-textual commentary on international politics more broadly, articulated through gendered discourses.

Chinese Internet users' engagement with international political affairs

While the emergence of social media technologies creates the potential for grassroots democracy, digital civic engagement is heavily controlled under authoritarian regimes, such as the CCP (Florian Schneider 2018). The CCP maintains this control through the combined use of digital censorship technologies and cyber-police forces, constituting arguably the most sophisticated Internet censorship system in the world (Cara Wallis 2015). Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts (2013) note that the main purpose of the censorship system is to prevent mass protests against the regime. The CCP tolerates the existence of some critical commentary on the Internet, as long as this is not fundamentally aimed at the political infrastructure (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). This socio-political context provides Chinese Internet users with degrees of room for digital civic engagement.

Within the context of the CCP's censorship system, Chinese Internet users have developed various creative ways to practise digital civic engagement (Wallis 2015). Through an analysis of stories and comments circulated on the popular Chinese digital culture blog ChinaSMACK, Tessa M. Pfafman, Christopher J. Carpenter, and Yong Tang (2015) show that Chinese Internet users often engage with political affairs outside of China as a means of expressing opinions about domestic issues in a non-confrontational manner. This is especially the case when the opinions expressed are critical of the CCP (Yan Wu and Matthew Wall 2019). Amid the CCP's tightened control over freedom of speech on the Internet under current Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, this approach provides Chinese Internet users with a way of "critiquing the government without personal consequences" (Pfafman, Carpenter, and Tang 2015, 551). Given this pattern of engagement with international politics as a vehicle for the sub-textual expression of attitudes towards domestic issues, exploring how high-profile women politicians in liberal democracies are perceived by Chinese Internet users requires a review of literature on China's dominant discourses of gender and how these discourses shape perceptions of women as political contenders.

Gender politics in the Chinese context

In the Chinese context, gendered mediation of political discourses is both historically and socio-culturally contingent. Throughout China's ancient history, women were confined to the home, deterred from engagement in the public sphere and barred from holding political office (Gina Marchetti 2009). Although the late 1800s and early 1900s saw the emergence of feminist ideas in China, introduced from the West, debates about appropriate gender roles were prominently

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driven by men intellectuals concerned with "national salvation and modernization" (Wallis 2015, 226). Often, these discourses objectified women by portraying foreign invasions as threats to Chinese men's ownership of women's bodies (James Farrer 2008). Significant improvement to Chinese women's socio-political status began with the CCP's radical feminist movement in the first three decades following the communist revolution, which started providing women with the same legal rights as men and encouraged women to enter the workforce (Chao Yang 2017). However, this feminist movement was mobilized in support of, and always subordinated to, male-dominated national politics (Wallis 2015). As such, it did little to promote women's access to senior positions in the political arena. The failure of the feminist movement in this regard provides the backdrop for the development of gender politics and a revival of patriarchy in more recent periods of Chinese history, which have been characterized by economic reform and a shift towards neoliberal forms of governance and popular culture (Altman Yuzhu Peng 2020).

Since the late 1970s, the CCP has implemented a series of reform policies to restructure China's economy. The reform has largely been based on the marketization of industries, which shows notable similarities with Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal economic policy in the UK throughout the 1980s (David Harvey 2007). Contemporary economists tend to avoid using the concept of neoliberalism to describe this reform process in China, as the CCP still constantly uses administrative means to regulate the economy (Donald M. Nonini 2008; Fulong Wu 2010). However, cultural theorists have observed that China's economic reform, which has done away with state-allocated employment, vastly reduced state welfare provision and reconnected the country to the global capitalist system, has cultivated Chinese people's self-reflexive capacity and encouraged the development of individualist and competitive values (Kaibin Xu and Yan

Tan 2019; Bingchun Meng and Yanning Huang 2017). By promoting a strong link between self-reliance and morality, the reform has facilitated the penetration of neoliberal culture into Chinese people's everyday lives (Rofel 2007).

This transition to a market economy has encouraged the development of individual desires, pleasures, and styles and has led to the elaboration of the notion of gender as Chinese citizens have become consumers with different preferences and aesthetic tastes (Meng and Huang 2017). Amidst the marketization of gender, normative models of masculinity and femininity have been established and have become dominant (Wallis 2015). These normative gender stereotypes have drawn upon and fed into the traditional Chinese concept of "*yin-yang*" complementarity, establishing dichotomous social roles for women and men respectively (Fengshu Liu 2014, 20). These gendered discourses have encouraged Chinese men to restore their hegemony in the public domain and women have been encouraged to "take on attributes of care, emotionality, communicativeness, and gentleness deriving from their [supposed] role as reproducers and nurturers" in the home (Liu 2014, 20). Although official women role models propagated by the CCP in the post-reform era have emphasized women's engagement in the public sphere, including as "women scientists, entrepreneurs, celebrities, or workers who have won recognition in mundane and low-pay work" (Liu 2014, 21), these women are constructed as having never lost their feminine characteristics and having maintained a 'perfect' home-work balance (Harriet Evans 2008). This promotion of normative femininity in both state discourses and the consumer market has shaped gender politics in the post-reform era (Peng 2020).

Against the backdrop of a post-reform revival of patriarchy (Xiao Han 2018), women who excel in competition with men are considered to have breached the *yin-yang* dichotomy and are portrayed as anomalies in Chinese culture (Liu 2014). Focusing on the gendered mediation of political discourses in the Chinese media, studies by Elaine Jeffreys (2008) and Xiaoyan Wu's (2014) show that women who succeed in Chinese politics are assumed to have used sexual favours to improve their political standing within the CCP and are, therefore, seen as corrupt and immoral. The gendered discourses of women politicians are a key way in which women's political achievements are rationalized in Chinese society, where patriarchal values and misogynist voices are undergoing a revival (Wallis 2015).

However, in the context of digital political commentary, discourses of gender may not only reflect gender inequality but may also be used in the pursuit of various political agendas (Kengcheng Fang and Maria Repnikova 2018). Yinghong Cheng's (2011) scholarship has touched upon the ways that nationalist Chinese Internet users deploy gendered discourses in their practices of racism. This is apparent in their use of slogans such as "defending Chinese racial stock", used to attack marriages or sexual relationships between Chinese women and non-Chinese men. This is especially evident in the commentary on relationships between Chinese women and African migrants, serving to construct the latter as a threat to Chinese society, represented by women's bodies (Cheng 2011, 567). Similarly, though in a different context, Cara Wallis' (2015, 223) study of discourses developed by Chinese political dissidents shows that their criticisms of the CCP often invoke "the female body and the feminine as the site of subordination, penetration, and insult". It appears, then, that gendered discourses that construct women as passive, weak and vulnerable are present in political commentary at both the

nationalist and liberal ends of the political spectrum and such commentary shores up the "structures and practices of binary gender difference" in the post-reform era (Evans 2008, 375).

Research questions and methods

Underpinned by an understanding of gender politics in the Chinese context, this research analyses how the gendered mediation of political discourses is manifest in Chinese Internet users' discussion about Theresa May immediately after she became the UK Prime Minister following the 2016 Brexit referendum. The research questions addressed through our analysis are.

1. How do Chinese Internet users perceive May's succession as the UK Prime Minister?
2. How do Chinese Internet users engage in gendered commentary on May's political activities?
3. How does the gendered commentary serve as a vehicle for expressing judgments about international political affairs?

May is one of the most recent, well-known cases of a woman being appointed to the head of government in a major liberal democracy. May enjoys a high degree of visibility in China's media sphere due to the relative recency of her appointment, its occurrence in a time of political turmoil in the UK and generally high levels of interest in British politics amongst Chinese audiences. As such, May provides a more useful and up-to-date case for exploring the gendered mediation of women's political leadership amongst Chinese Internet users than other high-profile international women politicians, such as Angela Merkel (German Chancellor) and Jacinda

Ardern (New Zealand Prime Minister). These characteristics, alongside the alignment of her politics with the traditional Chinese world view of capitalist liberal democracies vs. socialist China, renders this political event an up-to-date case study for analysing the intersection of gender politics and international political affairs in Chinese Internet users' digital civic engagement.

We gathered qualitative data from *Zhihu*, China's most popular community question-answering (CQA) site, in the form of user-generated responses to questions about the former UK Prime Minister – Theresa May. *Zhihu* is an interactive social media platform, which is used by almost 15 per cent of Chinese Internet users (CNNIC 2018), allowing them to generate original content by asking and answering questions on the site. Research shows that *Zhihu* users are largely middle-class, with "80% possessing a bachelor's degree or above" (Zhang 2020, 9). China's middle-class population not only upholds the structural stability of Chinese society but also leads public opinion and Internet use. By using the site to exchange their ideas on a variety of socio-political topics, these users have turned *Zhihu* into a popular venue for digital civic engagement in China. Furthermore, as a CQA site, *Zhihu* encourages users to generate "quality, argumentative and information-rich postings" (Zhang 2020, 9). In this way, *Zhihu* provides a useful source of data for the present research.

Given the volume of commentary on *Zhihu*, we employed a 'snapshot' technique, focusing on the question about May that is most widely discussed by Chinese Internet users on the site. The question '*What is Your Opinion on Theresa May's Succession as the UK Prime Minister?*' was chosen because it was asked on 11th July 2016 immediately after May became the

UK Prime Minister. The question specifically referenced the most high-profile moment in May's political career and prompted many *Zhihu* commentators to evaluate her personal traits and political achievements.[2] It was answered by 56 *Zhihu* users, which include 41 men, 9 women, and 6 responders who were either anonymous or did not state their gender on their *Zhihu* profile. We collected all responses to the question and analysed them thematically.[3] Using this 'snapshot' technique enabled us to collect original data that capture *Zhihu* users' immediate reaction to May's succession as the UK Prime Minister, avoiding complications caused by other factors, such as May's departure from the office in 2019. A summary of the data set is provided in Table 1 below.

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE HERE]

Following Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson's (1996) guidelines for thematic analysis, we coded the data in terms of its content and then collated related codes into thematic categories. Specifically, we manually created the first-cycle coding for each answer. New codes were given to the same units of data and were constantly compared to existing codes throughout the second-cycle coding process. We thematically categorized the second-cycle codes and analysed them in detail through a close reading of the texts. The coding and the categorization of the codes were performed by the authors together, and the results were agreed between us. In this way, the technique of triangulating researchers was employed to minimize the possibility of subjective or biased interpretations of the data.

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[2] By 16th November 2018, the question was followed by 1,093 users and viewed 241,823 times. URL: https://www.zhihu.com/question/48382800/
[3] Users' follow-up comments to each answer were excluded because they were either too short or irrelevant and, therefore, did not permit a focused analysis of the gendered discourses of May.

Analytical discussion

The analysis reveals that the most prevalent themes are: 1) emphases on May's 'feminine' characteristics; 2) positive appraisals of May's achievements; and 3) sub-textual expressions of political attitudes. These themes became the main focus of the analytical discussion, which is detailed below.

An emphasis on May's feminine characteristics

We noted that almost three-fifths of *Zhihu* users emphasized May's gender identity. As such, 'woman' became a primary categorization and definitional characteristic through which her activities and other characteristics were evaluated. This was apparent in the use of what can be considered a referential strategy, whereby May is categorized as 'a woman' and reduced to that gender identity. A referential strategy involves the naming of an object, person, or social group; it is a linguistic device that exploits people's capacity for categorization in dichotomous, simplified and reductive terms (Christopher Hart 2010). This was common to many responses to the question and is evident in the below example.

> User-3, man, 6th February 2017: The little lady Theresa May is a distinguished woman politician; she is the most outstanding British right-wing woman Prime Minister since Mrs Margret Thatcher in the early 80s.

In many commentators' introductory comments about May, her gender identity was seen as a defining characteristic such that, before anything else, she was a 'woman politician' and 'woman

Prime Minister'. This was the case for almost all commentators, regardless of whether they held positive or negative views of May.

Another common feature of this gendered perception of May was the use of diminutives, evidenced above in the use of "little lady". Even in the commentary that praised May, such as the above example, the use of such diminutives has, to a certain extent, aligned May with the discourse of women as subordinate, weak and vulnerable. Continuing this use of a referential strategy that defines May as 'woman', we found that commentators commonly grouped May alongside other women politicians. In the above example, she is compared to the former UK Prime Minister – Margret Thatcher. In the excerpt below, she is positioned alongside other high-profile women politicians in major liberal democracies, such as Hillary Clinton (former US Presidential Candidate) and Angela Merkel (German Chancellor), and these women are differentiated from their men counterparts, such as Francois Hollande (former French President).[4]

> User-47, man, 2nd August 2016: By 20th January next year, the national leaders of three long-existing capitalist powers will be Hillary, Merkel, and Auntie May. Have you considered Hollande's feelings?

In addition to the grouping together of women politicians, the above excerpt also exemplifies another common feature of *Zhihu* users' gendered perceptions of May – use of the appellation "Auntie May" (*Meiyi*), rather than the official phonetic translation of 'Theresa May' (*Teleisha*

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[4] The answer was generated on 2nd August 2016, before the 2016 US general election and the 2017 French presidential election.

Mei). In Chinese digital culture, it is common to invent a nickname when referring to a public figure by combining a character from her/his original name with a word describing certain family members. The available options typically include "auntie" (*yi*) and "sister" (*jie*) for women and "uncle" (*shu*), and "brother" (*ge*) for men. This nicknaming tradition is gendered in its nature, emphasising gender as a defining aspect of public figures by explicitly referencing it in their names. Such appellation was not specific to May, with some commentators also referring to the German Chancellor Angela Merkel as "Mother Merkel" (*Moma*). However, where men politicians were discussed in the answers, they were not named in these ways and their gender was not foregrounded as a defining characteristic.

The social function of naming May as "Auntie May" reflects a complex process through which political discourses are mediated by the notion of gender. On the one hand, it suggests that Chinese Internet users feel a degree of warmth and familial closeness toward May and may indicate respect for this woman politician. On the other hand, it emphasizes her gender identity and places her within a gendered familial role, potentially detracting from her recognition as a serious political figure. The discursive figure of the 'Auntie' in the Chinese context is well-documented in the award-winning Chinese film – *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* (Dir. Ann Hui, 2006), in which the heroine – Auntie Ye's life crises derive from the twofold pressure on Chinese women owing to their gender roles in both the family and wider society (Marchetti 2009). With the potential to invoke this figure of the 'Auntie', the present appellation of May as "Auntie May" highlights the gendering May in the *Zhihu* discussion.

Having been commonly invoked in May's case, the reference to her gender in the nickname 'Auntie May' confirms Chinese Internet users' gendered perception of this UK woman politician. This permits the construction of her personal image based on gendered discourses. This was evident in the number of responses that commented on May's physical appearance, evidencing the extent to which women politicians are subject to a set of gendered judgments from which men politicians are largely exempt (Baxter, 2017). This is exemplified in the below quotes, which underscore how May is domesticated and depoliticized on *Zhihu*.

> User-16, man, 13th July 2016: I am so disappointed! This Auntie May is nowhere near as good-looking as that Auntie May from Holland![5]

> User-12, man, 14th July 2016: She is a fashion icon […]. What I want to say is: May is a woman particularly good at dressing herself. She constantly changes her dressing style […], and most of the time looks really good.

On *Zhihu*, the domestication and depoliticization of May are most tellingly revealed in comments about May's appearance and dress style. The above excerpts show that May's appearance was often evoked as the standard against which she was judged. It appears that for these commentators, the question '*What is Your Opinion on Theresa May's Succession as the UK Prime Minister?*' could be answered with descriptions of her physical appearance. In the first example, the gendered appellation 'Auntie May' provokes comparison in terms of

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[5] 'Auntie May from Holland' is a reference to the Dutch actress Carice van Houten, who played Melisandre in the TV series *Game of Thrones*. The character Melisandre is also commonly referred to as 'Auntie May' by Chinese Internet users.

'attractiveness' between May and another woman public figure who is also referred to as 'Auntie May'. This suggests that May's public identity is reduced to the maker 'woman' (rather than, say, 'politician' or 'Conservative') to the extent that, for this commentator, it appeared logical and appropriate to compare May to another woman public figure with no other grounds for comparison than their shared gendered appellation. The second example praises May as a "fashion icon"; this comment that was posted alongside a range of images of May wearing different clothes. Here too, a judgment of May in terms of her political ideas and actions is foregone in favour of judgments often generically made of women in terms of dress and 'fashion sense'. While this is also a feature of media and popular commentary on women politicians in liberal democracies (Dolan 2014), such comments resonate with the post-reform Chinese consumer market culture, in which 'style', 'femininity' and 'beauty' have become markers the 'modern liberated woman' (Liu 2014). These discourses are part of a backlash against the pre-reform feminist movement, which was seen to have suppressed women's 'feminine' characteristics (Altman Yuzhu Peng 2019).

Such domestication and depoliticization of May on *Zhihu* is comparable to the gendered discourses to which she is subject in the UK context. As Judith Baxter (2017) notes, women political figures' appearance and dressing style are constantly scrutinized by the British media. This gendered political communication has normalized public interest in women's 'feminine' behaviour and diverted people's attention away from other aspects of women politicians' personal traits. With leadership ability being stereotypically constructed as masculine (Schneider and Bos 2014), an emphasis on the feminine attributes of women politicians amounts to a patriarchal evaluation of women's political participation, which spectacularizes their occupancy

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of a senior position in the male-dominated political arena. In the Chinese context, this patriarchal rationalization has been recognized by Elaine Jeffreys (2008) and Xiaoyan Wu (2014) in their analysis of representations of corrupt Chinese women politicians in the Chinese media. Resonating with this scholarship, May is subject to gendered judgments by *Zhihu* commentators. Yet, the gendered discourses of May identified on Zhihu do not necessarily preclude negative assessments of her leadership ability. These suggest more ambivalent sentiments towards this specific woman politician perceived by Chinese Internet users.

Positive sentiments towards May's political achievements

We noted that more than half of *Zhihu* users show their approval of her succession as the UK Prime Minister, with only 15 per cent showing the opposite attitude in their answers. In particular, many *Zhihu* commentators recognized May as a capable national leader. This positive commentary can be understood in relation to recent political and socio-cultural developments in China. The positive portrayal of May is sensitive to the timing of the question generated on *Zhihu*. As previously mentioned, the question was created in July 2016 following David Cameron's resignation as UK Prime Minister after the Brexit referendum. Chinese Internet users' perception of May is thus intersected with their evaluation of the result of the Brexit vote and the possible consequences of Britain leaving the European Union. As a general trend, commentators' views on the outcome of the referendum were optimistic, leading to a highly positive evaluation of May and her promise to 'deliver Brexit', as shown in the below excerpt.

> User-8, man, 17th July 2016: Personally, I think May is a capable leader. The UK will
> become better and better under her leadership. A snap election would increase the

Conservative Party's seats in the Parliament, and she will receive strong support from the people.

The above extract energetically praises May's leadership ability, describing her as a "capable leader". This positive sentiment towards May is a seeming departure from the patriarchal discourse often applied to women politicians, which downgrades the seriousness of their participation in politics (Baxter 2017).

Interestingly, the positive sentiment expressed by this commentator shows a level of cognitive dissonance, given that, in their personal profile on *Zhihu*, they identify themselves as a "recent British university graduate". Statistics show that the UK is the second most popular destination for overseas Chinese students – the largest international community in the UK higher education system today (UKCISA 2018). As UK Home Secretary between 2010 and 2016, May was famous for having introduced a series of policies "hostile" towards immigrants, and overseas Chinese students were also targeted by these policies (The Guardian 2018 n.p.). Knowledge of this was evident within the data set, as demonstrated by the below excerpt.

User-12, man, 14th July 2016: Studying in the UK, Chinese students, of course, know that [May's] policies are unfriendly to international students and immigrants […]. After all, she is not called "the killer of international students" for nothing.

As such, the earlier positive appraisal of May from a commentator who had studied in the UK seems paradoxical. Even in the continuation of the above excerpt, this commentator went on to

make a highly positive evaluation of May, noting "she is exactly the sort of leader that the UK needs right now". More explicit support of May's anti-immigration policies came from user User-19, whose commentary describes being able to "kick the immigrants out" as the most important criteria for a "good Prime Minister".

> User-19, anonymous, 13th July 2016: [May] would be a good Prime Minister as long as [she] kicks the immigrants out.

Such paradoxical positive evaluations of May, including her anti-immigration policies, raise the question of why Chinese Internet users would support May when they are arguably disadvantaged by her policies. This can be understood in relation to the contemporary embrace of neoliberal governance in China and the promotion of discourses of self-reliance in the reform era (Rofel 2007). In this sense, May's conservative politics was positively received by some *Zhihu* commentators, as exemplified below.

> User-7, anonymous, 17th July 2016: [May's policies] tackle social inequalities by providing everyone with the same opportunity to develop their full potential […]. This provides true social equality.

Chinese Internet users' support for May can be seen as largely based on the compatibility of her policy decisions and political ethos with a neoliberal rationalization of governance. This tendency is demonstrated in the above excerpt, in which the commentator explains their positive sentiment towards May by emphasizing the notion that her policies support equal opportunity

and self-reliance. The commentator's rationalization of May's policies follows a neoliberal justification of individualism, suggesting that individual citizens are accountable to themselves and the function of government is merely to support individual entrepreneurship (Zhang 2020). This discourse masks the power relations produced in a capitalist system in which social stratification continues to be reproduced by different classes' unequal access to resources (Meng and Huang 2017). This political ideology resonates with that adopted by the CCP in the reform era, which has seen reductions in state welfare provisions alongside the promotion of individual entrepreneurialism (Yunxiang Yan 2010).

The CCP's appropriation of neoliberalism has shifted the responsibility for social wellbeing away from the government and onto individual citizens, allowing the CCP to avoid blame for the increasing socio-economic stratification of Chinese society (Yuzhu Peng 2019). This shifting governance strategy has also simultaneously reshaped the perception of statehood in contemporary China, encouraging Chinese people to accept the notion that a government should prioritize the wellbeing of its own nationals (Zhang 2020). To return to the question of why Chinese Internet users support May's anti-immigration policies, then, this may be because neoliberalism intersects within nationalism in the field of international relations in that the nation-state is conceptualized as a self-reliant individual, responsible only for its own well-being (i.e. the wellbeing of its citizens), thereby linking neoliberal and anti-immigrant discourses (Adam Harmes 2012). This notion has fostered a rise of nationalism amongst Chinese Internet users (Schneider 2018), which is often articulated through the denigration of ethnic minorities and immigrants in Chinese society (Cheng 2011; Pfafman, Carpenter, and Tang 2015).

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Such nationalist sentiments were also evident in the ways that some commentators rationalize their positive evaluations of May in relation to China, such as in the below excerpt in which user User-1 responds to the question with the simple statement.

User-1, man, 31st December 2017: Good for the UK, good for the world, good for China.

By describing May as the ideal UK Prime Minister whose possession of power is "good", not only for the UK but also for China, User-1's commentary highlights a domestic political orientation in this commentary on international politics. Resonating with his peers' advocacy of May's implementation of anti-immigration policies, it forms a discourse strategy which implicitly utilizes an international political affair to legitimize their 'Chinese people first' nationalist political view. This echoes Tessa M. Pfafman, Christopher J. Carpenter, and Yong Tang's (2015) findings regarding China's digital civic engagement, which show how Chinese Internet users engineer their participation in international politics to rationalize their animosity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities in Chinese society. In this sense, discussions about May on *Zhihu* not only reveal Chinese Internet users' perception of May herself, as a woman politician in a major liberal democracy but also open up opportunities for Chinese Internet users to engage with politics more broadly.

Support for May but not for women's political participation

The discussion about May on *Zhihu* involves important subtexts which should be understood in relation to a Chinese assessment of politics in an international context. To a certain extent, Chinese Internet users' positive sentiments towards May do not connote their support for

women's political participation but instead suggest their rationalization of advocacy for the neoliberal agendas with which May is associated in their imagination of UK politics. This is evident in some Internet users' efforts to link May to her predecessor Margret Thatcher, seeing the two as comparable in terms of both gender identity and neoliberal politics.

> User-18, anonymous, 13th July 2016: May will arrive at No.10 Downing Street on Wednesday. She will be the first woman Prime Minister step into the office Margaret Thatcher left in tears 26 years ago. […] She […] will be helpful to the continuation of Cameron's project of modernization.

As the above extract shows, May is discursively linked to one of her predecessors, Margaret Thatcher. As the only two women Prime Ministers in UK history, and with a degree of similarity in appearance, Thatcher and May were widely compared to one another in the British media when May was elected (Baxter 2017). The symbolic connection between the two political figures is also widely recognized in Chinese society, evidenced elsewhere in comments on *Zhihu* in which the two were compared. Explicitly describing May and Thatcher as "women" Prime Ministers, the above excerpt highlights gender as a shared attribute between the two, potentially reducing their political identities to the generic category of 'women', as discussed earlier. However, May's alignment with Thatcher also appears to be part of her wider association with neoliberal politics within the imaginations of Chinese Internet users. Above, this is suggested by the recognition of her compatibility with her preceding Prime Minister – David Cameron's 'project of modernization', which, in its cuts to state spending on welfare and emphasis on social

responsibility, encapsulated Thatcher's "preference for individual action […] over government intervention" (Stephen Evans 2010, 328).

These perceived connections between May and Thatcher, and their neoliberal ideologies, can be seen to shape how May is gendered by Chinese Internet users. In the British media, Thatcher has long been described as the "Iron Lady", this has constructed the former UK Prime Minister as an iconic figure representing a hyper-masculine stereotype of women politicians (Baxter 2017, 42). By discursively linking May to Thatcher, this gender stereotype is, at times, extended to the discourses of May on *Zhihu* as well. Yet, differing from its reception in the UK, the 'Iron Lady' stereotype that Thatcher embodies is viewed positively in Chinese society, and Thatcher is widely regarded as a serious and powerful politician by Chinese people (Xudong Zhu 2013). The positive light in which Thatcher is viewed in China can be understood as due to the fact that China's economic reform in the 1980s was partly inspired by Thatcher's neoliberal governance of the British economy (Harvey 2007) and, as part of state propaganda aimed at ensuring support for the reform process, Thatcher and her politics have been portrayed largely positively in the Chinese media (Zhu 2013). Contextualized against this backdrop, Thatcher is often portrayed by the Chinese media as a pioneer reformer who saved the UK from economic stagnation in the 1980s (Zhenhua Wang 2013). Under these circumstances, the hyper-masculine stereotype of women politicians that Thatcher represents is read as progressive in the Chinese context and as dramatically different from the discourses of the "self-assertive mistress" to which Chinese women politicians are often subject (Wu 2014, 45). While discussions of May on *Zhihu* still foreground her gender, being discursively linked to the public impression of Thatcher in the Chinese context can be seen to distance May from the feminine characteristics of normative

womanhood when her leadership ability is assessed. In the below excerpt, May's status as a Conservative politician is seen to make her "different" from other women politicians.

> User-49, man, 15th July 2016: Generally speaking, a nation almost has no future if a woman is elected to be its leader […]. However, Theresa is different, she is a Conservative, and the Conservatives are politicians; she is no 'Virgin Mary'.

Such positive portrayals of May on *Zhihu* by no means contradict contemporary Chinese gender politics in which women continue to be alienated in the political arena. Instead, the above excerpt evidences a patriarchal rationalization of women's political achievement which spectacularizes the existence of women national leaders on the world stage. Above, May is referred to as a "politician" by dint of being a Conservative"; she is seen as "different" from other women national leaders – a statement likely based on associations between women leaders and left-wing politics. In this instance, May is marked out from normative femininity and assumptions of care, emotionality, nurturing, and lack of political cunning embodied in the notion of the "Virgin Mary". In this way, she is discursively redefined as an 'ungendered' national leader, whose achievement shows no connection with her gender.

Zhihu users' rationalization of women leaders' existence in international politics has once again created a negative association between women and political participation in which recognition as a serious politician appears to require forms of discursive 'de-gendering'. This forms an important aspect of the rising misogynist voices in China that demotes the seriousness of women politicians and their achievement. The way in which gendered discourses are

mobilized in Chinese Internet users' discussions about May on *Zhihu* further evidences the gendered mediation of political discourses in China's digital civic engagement (Wallis 2015; Fang and Repnikova 2018).

Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed Chinese Internet users' discussion about Theresa May's succession as the UK Prime Minister in 2016. The analysis of the answers retrieved from *Zhihu* shows that exploring how Chinese Internet users discuss May offers insights into post-reform Chinese gender politics in an international political context, showing persistent gendered discourses that construct women as apolitical, as well as strategies for the rationalization of women politicians' success that align with China's embrace of neoliberalism in the post-reform period while still maintaining associations between femininity and political unsuitability.

Specifically, we discovered that in discussing May on *Zhihu* Chinese Internet users deploy the notion of gender as an important discursive device to facilitate their expression of complex socio-political views and sentiments. This discourse strategy confirms Harriet Evans' (2008) analysis of the CCP's official discourses of gender and Bingchun Meng and Yanning Huang's (2017) assessment of mainstream Chinese consumer culture, which together have constructed a wide range of the representations of gender without "a simultaneous engagement with the concept of gender as the social and cultural power relations that undergird conceptions of masculinity and femininity" (Wallis 2015, 227). The findings of this research resonate with existing feminist analyses of China's digital civic engagement, showing how gendered

discourses are used by Chinese Internet users who inhabit both the nationalist (Fang and Repnikova 2018) and the liberal ends (Wallis 2015) of the political spectrum.

The gendered mediation of political discourses in Chinese Internet users' digital civic engagement provides insight into the revival of patriarchy in contemporary China. Resonating with Kecheng Fang and Maria Repnikova's (2018) research findings, which reveal male-dominance in digital civic engagement, this research shows that the room for discussing political issues on *Zhihu* has been mainly occupied by Chinese Internet users who advocate the return of patriarchal orders and see women as unfit to engage in politics. The gendering of women politicians promoted in this process exploits and feeds back into the "*yin-yang* balance" notion of normative womanhood emphasized in traditional Chinese culture (Liu 2014, 20), which supports their arguments against women's pursuit of success in the public domain.

This research makes original contributions to the field of feminist media studies by providing insights into Chinese Internet users' mobilization of gendered discourses in digital civic engagement. In the era of globalization, Chinese political issues now have great international relevance. The construction of women as unsuitable for political participation in China's digital civic engagement is not an isolated example but reflects the growing misogynistic voices in the international political arena that attempt to dismiss the importance of gender equality for which we have been fighting for decades (Carter 2019; Molina-Guzman 2019). In this sense, the present research provides another layer of evidence to highlight the need for further research into and critique of the misogynist discourses that are deployed within the field popular commentary on national and international politics.

Given the qualitative nature of this research, we make no attempt to describe every aspect of gender politics in Chinese society and recognize the necessarily limited focus and scope of our analysis and conclusions. In particular, a methodological limitation of the present research is its insufficient attention to the interactive nature of *Zhihu* use. Yet, the findings provide enlightening insights into how gender politics intersects with Chinese Internet users' engagement with political affairs outside China. At a wider scale, the findings contribute to understanding the circulation and function of gendered discourses in translational political imaginaries. In this way, this article serves as the basis for future research into 1) how Chinese Internet users refer to women and men politicians in liberal democracies, and 2) how they interact with each other when practising civic engagement on *Zhihu* and similar platforms.

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