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The Discursive Construction of Populist and Misogynist Nationalism: Digital Vigilantism Against Unpatriotic Intellectual Women in China

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Abstract

The phenomenon of nationalist digital vigilantism targeting Chinese intellectual women is rising in China. To illustrate how national identities and social exclusion are discursively constructed, as well as the potential vulnerabilities experienced by Chinese female intellectuals, four high-profile cases that took place between 2017 and 2021 are chosen. Critical discourse analysis is conducted on collected Sina Weibo comments, WeChat public account articles, and news articles published by state-run media. The research identifies three main discourses: the ungrateful traitor, the corrupt elite, and the ugly slut. These discursive interactions demonstrate the fluidity of both discursive and operational conditions in nationalist digital vigilantism, which amplifies the targets' vulnerability. This research contributes to the study of misogynist populist nationalism by providing an empirical analysis in an under-studied social context—China, and to the study of Chinese populist nationalism by foregrounding an under-studied perspective—misogyny.

Keywords

critical discourse analysis, digital vigilantism, misogyny, nationalism, populism

Introduction

In 2017, a female Chinese overseas student found herself a target of naming and shaming by millions of Chinese social media users. The controversy was caused by her public speech at University, in which she criticized some social issues in China. Her speech caused a national online discussion and was regarded as a "lie/suck-up" with "exaggerated and flawed arguments." Her personal information and all her social media accounts including Sina Weibo, Facebook, and LinkedIn were exposed and spammed. She even became a meme afterward. She was regarded as an "unpatriotic, ungrateful, and lying traitor." The shaming continued on Chinese social media platforms even after she terminated all her social media accounts. In recent years, such mobilization where citizens seek retaliation via public naming and shaming, also referred to as digital vigilantism (Trottier, 2017), against individuals with perceived unpatriotic behaviors are not rare in China (Q. Huang, 2021). The undesired public visibility often leads to further institutional punishment against the targets such as job loss (Q. Huang, 2021). This case prompts me to start collecting similar incidents from 2017 to 2021 (when the research project ends).

Mobilization of Chinese Digital Nationalism

In addition to nationalist digital vigilantism, other types of social mobilization triggered by nationalism are also rising in China, which is widely discussed in both the public media (Deng & Lin, 2020; Yang, 2019) and academic research (H. Liu, 2019; Luqiu & Kang, 2021; Schneider, 2018; Y. Zhang et al., 2018). In many cases such as the American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia (Gries, 2004) and the conflict between China and Japan over Diaoyu Island (Schneider, 2018), the nationalist mobilization on social media is triggered by international relations events, where Chinese netizens usually direct their anger to "enemy" countries—either their government, as abstract concepts, or their products. In recent years, there is also increasing nationalist mobilization similar to digital vigilantism where Chinese citizens take offense at brands that "disrespect" or "insult"

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China, which is illustrated in the 2018 Dolce & Gabbana advertisement incident (Q. Huang & Janssens, 2019) and H&M's announcement about the Xinjiang issue (Friedman & Paton, 2021).

In the aforementioned cases, the targets (foreign countries/brands) are *Others* by default because they are outside of the imagined community (Anderson, 2006). However, the construction of Others and social mobilization can be more complex when the targets are perceived to meet the criteria for the imagined *Us*, such as nationality, ethnicity, and cultural heritage. Just as the incident briefly described at the beginning of this article, there are many digital vigilantism cases targeting Chinese citizens who are perceived as betraying the motherland by publicly speaking against China (Deng & Lin, 2020) or coming back to China from foreign countries during the second wave of the world pandemic (Trottier et al., 2021). To justify and mobilize online shaming against such targets, digital vigilantism participants need to construct *Otherness* within *Us*. Studying such nationalist mobilization in China can help understand the complexity of Chinese netizens' construction of *us* versus *them*. Therefore, I propose to pay attention to Chinese nationalist digital vigilantism that is directed toward fellow Chinese citizens. In addition, these nationalist mobilizations present alarming risks to general Chinese citizens of becoming a digital vigilantism target, which warrants an in-depth analysis of how national identity is constructed and how individual citizens are put at risk of social exclusion through public and media discourses.

I also propose to highlight how such nationalist mobilization intersects with populism in China. When scholars study contemporary Chinese nationalism, the dynamics between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and Chinese netizens have been focal points. While the party state promotes patriotism—its preferred discourse on nationalism, grassroots populist nationalism also grows and sometimes can go beyond and challenge the official narrative (Deans, 2005; Ma, 2018). This populist nationalism on Chinese social media allows Chinese Internet users to construct their own nationalist narratives and interpretation (S. I. Zhang, 2021). Meanwhile, the party-state also learns to improve its methods of dealing with such tension. By partially including populist online deliberation, evoking nationalism, and taking stances case by case based on populist nationalism, CPC manages to maintain the system's stability and legitimacy (Hyun et al., 2014). Taking this a step further, CPC also creates a system of "authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0," in which populist patriotic bloggers are co-opted (Repnikova & Fang, 2018). Populist nationalism constructs inclusion and exclusion by policing the good/national *us* and bad subversive/non-national *other* (Anand, 2022). Taking this dimension into account when studying nationalist mobilization against fellow Chinese citizens can not only results in a more nuanced and complex analysis but also contributes to the research field of Chinese populism and nationalism.

Another intersection with Chinese nationalist mobilization that deserves more attention is its confluence with gender and misogyny. While many western scholars demonstrate the synergy of misogyny and populist nationalism in right-wing discourses and mobilization (Bjork-James, 2020; Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Cloud, 2009; Guy, 2021; Vowles & Hultman, 2021; Wilson, 2020), only some scholars who study Chinese nationalism pay attention to such synergy, including Fang and Repnikova (2018), T. Liu and Deng (2020), and Peng (2022). As Anand (2022) states, investigating how gender and nationalism intersect can shed light on "how gendered identity gets shaped through a nationalist discourse which, in turn, (re)produces a national identity" (p. 302). Thus, I also investigate the gender discourse in Chinese nationalist mobilization.

Personal Positionality and Research Agenda

Following the *situated knowledge* (Haraway, 2020) principle in Association of Internet Researcher's (AoIR) feminist research ethics (franzke, 2020) and the reflexivity in qualitative research, I would like to discuss my personal positionality and contextualize my research agenda before proceeding. I came across the four chosen cases (which will be discussed in the later section) when I monitored general digital vigilantism incidents in China for a long-term research project. I found patterns of misogynistic vitriol against Chinese female intellectuals who are perceived as unpatriotic. My drives to conduct further research on this phenomenon are both intellectual and personal. I am a Chinese cis-gender heterosexual woman in an inter-racial long-term romantic relationship. I come from a middle-class family background, which provided me with the opportunity and financial means to pursue higher education first in China and later abroad. I work in a western academic institution and identify as a liberal feminist intellectual. My liberal feminist academic training and worldview motivate me to conduct research focusing on revealing social injustice; meanwhile, my personal identities and experiences, which share many similarities to the ones of the targets, make me fearful of and upset about the vulnerabilities they experience.

Therefore, I conduct this research with the intention to illustrate the potential vulnerabilities experienced by Chinese female intellectuals who might have misalignments with mainstream narratives and ideologies in China. I want to emphasize that in this research, I do not intend to argue that only intellectual women are vulnerable when facing nationalist digital vigilantism or that the targets received vitriol only because they are female intellectuals. By purposively choosing four relevant high-profile cases, sampling corresponding public discourses, and conducting van Dijk's approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA), I aim to answer the research question: *How are social exclusion and national identity constructed discursively in digital vigilantism cases that target perceived unpatriotic Chinese female intellectuals?*

Literature Review: The Synergy of Nationalism, Populism, and Misogyny

The intersection between nationalism and populism has become an important research field as right-wing movements rise globally (Bergmann, 2017; Dunn, 2015; Schroeder, 2019). The construction of *the people* becomes multilayered as both underdogs and as a nation (de Cleen, 2017). In radical right discourses in western countries, the collective status of the people is threatened by various social changes brought by elites and immigrants, which is used by radical right-wing politicians and parties in political campaigns to win over voters (Bonikowski, 2017; Saresma et al., 2021). This political function of populist nationalism does not apply China because of the insufficient democratic election of political party and leader in China and there are always tensions between CPC-led populism/nationalism and bottom-up populism/nationalism (Y. Cheng, 2011; He et al., 2021).

These populist-nationalist discourses also often contain racial elements. Migrants and their descendants are excluded from the populist construction of the people despite their nonelite socioeconomic status (de Cleen, 2017; Panico, 2021). Meanwhile, the perceived elites are accused of betraying their nation/people by prioritizing immigrants and promoting multiculturalism (Bonikowski, 2017; de Cleen, 2017). Such manifestation of populism and nationalism is not common in China as the immigration issue is not a central conflict yet in contemporary Chinese politics. Similar to the populist nationalism in the west, Chinese populist nationalists distinguish the *pure people* and *corrupt elites* (He et al., 2021). However, racial issues and immigration issues are rarely the focus of populist-nationalist discussions. Chinese nationalism mainly focuses on the external threat to its unique culture, history, sovereignty, territoriality, and international legitimacy (Guang, 2005). Some exceptional situations where Chinese populist nationalists engage with racial and immigration issues are discussing ideologies of so-called western liberal elites (S. I. Zhang, 2021) and (social)media content about inter-racial marriages or relationships (T. Liu & Deng, 2020)—when gender issues are involved.

Gender issues are also intertwined with populist nationalism. Women are often viewed as prime representations and vessels of their culture and nation, which is a responsibility forced on them and they are denied agencies (Anand, 2022; McClintock et al., 1997). "Our" women—who share the same nationality and ethnicity as the nationalists—are shamed as ungrateful, unfeminine, and unpatriotic for criticizing "our" men or "our" masculine way of running the country (Bjork-James, 2020; Cloud, 2009; Saresma et al., 2021; Taylor, 2019; Vowles & Hultman, 2021). Gender issues are also added threats to the collective status of "our people" or "our men," which generate the misogynist and nationalist online manosphere (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Guy, 2021; Wilson, 2020). By constructing sexualized and racialized women in online discourses in affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), populist nationalists mobilize "the people" to protect national interests from irrational women and left elites (Saresma & Tulonen, 2022; Vowles & Hultman, 2021). The manifestation of gendered populist-nationalist mobilization is also studied in China. Some scholars focus on how gender influences the manifestation of online nationalist discussion (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; T. Liu & Deng, 2020; S. I. Zhang, 2021). Peng (2022), on the contrary, shows how nationalism influences online discussions on gender politics in China. These researchers demonstrate that mirroring western nationalism, Chinese digital nationalism is also influenced by the gendered discourse of politics. Most research mentioned above, however, focuses on the synergy of gender, populism, and nationalism in public discussions or shaming female public or semi-public figures. How such synergy mobilizes naming and shaming toward civilian individuals can enrich this body of literature.

This research, therefore, can contribute to the scholarly investigation of gendered populist nationalism by studying such mobilization against civilian individuals in a social context that is different from western democracies. The differences include the political system, core issues in nationalist public discussion, and power relations in media systems, which can all influence the synergy's mobilization.

Theoretical Framework

Digital Vigilantism as Discursive Interactions

Digital vigilantism is a form of symbolic and discursive violence that citizens seek to impose on individuals who are perceived as committing legal or moral transgressions by publicly naming and shaming them online (Trottier, 2017). Its process is not only mediated but also mediatized, where various actors primarily interact on social media platforms and follow the media and platform logic (Q. Huang, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to study the discursive dynamics between different actors on social media platforms. Trottier (2019) proposes three sets of discursive interactions for investigation. The first set of discursive interactions is between the target of denunciation and campaign initiators/participants. In nationalist digital vigilantism, the initiators/participants need to first construct the target as Others and then mobilize further online participation by linking to broader social issues, both discursively (Trottier, 2019). Second, the discursive relations between participants and the state should be discussed (Trottier, 2019). Studying this set of discursive relations is especially important to understand digital vigilantism triggered by populist nationalism in China due to the tensions between the CPC-led patriotism narrative and the grassroots populist nationalism narrative, as discussed in the literature review. Third, Trottier (2019) emphasizes investigating the discursive relations between the press and targets/participants. Hence, Trottier's framework of three discursive interactions guides my data collection.

Intersectionality as Conditions of Mediated Visibility

In Trottier's (2019) conceptual model of digital vigilantism, initiators and participants need to frame the incident with specific moral concerns that warrant policing and denunciation. In the discursive interaction, the offense can be discursively constructed as part of a broader social condition, not only by participants, but also by the press and the state. These moral concerns and social conditions constitute the discursive conditions of mediated visibility in digital vigilantism cases. Also, institutional power relations and the media system form the operational conditions of such mobilization. Informed by my intellectual knowledge and personal experience, I argue that in the nationalist digital vigilantism cases against Chinese female intellectuals, abstract values such as patriotism, citizenship, and femininity, as well as institutional power relations, make it necessary to discuss intersectionality.

Intersectionality was first coined by Crenshaw (1991) to analyze the structural and political vulnerability faced by Black women in the US legal system. Following this genealogy, more critical and feminist scholars use intersectionality as an analytical tool to investigate how seemingly separable identity categories such as gender, race, class, and sexuality can mutually constitute individuals' vulnerability (Cooper, 2016). Some scholars also adopt the intersectionality framework in the local context of China (Chiu, 2017; Clothey et al., 2018; C. Y. Zhang, 2013). Albeit some criticism of adopting the concept of intersectionality as a more general framework due to its possibility of disappearing Black female scholarship (Alexander-Floyd, 2012), scholars propose to use intersectionality as a general analytical framework to understand the power structures and dynamics when the unitary or multiple approaches are insufficient (Hancock, 2007). Cho et al. (2013) also endorse the idea that intersectionality should not be understood as superficial categories and differences but should be best framed as an analytic sensibility of considering the problem of sameness and difference, and its relation to power. Therefore, the framework of intersectionality guides my data analysis and discussion.

Methodology

Ethics and Reflexivity

As disclosed in the introduction, this research is driven both intellectually and personally. While such motivations make me "biased," they also allow me to follow the *Ethics of Care* in feminist research ethics (franzke, 2020), which "starts with the real experience of being embedded in relationships with uneven power relations" (Suomela et al., 2019, p. 2). Other general ethical guidelines are also followed in research design to ensure the research rigor, which will be elaborated in later subsections of case selection, data collection, and data analysis. This research has been approved by the institutional ethical review board. I also adhere to the principle of situated knowledge (Haraway, 2020) and reflexivity (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) by reflecting on who I am, why this research is conducted, and how the knowledge is produced throughout the research process to account for the situated and embodied nature of knowledge production (Pillow, 2003). I integrate such reflection at reflexive moments, including personal stories and the research question/agenda, theoretical approach, case selection, data collection, and data analysis (Ademolu, 2023; Subramani, 2019).

Case Selection and Data Collection

Based on my research agenda and research question, I purposively selected four cases based on the following criteria: (1) incidents are nationalist digital vigilantism, which is operationalized as civilian individuals are targeted, named, and shamed on Chinese social media platforms for being unpatriotic between 2017 and 2021; (2) targets are identified as women with Chinese nationality and at least a university bachelor degree; (3) the incidents are high-profile nationwide, which is operationalized as being covered by national news outlets. Relevant information from four selected cases is listed in Table 1. To follow AoIR's well-being principle (AoIR, 2019) and minimize second-round undesired digital visibility and harms brought by the research to the targets, no personally identifiable information or sensitive information is listed. Targets are pseudonymized, and key information to trace back to original incidents is not provided. The same principle is adopted when presenting data in the analysis. To minimize the possibility of tracing back original posts and, therefore, exposing the targets, I only provide data in English, which are translated by me.

After case selection, I collected three types of data based on Trottier's (2019) conceptual model of digital vigilantism. Trottier (2019) proposes to understand the mediated denunciation from three sets of discursive relations: targets and participants, targets/participants and press, as well as targets/participants and state.

For the discursive relations between targets and participants, I collect relevant posts and comments on Sina Weibo since it is the main public venue for digital vigilantism to develop in China (Q. Huang, 2021). Also, despite its censorship under the tight control of the party-state, Sina Weibo is still regarded as the most potential online public sphere in China (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015; C. Zhang, 2020). First, I use visitor[1] mode to enter Sina Weibo, and manually conducted a keyword search for the relevant hashtag topic one day after state-run media outlets comment on the incident. The data collection time is chosen to let the digital vigilantism incidents fully develop, which is usually signaled by commentary articles released by state-run media outlets. Then, I sorted them by clicking "按热度" [by popularity/trendiness], filtered out the posts by news media outlets, and

Table 1. Sampled Targets' Information.

Target	Gender	Education	Accused of	Outcome
A	Female	Bachelor's degree in a foreign country	*Ruhua* [insulting China] and *henguo* [hating the motherland] public speech	A was forced to delete all her social media account to avoid large-scale harassment.
B	Female	PhD candidate in China	Ruhua and henguo online speech	B was expelled from PhD program.
C	Female	Master's degree in both China and a foreign country	Ruhua and henguo online speech	C issued several apologies on her social media accounts and then forced to delete all her account to avoid large-scale harassment.
D	Female	Bachelor's degree in a foreign country	Ruhua and henguo speech and work; *maiguo* [sell out the motherland]	According to D's Tweets, she experienced severe trauma due to the amount of vitriolic harassment she received.

collected the top 10 posts. For each post, I sorted the comments by "按热度" and collected the top ten comments. In total, 40 posts and 400 comments were collected on Sina Weibo. The collected data are by no means a perfect representation of Chinese public opinions due to censorship and the intervention of sorting algorithms provided by Sina Weibo, but they are also the discourses available and most visible to regular Sina Weibo users, which is what matters to my research agenda.

The same logic and time frames apply to my data collection for the discursive relations between targets/participants and the press. I chose to collect WeChat public account articles to understand these discursive relations because they have become a major news source for Chinese citizens (Xu, 2022). I used the keyword search for articles function in my own WeChat account, manually clicked into all articles in the first 10 result pages, and selected five articles that are dedicated to commenting on selected cases with the widest readership—indicated by the viewer number shown at the bottom of each WeChat public account articles. A total of 20 WeChat public account articles are collected.

For the discursive relations between targets/participants and the state, I collected 12 news reports and commentaries by national state-run news outlets *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency in real-time. These two news outlets are chosen because they are the best indicators of the party-state attitudes, while regional news outlets may have a political leaning (Repnikova, 2017). Reports from state-run English-language news outlets such as *Global Times* are not collected because this research focuses on domestic discursive relations.

Data Analysis

I conducted CDA on collected data. CDA is chosen because its goal to reveal how language as social practice enacts power in societies (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997) matches my research agenda and the consideration of discursive power relations required by the conceptual model of digital vigilantism (Trottier, 2019) in my theoretical framework. There are four main approaches to CDA. Fairclough's (2013) approach to CDA mainly focuses on institutional hegemonic discourse power. While institutional power is an important part of digital vigilantism mobilization in China, it is not the sole analysis aspect of my research. Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) attempts to trace in detail the constitution of political institutions and organizations of everyday life historically (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), which is not the focus of my research question. The approach of van Leeuwen (2008) highlights the visual devices in discourses and how they maintain and legitimize inequality, injustice, and oppression in society. While there are pictures used in collected data, they are not the focal point of my analysis.

The approach that I adopt is van Dijk's (2005) socio-cognitive approach to CDA. He focuses on social inclusion and exclusion, which matches my research question on the construction of social exclusion and national identity. My analysis follows his three-level analysis, namely the discourse-cognition-society triangle. Van Dijk defines discourse as a communicative event, such as conversational interaction, written text, and images. Cognition refers to personal and social cognition, such as beliefs, goals, evaluations, and emotions. Society can be both the local face-to-face interactions and the global socio-political structures such as social groups, institutions, political systems, and many other abstract properties of societies and cultures (van Dijk, 2005). I first focus on linguistic markers such as lexical style, syntactic structures, semantic meanings, rhetorical figures, and topic choice. These linguistic markers build the foundation for understanding the discourse through the analysis of topics and macro-propositions, analysis of local meanings, analysis of subtle formal structures, analysis of context models, and analysis of event models. As for the social cognition level of analysis, knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, norms, and values presented in the discourses are investigated. Finally, I discuss the social situations, actions, actors, and societal structures involved and illustrated in the discourses.

In the data analysis process, my own identity and life experience similar to the targets can make me biased or subjective because I am more sensitive toward certain types of denunciation and, therefore, highlight them. However, denunciation also impacts targets subjectively: certain types

of vitriol can be picked up more easily by targets and pose a severer impact on them. Therefore, my intersubjectivity (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010) can help illustrate the potential harms and trauma facing the targets in these incidents.

Analysis

I identify three main discourses that are also interconnected: *the ungrateful traitor, the corrupt elite*, and *the ugly slut*. These three discourses coincide with Cloud's (2009) analysis of the harassing correspondence she received, namely *elitist intellectual*, *national traitor*, and *gender traitor*.

The Ungrateful Traitor

The fundamental discourse in Chinese nationalist digital vigilantism cases is that patriotism is an unquestionable norm. The participants and commercial media shame the targets for not loving their countries as violating a universal value and basic human virtue. First, this discourse is established by direct lexical choices such as "the bottom line of loving your country." Participants also strengthen this discourse by using concession syntax such as "even if" and "we can . . . but." For instance, participants put *patriotism* before *freedom* by commenting that "it is saddening to see people smearing China and taking the opposing stance against the national interest of our motherland, even if it is for the pursuit of so-called freedom" (Sober Pie). Sometimes, such concessions can also be expressed more subtly: "this has nothing to do with political ideologies; this is the bottom line of being a human" (Li). This discourse is often directly followed by a discourse of exclusion of targets in an explicit manner, such as ". . . so she isn't qualified as a Chinese" or "she should just give up her Chinese citizenship." It is important to note that explicit exclusion is usually found in social media comments and commercial media outlets, while hardly seen in formal state institutions' responses or state-owned media.

Building upon this discourse, participants and commercial media further shame and exclude participants as "the ungrateful traitor." This is accomplished by defining the targets' speech or behavior as ruhua or henguo and then constructing contrasts between the past and present and China and other countries. In most posts and articles, there is no nuanced discussion on the nature of the targets' speech or behavior. Instead, the terms ruhua and henguo are directly applied without reasoning and explanation. Targets are put in a vulnerable position because they lose the power to define and explain their actions. The "traitor" discourse is further amplified with the addition of "ungrateful" adjectives by constructing various sets of contrast. The first set of contrast focuses on the "hundred-year humiliation" and current strong China. Just as many scholars argue, state-led patriotism education emphasizes national humiliation to raise nationalism among Chinese citizens (Callahan, 2004). Participants resort to this discourse and very often combine rhetorical devices such as parallelism and rhetorical questions. For instance,

> Shame on jingri [Self-deemed Japanese]! [angry emoji] Don't you remember the Nanking Massacre, the comfort women, and the Yasukuni Shrine? How much blood and tears did our people have to shed to win the war so that we can have peace today?

Painful historical events were named and used as examples of how Chinese people as a community have been mistreated. To qualify as a Chinese requires remembering these events and not forgetting the hatred toward those countries and their people. Such shaming does not directly relate to the specific behavior or content of speech; rather, similar or the same narratives can be observed in two different incidents involving the same "enemy." The discourse of past humiliation is further intensified by descriptions and stories of national heroes' sacrifices.

> What did it mean to be a communist party member? [. . .] So many soldiers froze to death, and their bodies were just left in the snow-covered ground . . . they sacrificed their lives for the country and the people! Why? Because of love! The love for the motherland and its people! (Feng)

This contrast narrative continues with the celebration of contemporary safe, strong, and economically successful world power, which is also posed as a contrast to the situations in other countries.

> I have read so much about Syria these days. I am extremely proud of being Chinese when comparing (Syria) to our military drill in the South China Sea. It is not easy for China to achieve what we have today. We must be thankful for the lives and blood that countless national heroes sacrificed. Since I know about xxx [the target's name], it pains me to see people defending her, saying it is about freedom of speech; it is obviously insulting China, insulting all Chinese! (Hua)

As shown in this Sina Weibo comment, contrasts are drawn between current China and the old China, especially in the late 19th century to the early 20th century, and between China and some other countries experiencing political, economic, or humanitarian crises. Such contrasts are made to demonstrate that the current good life Chinese people are living should be attributed to the efforts made by the vague mix of the nation, the CPC, and the heroes, which led to the conclusion that good Chinese should be thankful instead of criticizing the "country." With the economic growth and technological development soaring in China in the past decade, Chinese citizens also have higher confidence and construct the contrast between China and western countries (H. Huang, 2021).

> My fellow people who have studied abroad all understand the phenomenon of "going abroad makes you love China more." [. . .] the convenient payment with QR codes, public transportation, Taobao, the safe environment even in midnights . . . All these convenient and safe lives that we have already been used to come from our strong motherland. In contrast, we all experience different levels of inconvenience and unsafe environments in the foreign countries we study in. Our motherland behind all these has managed to become stronger step by step, with perseverance, and with endless efforts, despite being so weak in the past. How can we not love our country? (Insight)

By emphasizing such contrast, the DV participants and media establish an "ungrateful" image of the targets, legitimizing the exclusion of the targets.

The discourse of ungrateful traitors is present not only in participants' comments and posts but also in commercial and state-owned media outlets. It demonstrates the wide range of shaming and exclusion facing the targets and the impact of the state-led nationalism narrative (Callahan, 2006; Yu, 2014).

The Corrupt Elite

Another discourse observed in these incidents is shaming and excluding the targets because they represent the corrupt vested interest and social elites. Unlike the across-the-board appearance of "the ungrateful traitors" discourse, this discourse is mainly observed in participants' posts/comments and articles from commercial media outlets. The discourse attacks the targets based on the perceived wasted national resource, the targets' immorality, and potential harm to Chinese society.

To legitimize the shaming and exclusion, the DV participants first establish narratives about how much resources the country, the people, and their parents have invested in the targets. Posts and comments question "how much of the taxpayers' money did she waste" after it was exposed on social media platforms that B was a graduate student in a famed university and got admitted to a doctoral program in China. When the targets study abroad and the argument about taxpayers' money is relatively invalid, the topic of their parents' investment and sacrifice is chosen instead:

> Even though her parents did not support [her wish to study abroad] and did not have the ability to afford the high expenses, they still smash their iron pots and pans into pieces and sell them as scrapped iron[2] [sacrificing all they have] to support her dream of studying abroad. (Yufucaijing)

The financial support from the targets' parents can also lead to participants' suspicion of the legality of the family's wealth: "someone should investigate how her parents got all the money for her study in country B!" To support their suspicion, participants and commercial media also take the targets' social media posts out of context as evidence. Target C tried to acknowledge her privileges in her Sina Weibo post: "I acknowledge that I owe the resources and platforms provided by my parents and the city I live in for any of my success today." However, this post is used against her as evidence of her potentially corrupt parents and her boasting about her elite background.

The lexical choice of jingzhi'de'lijizhuyizhe[3] [meaning vested interest; literal translation: sophisticated/excellent self-serving egoists] is commonly used across all four cases. The term was first popularized in China by Professor Qian Liqun from Peking University when criticizing the current Chinese higher education system (Wang, 2018). It was later taken out of context and then further popularized by users and public accounts on social media platforms to mainly criticize students and young professionals who graduate from famed universities and are deemed selfish. An example of using this term in these cases is as follows:

> This Miss A is definitely a model of jingzhi'de'lijizhuyizhe. These people are best at doing and saying the "right" thing in different situations. If they can get attention by blabbing about controversial things, they will blab. Worst case scenario, they just say they're sorry afterward. [. . .] they don't have any integrity or sense of justice in their mind. [. . .] if necessary, they can kiss ass and try their best catering to the "political correctness"; [. . .] For Miss A type of people, praising [. . .] country A is just an act and her showtime. Behind all the virtue words, they only love their dirty soul, and their futures that are carefully planned. (Mamaquan)

Using this term to label the targets, participants assume ill motivations behind targets' speech or behaviors and ascribe them moral flaws: selfish, calculative, and untrustworthy. This discourse is also closely linked to the previous "ungrateful" discourse, which states that all these investments and opportunities have been in vain, and the targets are ungrateful. By constantly using adverbial clauses of purpose without providing any evidence such as "to please country C as well as maintain her luxurious lifestyle, D started to smear her own country" (Nanxiaoxi), the participants and commercial media also perpetuate the assumption about targets' moral flaws and present it as facts, which leaves no room for the targets to defend themselves against the overwhelming attacks. The commercial media outlets also use contrast to further emphasize the targets' lack of morality. For example, a Chinese Harvard graduate's speech is used as a contrast to A's speech. When narrating the story of the Harvard graduate, special emphasis is put on the fact that he comes from a poor rural family, and he intends to bring back the knowledge and technology to improve his hometown and all other poor rural areas in China.

The participants further their argumentation for socially excluding the targets by discussing the (potential) harms when these elites are in power.

> It is a trend that Jingris are getting higher degrees and becoming a large part of the elites. We should be careful; otherwise, the country will be in danger if they are allowed to work in the government or hold power!

However, it is important to note that when presenting the perceived harms of these "social elites," participants are vague and flexible about who the "social elites" are. In the four chosen cases, "social elites" can refer to professors and lecturers in universities, high-level intellectuals, communist party members, overseas students, and students in famed universities; it can also refer to families with political, financial, or social resources. By creating this vague "us versus them" and implying the demand for more opportunities and resources for "the people," the participants and commercial media demonstrate populist sentiment in their discourse.

The Ugly Slut

Another common discourse in all four cases demonstrates misogyny in Chinese online public discussion (Jing-Schmidt & Peng, 2018). Shaming and exclusion are made based on the targets' gender—female, which is supposed to be irrelevant to the original discussion on patriotism. Like the "corrupt elites" discourse, this discourse is present mainly in social media posts, comments, and articles from commercial media outlets. The most obvious demonstration is that both participants and commercial media overtly use gendered insulting words including *slut*, *whore*, and *succubus* to describe and shame the targets. These lexical choices are made to label and insult the targets for their immorality based on their sexual impurity, a gendered insult that illustrates a form of widely accepted misogyny (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Vickery & Everbach, 2018).

To support the misogynistic lexical choices, the participants and commercial media also extensively discuss the targets' romantic relationships and sex lives. In the articles from commercial media, unverified and unsupported claims about one target's involvement with foreign men are made: "she had over ten white boyfriends in the past five years, and she even participated in an orgy with no less than 15 white men once" (Nanxiaoxi). Ironically, a different version of the same target's sex life is provided in the article from a commercial media outlet: "she maintains sexual relationships with over ten men at the same time." This discrepancy between presented "facts" about the same person shows the lack of credibility in these commercial media articles. Following the discourse provided by commercial media, participants also make speculations and shame the targets by commenting, "I bet that she always sucks up to white men" or "I can see that she is one of those whores who allow whichever Country A man to fuck her." Such discourse is problematic not only because many of these claims are unverified or pure speculation but also because it is based on the ideology that women with sexual desires, specific preferences, and active sexual life are immoral and should be shamed. By discussing the targets' personal life, both the media and public discourse make private issues into public issues.

Another present gendered shaming discourse is based on the targets' appearance. Commercial media usually use uncensored photographs—often with unflattering angles, facial expressions, or demonstrating undesired qualities of women—in their articles. Pictures of targets with a shaved head, smoking, tongue-out, or sitting with spreading legs are selected to accompany the texts. With the material provided by commercial media, participants attack the targets' appearance based on these presented photographs in their (re)posts and comments, such as "If she is so rich, why didn't she get herself some plastic surgery? I get scared whenever I see her face" and "she looks like a monster with that shaved head." Some participants even make memes and Graphics Interchange Formats (GIFs) with these unflattering pictures, accompanied by mocking or vitriolic texts, such as "forcing an ugly and fake smile." These memes later became pop culture references on various Chinese social media platforms, which prolonged the undesired visibility and shaming of the targets. Like the slut-shaming, the ugly-shaming also illustrates deep-rooted misogyny and the ideology that a woman's appearance is part of her morality. Both discourses are still very effective methods to destroy women's reputations in Chinese society.

Discussion

Discursive Conditions of Mediated Visibility: The Fluid "Us Versus Them"

Just as Taylor's (2019) finding that when shaming the target as "totally unAustralian," no specification of what an "Australian" is, the specification of a "Chinese" is never provided, assuming and implying it as common knowledge and constructing a fluid boundary between us and them. This vagueness allows participants, the press, and the state to construct "traitor" discourse according to various conditions of mediated visibility (Trottier, 2019), such as the "pure people" populism (He et al., 2021) and misogyny. Bonikowski (2017) and de Cleen (2017) argue that depending on the populists' ideologies and goals, the category "elites" can be used to refer to elected politicians, economic leaders, civil servants, journalists, intellectuals, artists, and academics. Similarly, the discursive construction of the elite is fluid in these four cases. Instead of defining the targets as elites based on objective economic makers, participants and the commercial media categorize the targets as elites because they are intellectuals, journalists, or academics. The discourse of targets being elites yet corrupt strengthens the discourse of them being "ungrateful," further excluding them from "the Chinese."

Contemporary Chinese society has complex relationships with and public perceptions of intellectuals, especially

in humanities and social sciences (Han & Jia, 2019). In various communist campaigns in the history of the People's Republic of China, intellectuals are regarded as petit-bourgeois and polluted by western ideologies, who are the enemy of achieving communism and socialism, which leads to a negative perception of intellectuals that lingers even in today's Chinese society (Han & Jia, 2019). Meanwhile, being an intellectual—individuals with higher education degrees as defined by the digital vigilantism participants in these four cases—has also become a useful resource in the current Chinese society of market economy (Brown et al., 2021). In addition, the traditional Chinese ideology believes that a man of learning is superior to others,[4] and many Chinese people believe that higher education is the ultimate path to moving up on the social class ladder (Brown et al., 2021). Therefore, higher education is very much valued and pursued, yet sometimes mocked and even hated in contemporary Chinese society (R. Han & Jia, 2019). In addition to the historical influence, the decreasing social mobility—even via education in contemporary Chinese society—also adds to the populist grievance, as demonstrated by the other group of people referred to as social elites in participants' discourse—individuals with resourceful families. Such populist grievances against perceived social elites contribute to the participants' desire to capture the information about the targets and shame them publicly.

Also, the fact that the targets are female evokes another condition—misogyny—to exclude the targets from Chinese patriots in a gendered way. First, good Chinese women should not have sexual desires for or relationships with foreign men. Second, good Chinese women should demonstrate ideal femininity. Chinese women have been shamed as sluts, whores, and gold-diggers on social media platforms (Jing-Schmidt & Peng, 2018), all of which are related to Chinese women's preferences in sexual activities or marriage. There is an increasing demonstration of such grievance, especially in recent years, possibly due to the bigger difference in gender ratio and the consequent rising difficulties for men to find a spouse in China (Chen, 2020; Wee, 2021). Combining the deep-rooted misogyny in Chinese society (Jing-Schmidt & Peng, 2018; Ng & Han, 2018), participants vent such grievance masked in patriotism in these four cases and cases alike. Such masked misogyny and gendered public shaming are also present in other communities and societies, demonstrating women's vulnerability in digital media across cultures (Bjork-James, 2020; Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019).

The discourses in these four cases clearly demonstrate that the intersectional conditions of mediated visibility can lead to temporary expansion of evaluation criteria in national identity construction: elites should be extra grateful, and women should practice traditional femininity and only desire Chinese men. In the digital vigilantism discursive interactions, targets are not publicly shamed and excluded based on a specific, stable, and priorly agreed-upon national identity; rather, they are shamed and excluded based on the fluid conditions triggered by other identities attributed to them. Such fluid national identity construction put individuals at the risk of unpredictable shaming and exclusion based on any of their social identities and past speech and actions, which can lead to a large scale of self-censorship among citizens.

Operational Conditions of Mediated Visibility

With different goals, various actors engage in discursive interactions of nationalist digital vigilantism. The participants are driven by their grievances and nationalism, the commercial media intend to gain more profit in the attention economy, while the party state uses its dominant power over various actors to maintain and promote its ideology and control over the country and its people.

Commercial media play an important role in framing the incidents and amplifying public shaming and social exclusion (Trottier, 2019). As demonstrated in the previous analysis, the commercial media in these four cases frame the targets' speech or behaviors as insulting China, emphasize their educational background and gender, and meanwhile provide material for gendered shaming, which all contribute to the direction and scale of public debates and shaming in these four cases. The choices they make are heavily influenced by the logic of the attention economy (S. Cheng, 2020). The business model of WeChat public accounts relies on the incomes generated from sponsorships and advertisements that directly link to views and shares that the accounts can accumulate (S. Cheng, 2020). Therefore, actively participating in public debates about controversies and provoking Chinese citizens' nationalism, populism, and misogyny have become common strategies among Chinese commercial media, especially on social media platforms, to attain more traffic and thus generate more income (Quan, 2018).

The state is also involved in shaping the discourses in these four cases. As demonstrated in the analysis, the state-run media participate in the ungrateful traitor discourse constructed by the participants and commercial media. To avoid engaging in the more fundamental debates about national identity and the CPC's ruling legitimacy (Guo, 2004), the party-state has developed strategies to co-opt populist-nationalist sentiments to maintain the domestic cohesion and stability as well as the CPC's ruling position (Repnikova & Fang, 2018). Yet, the state-run media avoid directly engaging in populist skepticism and criticism about social and intellectual elites. This could be because of the vague yet wide definition of deemed social/intellectual elites, which can be potentially directed toward the ruling elites and, therefore, undermine the CPC's ruling legitimacy (He et al., 2021). As for the misogynistic discourse, while it is absent in state-owned media articles, there is also no censorship or criticism against it. Given the willingness and capability of the party-state to censor unwanted media content, the absence of censorship and criticism shows that such misogynistic discourse

is condoned. This condonation aligns with the Chinese government's mostly negative attitude toward feminist discourses and social movements (Fincher, 2020; Zeng, 2020). The state's power in shaping the discourses in these four cases and cases alike, however, fundamentally stems from its control and impact over the Chinese society, including the national patriotism education (Callahan, 2009), mainstream ideologies and values, as well as the media system including both mass and social media (Repnikova, 2017).

Therefore, targets in these four cases and cases alike are extra vulnerable because various actors have different forms of power over them: defining their identities, defining their actions, defining the social norms, and most importantly, providing discursive and operational conditions for public shaming and exclusion.

Concluding Remarks

By intentionally selecting four high-profile cases of nationalist digital vigilantism against female intellectuals in China, this research illustrates how the discursive interactions of nationalism, populism, and misogyny are present in constructing the discourse of "us" versus "them" and consequent social exclusion. The discourses of "the ungrateful traitor," "the corrupt elite," and "the ugly slut" are formed under the discursive and operational conditions in China.

While it is a pity that the targets were not interviewed to better understand how they perceive and experience such intersectional vulnerability, the author believes that an ethical research design that avoids potential secondary victimization and repeated traumatization is more important. This unavoidable limitation brought by the chosen research topics and subjects also requires us researchers to consider and develop innovative research methods that can help to shed light on individuals' subjective experiences of public shaming and social exclusion without harming the research subjects. The field can also benefit from empirically measuring how naming and shaming differ for female and male targets in nationalist digital vigilantism cases in China, which is beyond the scope of this research. In addition, no detailed account of how the party-state is involved in such mobilization, directly and indirectly, is provided in this research, which could be supplemented by adopting computational methods to collect relevant data and then conducting social network analysis in real-time when such incidents occur in the future.

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Notes

1. "Visitor mode" refers to accessing Weibo posts without logging in with a personal account. While registering and logging in on Weibo can grant access to more comments, I chose not to do so to avoid algorithmic bias in search results. In addition, posts and comments that are visible to even visitors can also demonstrate the type of content that are favored by the platform Sina Weibo.
2. A Chinese saying that uses hyperbole to emphasize the sacrifice one makes. In Chinese: 砸锅卖铁
3. In Chinese: 精致的利己主义者
4. In Chinese: 万般皆下品，惟有读书高.

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