

The Cognition Trend of Chinese Traditional Media on Feminism and the Underlying Reason for Existing Negative Reports

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Abstract. With the positive development of the media, various mainstream cultures and ideologies have also changed. It is difficult for the two to accommodate. "Feminism", as a progressive thought, spreads in the media space and has a great impact on the cognition of social equality between men and women. This paper studies and analyses about 200 articles from two traditional Chinese print media, exploring the cognition trend of Chinese traditional media on feminism and the deep reasons for existing negative reports. Conclusions can be drawn that the general attitude of traditional Chinese media to feminism is neutral and positive, while both the traditional dualism of patriarchal society and the reform of social economic structure have influenced the cognition and inclusiveness of traditional media to feminism.

1 Introduction

In the year of 2005, the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Guarantee of the Rights and Interests of Women passed the constitutional amendment. In the past, Chinese women have lived in the framework of Confucian ethics, which is essentially masculine, patriarchal, and hierarchical [1]. With the coming of the reform era, women opened the way to find their self-identity under the influence of the market economy. Feminism has become a prominent issue since the 21st century. "Gender-related perspectives have become increasingly diverse and have entered the public discourse space, but most media, especially mainstream media, still follow the norms of Chinese women's inferiority to men in love, marriage, and family". It is not difficult to find that there are still some traditional mainstream media and new social media gradually stigmatizing and misinterpreting "feminists", which can be regarded as a sign of the media's lack of inclusiveness. The stigmatization of feminist is reflected on the denial of feminist identity, the failure to advocate radical feminist movements, and the weakening of the idea of gender inequality. The term feminism has fallen into a false dilemma and is used as an offensive symbol in various contexts. It is judged to be non-inclusive, exclusionary of men, and even disturbing to social stability, and the meaning and group rationality behind it is being ignored.

This paper takes the texts and headlines from Beijing Youth Daily and Global Times in 2019, 2020, and 2021 as the main objects of investigation. By searching "feminism" keyword samples in WiseSearch Database, the author selects the relevant samples that directly illustrate the action or characteristics of feminists or express views about feminism. In conjunction with these findings, this

paper investigates the inclusiveness of Chinese traditional media to feminism and its causes from a social perspective. The media's portrayal of feminists directly affects the readers' and popular culture's perception of feminists, so studying this topic is of great significance in the context of contemporary China.

2 Literature Review

Feminism, a term that first appeared in France, refers to a social theory and political movement created and initiated to end sexism, sexual exploitation, discrimination, and oppression, and to promote equality among sexual classes. Feminism was introduced to China in 1919 during the May Fourth Movement. The pioneers of the May Fourth Movement used the issue of women's rights as a breakthrough to advocate individual rights and rebel against traditional culture. The issue of women's rights was then seen as the yardstick of modern civilization and a prerequisite for human liberation [2]. The Chinese women's liberation movement preceded the West, and the slogan "women can hold up half of the sky" at the founding of New China in 1949 "meant that what the men could do under the leadership of the Party, the women could also do." The Chinese Communist Party led the debate on the "new woman" with more ambition for personal progress and patriotism, turning women into part of the national workforce. In 1995, the Chinese government made it clear that "equality between men and women" is a basic state policy. The related laws and regulations are made to ensure women's participation in the implementation of state, social, and economic affairs, women's employment rights, equal income rights, and labor protection rights, as well as women farmers' rights to land, etc.

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Women's legal equality with men is clearly guaranteed, but in reality, traditional patterns of gender relations are still deeply rooted. With modernization, women's empowerment has become a hot topic in the media, and countless feminist scholars have explored whether women can obtain equal rights in the media context. The emergence of media such as Weibo and Zhihu has provided women with the opportunity to enter the public sphere and gain a voice, and on these platforms, women are able to express their views on current events and politics in the same way as men. But in the process of interaction, feminism's struggle against patriarchy can hardly avoid the social stigmatization of feminism. According to the research of Wang Lan, women are able to express their views on current affairs and politics on the new media platform as men do, and are no longer confined to the trivial matters in daily life. Many women have become opinion leaders through the new media. But at the same time, the number of media reporting on feminism is very small, and some of them are negative. Zeng Changqiu states in his article that the development of the Internet does not necessarily promote the harmonious development of gender in society. The online media's focus on women's bodies constructs the image of women "seen" on the Internet, which is a derogatory and distorted image of women [3]. Not only in the new integrated media, but also in the traditional print media, women have gradually shed their passive status and become feminists who actively fight for their rights. However, the stigmatization of feminists in the media is like a misogynistic orgy. Yang Yuke conducts a textual analysis of more than 200 news media reports, exploring the process of feminism's stigmatization. It shows how feminism has been commercialized, misinterpreted, and taken out of context as radical egoism [4].

3 Methodology

In this paper, the content analysis was used to search articles from Beijing New Youth Daily and Global Times. Using the WiseSearch Database, the headlines and articles that talked about "feminism" from 2019 to 2021 were searched. By analyzing the content of the articles, their reporting plots, and the characteristics of the words used, the articles were categorized into three types, namely neutral, negative, and positive attitudes toward feminism. And the author specifically analyzed the nature of the negative texts to explore the story paradigms, stereotypes, or other underlying causes of the negative attitudes.

4 Result and Analysis

4.1 Beijing Youth Daily

There are 93 reports on feminism in Beijing Youth Daily from January 1, 2019 to December 31, 2021, and 65 of them meet the requirements after screening. As can be seen from Figure 1, Beijing Youth Daily's attitude toward women's rights is neutral and positive, with less and less bias from 2019 to 2021. Among the reports in 2021,

negative feminist reports are no longer present. They are replaced by praise and promotion of the works of feminists that continue to emerge. For example, in the article "Ueno Chizuko - A Name That Cannot Be Ignored," the author praises Ueno Chizuko's feminist ideas. The author writes, "Chizuko Ueno's words are worth remembering: feminism is never the idea of the weak trying to become strong; feminism is the idea of seeking respect for the weak as well."

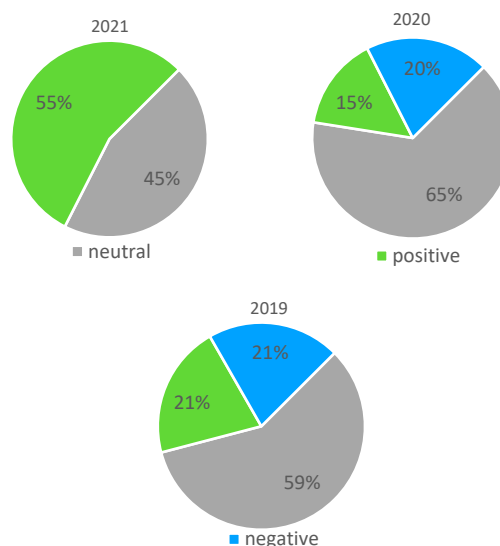


Fig. 1. Beijing Youth Daily's attitude toward feminism (original).

4.2 Global Times

The Global Times had a total of 105 reports in which feminism appeared in the full text between January 1, 2019 and December 31, 2021, and 72 of them were screened for compliance. According to Figure 2, the Global Times is generally neutral in its portrayal of feminism, and is less righteous and aggressive in its promotion of feminism than the Beijing Youth Daily.

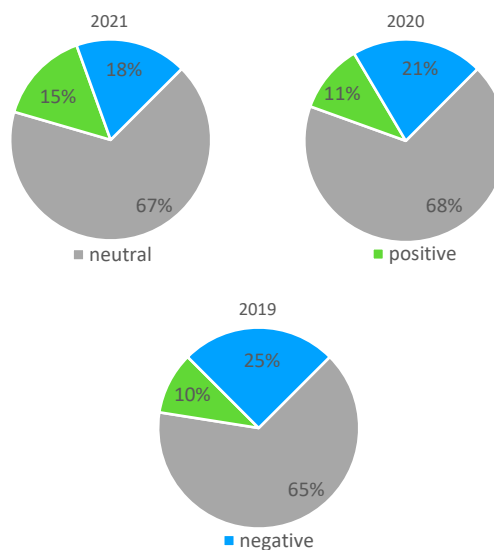


Fig. 2. Global Times's attitude toward feminism (original).

5 Discussion on the Underlying Reasons for Negative Reports

Among the articles in these three years, there are direct depictions of feminists or feminist events, as well as indirect depictions of feminists in film and television and political activities. Basically, there are two types of negative attitudes toward feminism. One is the misinterpretation of feminism and the other is the denial of one's feminist identity.

5.1 Misinterpretation of feminism under the influence of patriarchal society

Most of the misinterpretations of feminism are false critiques of feminists from the nature of gender binary and masculine centrism. On April 26, 2019, in an article called "Woman, When Your Name is Power," the author points out that the historical pseudo-propositions of feminists are "if I were a man" and "unfortunately, I am not a man". In a nutshell, men are regarded as a standard and reference point. The essence of this statement is that feminists want to be men, which is not possible. And this is not at all the intention of feminists, but the plight of women tossing and turning and rebelling under the patriarchal culture and language. Mulan is a hero on the battlefield when she disguises herself as a man. In other words, women are only equal beings when they possess androgyny. This is the stereotype under the gender dichotomy and the emphasis on masculine centrism [5].

In the article "what are they against when they are accusing Papi?" the author discusses the feminist position with the online event of the influencer Papi's right to a surname. There are three reasons for the "surname" debate: the convention of the patriarchal family system, the continued market for patriarchal inheritance and male superiority, and the advancement of women. To solve this problem, the most urgent task is to dilute the concept of "surname". Surname and first name, in the end, is a symbol used to distinguish different people, it does not have much special meaning. Nowadays, people are fighting over it, but it is just a kind of male superiority and female inferiority ideology and the concept of succession that is at play [9]. The author of the article, however, attributes this argument to feminist fallacies, portraying feminists as elite, arrogant, and inconsiderate of the lower classes.

In fact, Professor Chizuko Ueno once expressed, "feminism is never the idea of the weak trying to become strong; feminism is the idea of seeking respect for the weak as well." Women have long been an oppressed group, and patriarchy and misogyny are widespread phenomena in society. However, in fact, it is the feminism preached by society that has somewhat abandoned the average women. The essence of slogans like "women can hold up half of the sky" and "whatever a man can do, a woman can do it too" is to encourage Chinese women to participate in productive work and contribute economically to the country. In fact, however, they still follow the patriarchal family code in the context of feminism propagated by the state. Women in the new era are walking into a historical

paradox. Contemporary Chinese women, while they are allowed to share in the power of discourse, have lost their gender identity of discourse in the culture. Society does provide support for women's economic independence, yet women must still act in accordance with traditional social norms and cultural values [6].

And the pro-patriarchal, elite population that the author describes as excluding ordinary women is the very picture of the refined egoist. At the same time, the Internet is rife with a phenomenon where people who are essentially individualists are regarded as feminists. They have their own names, such as "microblogging women" and "garden feminism", but the common feature of these names is that they bind egoists, who have no connection with feminist claims, to the category of feminists. The term "Chinese Feminism in the Field" should be literally interpreted as feminism of Chinese origin or feminism with Chinese characteristics. Other views point out that the word garden means romanticized, and feminism of Chinese origin is a variant of feminism that has been romanticized or alienated in China, meaning that feminism with Chinese characteristics is not feminism in the true sense of the word. Therefore, in the online environment, it is not appropriate to simply label a group as stigmatized without analyzing its origin and the mechanism behind it [7]. From these points, it seems that the "feminism" that is often rejected in the media corresponds to romanticized feminism. The fact that some self-interested discourse unrelated to feminism is tied to feminism reflects the misuse of the term feminism and the erasure of the historical image of feminists. When egoism is pretended to be feminism, the real idea of feminism will be erased, and what is weakened is their suffering and struggle.

5.2 The denial of feminist identity in the process of economic transition

In the article "The Huge Risk Behind the High Divorce Rate" reported on March 30, 2019, the author indirectly points to the rise of feminism as the cause of imbalanced gender relations and increased divorce rates: "This has led to, on the one side, the rise of feminism, the high status of female and low status of male, and the imbalance of yin and yang, thus leading to gender inequality and easily causing an imbalance of gender relations in marriage. On the other side, some unmarried women are more likely to be tempted by material things, such as houses and cars. They pursue materialistic marriages and this has caused a lot of pressure on the male partner, leaving a poor foundation for their marriage and serving as the root cause of conflicts after marriage."

With the economic and social development, the education and employment of modern women have been improved in general. The improving economic status of women in the family has rapidly increased their sense of independence. Such changes have made a great number of married women, on the one hand, feel more confident in self-sufficiency, and on the other hand, more difficult to tolerate an unsatisfactory marriage [8]. This is one of the many reasons for the increase of the divorce rate. What

this phenomenon has led to is an open mind where marriage is just one of the life choices for women [9]. The article not only implies that the rise of "feminism" has led to a new kind of gender inequality, but also objectifies unmarried women and describes them as "for sale" and materialistic. In the face of the rapid change in the class status of women and men in the process of economic transition, the anxiety and pressure accumulated by the division between the lower class and the powerful class are finally released in the new media [10]. However, the "gender equality" between men and women is only valid in a society where all people are married.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the data showed that the attitude of Chinese traditional media toward feminism is, to a large extent, positive and neutral. The misunderstanding and stigmatization of feminism can be attributed to the paradoxical identity of women in the process of modernization and the dregs of patriarchal society. The dual demands of patriarchal society on women have become more pronounced after the reform and opening up. To the present day, it is evolved into the objectification of women and the radicalization of the stigma of feminism. Women have both the status and opportunities to advance, but still find it difficult to escape the demands placed on them by a patriarchal society. Additionally, the rising status of women and their rising control over marriage and economy have also caused rising anxiety among a certain proportion of men. When feminism is demonized and restrained by institutions with certain authorities, gender equality in society is difficult to be achieved all over. The change of the media's cognition on feminism has a direct effect on the change of people's perceptions, so its inclusiveness and correctness are extremely important.

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