

## Understanding the Russian invasion of Ukraine through a gendered prism

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### ABSTRACT

This essay offers a timely analysis of how the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian warfare is observed in China through a gendered prism. Accounting for an anti-West axis in China's current political climate, we articulate how misogyny and nationalism converge in Chinese social media users' discussions about the military crisis currently unfolding in East Europe. This is revealed by a vulgar interpretation of the Russo-Ukrainian relationship and the sexualisation of Ukrainian/Russian women, which are both widespread in the Chinese-language social media sphere. With the patriarchal specificities of the Party-State polity in mind, the discussion yields a feminist perspective to foreground China's nationalist politics.

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20多年前,乌克兰与前夫(俄罗斯)离婚,几个孩子也归了她,前夫对她也够意思,给了不少钱还留下了不少家产,之后前夫俄罗斯还替她还清了2000多亿的债务!摆脱了前夫,她开始与村霸(老美)及一帮浪公子(西方)开始眉来眼去,这倒也罢了,她居然完全听顺村霸和浪公子们的,勾搭在一起对前夫围攻[...]前夫不依不饶,现在开始打上门去了

**Translation:** Over 20 years ago, Ukraine divorced her ex-husband (Russia) and obtained custody of their children. Her ex-husband treated her well and paid off her debt worth 200 billion! After divorcing her ex-husband, she starts seeing a big bully in the village (America), as well as a bunch of playboys ([other] Western nations). She completely listens to the bully and the playboys and starts abusing her ex-husband [...]. Now the ex-husband is not letting it go and starts striking back.

The above extract was retrieved from a post widely shared on Weibo, the Chinese-language equivalent of Twitter.<sup>1</sup> It offers a vulgar interpretation of the Russo-Ukrainian bilateral relationship, using divorce as a metaphor and assigning Russia with the male role to connote its position of strength in the relationship. Being praised as “sassy, yet informative” in the thread it creates, the post offers a glimpse of Chinese social media users' gendered observation of the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian crisis currently unfolding in East Europe.

In February 2022, Russia launched a massive invasion of its southwest neighbour, Ukraine. Dramatically different from the voices supportive of Ukrainians being echoed across the world, opinions sympathising with Russian invaders appear to be more

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mainstream on Chinese social media. For observers closely following China's political climate, such a situation is not surprising, considering that the intensification of geopolitical frictions between China and the US-led coalition has established Russia as the only powerful international alliance of the East Asian country in its official and popular political discourses. The popular reception of the post amongst a large cohort of social media users not only explicitly glorifies a nation's invasion of another sovereign state, but also implicitly legitimises a man's violence against a woman in an abusive relationship. This signifies the creation of a nationalistic and misogynistic echo chamber on Chinese social media, which, on the one hand, underscores the gendered nature of China's nationalism, and, on the other, urges a feminist trajectory of intervention.

### **Nationalism as a masculine terrain**

Nationalism and misogyny always go hand in hand because modern nationhood is principally a masculine project from the very beginning. As Cynthia Enloe (1989, 44) argues, national identities of any kind have "typically sprung through masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope." Women are typically defined as the "symbolic bearers of [a] nation" in rhetoric but "denied any direct relation to the national agency" in practice (Anne McClintock 1993, 62). This is most tellingly revealed by the underrepresentation of women in politics, which leads to the marginalisation of their perspectives in societal decision-making processes. Women's political participation has certainly improved in the Global North. However, scholarship suggests that female leaders are still stereotypically represented in the Western media as either excessively feminine or hyper-masculine (Judith Baxter 2017). Such media representations feed into the male dominance of nationhood by substantiating the unsuitability of "normal" women's political participation. In this process, asymmetrical gender power relations are reinforced in political processes, turning nationalist politics into an arena for men's quest for male hegemony (Enloe 1989).

Specific to the Chinese context, the masculine nature of nationalism also reflects the historical marginalisation of women in politics, with the slogan, "defending our women and children from foreign invaders" being unreflectively used by early nationalist thinkers, such as Liang Qichao, to clarify the urgency of the modern Chinese nation-building project (Qichao Liang 1897). Persisting to the present day, Chinese nationalist discourses continue to exhibit notable misogynistic characteristics. The intersection of nationalism and misogyny is manifested as male Chinese nationalists openly calling for preserving Chinese racial stock to promote racism against male African immigrants, in which men's ownership over the bodies of their fellow female citizens is reiterated (Altman Yuzhu Peng, Xianwen Kuang, and Jenny Zhengye Hou 2022). Meanwhile, it is also reflected in the male takeover of public debates in general, with femininity becoming a stigmatised label, which can be conveniently used by male dissidents to attack grassroots nationalists who happen to be mainly men and share a similar, misogynistic view on the notion of womanhood (Altman Yuzhu Peng, Chunyan Wu, and Meng Chen 2022).

The recent rise of China's nationalism is inseparable from the Chinese government's nationalist campaigns, mobilising official propaganda apparatuses to legitimise the Party-state polity, as a result of the exacerbation of social stratification that has undermined its legitimacy in the post-reform era (Florian Schneider 2018). This marks the political

specificities of China's domestic politics, which are shaped by the paternal state's agendas. Amid the revival of Cold War mentalities in both the West and the East, China and major Western democracies have drifted away from each other, despite the close trade relations between them. An anti-West axis, thus, becomes a defining characteristic of contemporary China's nationalist sentiments. In this process, Russia emerges as China's powerful international partner, which shares a similar ambition that attempts to challenge Euro-American hegemony in the current global geopolitical order (Maria Repnikova 2017). This results in Russia's agendas being supported by both the Chinese government and its nationalistic masses when it engages in conflicts with the US-led coalition, as reflected in the current Russo-Ukrainian crisis.

### Scrutinising the Russian invasion through a gendered prism

With both the masculine nature and the anti-West axis of Chinese nationalist discourses in mind, it is logical to observe gendered values being perpetuated in China's social-mediated discussions about the 2022 Russian invasion. This phenomenon is not only confirmed by the vulgar interpretation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine but is also manifested by a group of Weibo users' postings of blatant sexist commentaries, which have now received an international audience, after being reposted on international platforms, such as Twitter.<sup>2</sup>

**User-1:** #关注俄乌局势最新进展# 接收乌克兰无家可归的朋友, 18-25岁女士优先 [emoji]

**Translation:** #Focusing on the latest developments in the Russo-Ukrainian situation# Accepting homeless Ukrainian friends. 18-25-year-old women are first served.

**User-2:** 收留乌克兰心碎流浪女孩, 包吃包住, 多多益善, 没别的, 就是关注世界局势 [emoji]

**Translation:** Accepting heartbroken Ukrainian homeless girl. Food and shelter are on me, and the more the better. Nothing much, [I] just care so much about world affairs [emoji].

**User-3:** #关注俄乌局势最新进展#接受乌克兰18-26周岁单身女性

**Translation:** #Focusing on the latest developments in the Russo-Ukrainian situation# Accepting 18-26-year-old Ukrainian single women.

Taking the form of "banter," posts as such appear to be away from the focal point of the current crisis. The unsympathetic attitudes towards Ukraine, and the sexualisation of its female citizens, offer a glance at the overall pro-Russia sentiments on Chinese social media. Yet, beyond the ostensible sexist commentaries, these posts implicitly demonstrate a comment on the Ukrainian government's inability to protect their female citizens, which suggests a disparagement of male Ukrainian citizens' manhood in a time of war. This is consistent with the masculine thesis deeply held in Chinese nationalist discourses, despite the seeming omission of it at a textual level. Considering the widespread penetration of such sexist commentaries on Chinese digital platforms, it becomes apparent that both sexism and nationalism are largely taken for granted by a sizable number of Chinese social media users, who are typically men and both misogynistic and nationalistic in their worldview (Peng, Wu, and Chen 2022).

It should be noted that the Chinese government has not completely sided with male misogynists in public debates. In particular, we have witnessed the original posts insulting Ukrainian women being removed from Weibo, with the state-owned/sponsored media publicly condemning such sexist commentaries, after they have provoked international criticisms, which are considered to have tarnished China's global image.<sup>3</sup> However, in state-backed condemnations, nationalist discourses are once again conveniently invoked to energise existing anti-West sentiments amongst the population. A typical example of such discursive strategies can be found in an article authored by Lei Xiying,<sup>4</sup> a standing committee member of the All-China Youth Federation and President of a Hong Kong-registered think tank specialising in Mainland-Taiwan relations. In this article, international criticisms of Chinese social media users are framed as a scheme created by China's domestic separatists, who are puppets of the US-led coalition, aiming to promote anti-China rhetoric in the global context to destabilise the Chinese state. In this way, a conspiratorial style of argument is put forward to mitigate the negative impacts of male Chinese nationalists' sexist commentaries and, by extension, delegitimise dissenting opinions against the government's pro-Russia foreign policy in the eyes of its domestic audiences.

**User-4:** 中国在胜负已分之后出兵俄罗斯有两个好处[. .]. 1. 可以夺回失去的领土, 2. 更重要的是, 远东部分的俄罗斯男人, 大部分都被普京派上战场, 死在乌克兰了, 中国夺回远东领土之后, 还可以同时接收大量俄罗斯青年妇女, 为2,000万中国光棍找到老婆

**Translation:** China should send troops to Russia after the war ends for two reasons [. .]. First, [we] could take back our lost lands. Second, and more importantly, most Russian men from the Far East are now dead in Ukraine. When taking back our lands, China could also accept many young female Russian refugees and help 20 million Chinese bachelors to find wives.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, due to Russia's military losses, voices critical of the Kremlin are increasingly being observed on Chinese social media in recent months. In this process, gendered readings of the war are once again manifest in the form of posts advocating sheltering female Russian refugees, as revealed by the above Weibo post. These misogynistic social media posts, alongside those sexualising Ukrainian women being observed in the early stage of the war, are two sides of the same coin. Their existence reiterates the masculinist nature of China's nationalist sentiments, although the political opinion on which the latter is based starts turning against Russia, due to its inability to perform its manly, military strengths on the battlefield.

## Concluding remarks

The revaluation of Chinese social media users' gendered observation of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is twofold. On the one hand, the nature of China's nationalist politics being a masculine terrain is once again confirmed by how male Chinese social media users adopt a gendered lens to observe international geopolitics, underscoring a dynamic intersection of misogyny and nationalism that constantly appears in China's social-mediated communication. On the other hand, the propaganda machine's adoption of discursive strategies, which play down the severity of male Chinese social media users' sexist commentaries by energising nationalist sentiments amongst the population, also alludes to the government's collateral responsibility for the amplification of misogynist voices on Chinese digital platforms in recent years. In conjunction with the state's strict suppression of

domestic grassroots feminist movements in recent years, this reveals a gender-specific double standard in the Chinese government's propaganda campaigns. With the close alignment of masculine values and nationalist discourses in mind, such a double standard is unlikely to be a result of gender politics per se, but a reflection of male misogynists' ideology and worldview being more compatible with the Chinese government's political agendas. To this end, this essay raises the need for a feminist approach to foreground China's nationalist politics at an infrastructural level, which represents a much-needed trajectory of intellectual intervention that indeed requires urgent scholarly attention.

## Notes

1. Retrieved 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022, from <https://m.weibo.cn/3553342022/4740758248882775>.
2. Retrieved 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022, from <https://twitter.com/thisiswenhao/status/1496882211018395649>.
3. Retrieved 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022, from <https://china.huanqiu.com/article/46yIKxjvlt>.
4. Retrieved 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022, from <http://ccsa.hk/index.php?m=home&c=View&a=index&aid=524>.
5. Retrieved 13<sup>th</sup> September 2022, from [https://weibo.com/6975779711/M5cOMu0S8?refer\\_flag=1001030103\\_](https://weibo.com/6975779711/M5cOMu0S8?refer_flag=1001030103_).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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