Women Hold Up Half the Internet: Examining the Political Identities of Chinese Women Bloggers

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Taylor Brack

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Approved by

Advisor: [Signature]
Dr. Joshua Howard

Reader: [Signature]
Dr. Kees Gispen

Reader: [Signature]
Dr. John Sonnett
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Introduction

Women in all societies have traditionally occupied a marginalized position in state politics, and Chinese women are no different. Society’s treatment of these marginal actors and the way they engage in the political process has always served as a kind of litmus test for the strength and stability of a nation’s political system. The dramatic evolution of Chinese womanhood, from the fall of the Qing Empire to the present, reflects the kind of societal and political change that is possible in an authoritarian, revolutionary state like China. When Chairman Mao Zedong famously announced in 1949 that women held up half the sky, he made the promotion of gender equality a primary goal of advancing the Chinese state. No comprehensive understanding of modern Chinese politics is complete without an understanding of women’s position in society. For this reason, a modern study of the political identities of Chinese women is valuable to the field of political science and international relations.

Political identity is a fluid construct with many overlapping factors that is difficult to study. However it is nonetheless vital to making conclusions about how individuals participate in and help to shape societies and social phenomenon. Sociolinguists Bamburg et al outlined the empirical study of identity as written and spoken narratives, linguistic patterns and devices in conversations, and critical discourse linked to social, political, and ideological contexts. The goal such studies is to better understand how the world influences individuals and how the world is influenced by individual perspectives. Researchers do this by looking at discourses in order to define and compare fluid, interrelated identities and understanding how those identities were formed and can change.¹ For this study, I hope to qualitatively and quantitatively study sources from three different perspectives: government, society, and women, to make definitive conclusions about young urban women in

contemporary Chinese society and politics. These women are uniquely positioned at the crossroads of gender politics and history and their demographic will be part of the next generation of Chinese political activists.

Political identity is a potent force that can shape everything from individual political decision making to the trajectory of social movements. For better understanding how identities explain social action, researchers use discourse theory which is a field that “investigates the way in which social practices articulate and contest the discourses that constitutes social reality.” In this way, discourse theory recognizes that identity can be an inherently political entity where actors exercise power in interacting with one another and transmitting knowledge. Thus, discourse theory provides some useful assumptions and methods of study for dealing with power hierarchies in society. Professors of Social Work, Tsang and Ho, assert that an individual claiming identity is an exercise of power that creates a space to voice his/her opinion and orient life goals. Furthermore, identity can be shared with others which creates a group power base that can work to pursue common interests and fight for specific rights. Simply put, political identity is a starting point for shifting political dynamics.

Studying political identity in a Chinese context requires some special considerations. Firstly, defining the civil society in which Chinese political actors operate diverges greatly from traditional conceptions of civil society. Civil society can be defined as a social space that exists independently from and outside of the government. Organizations comprising civil society are usually thought of as formal and informal nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations that are made up of a community of citizens who share common interests and act in concert to pursue those interests. Examples include church congregations, economic interest groups, labor unions, and so forth. Most of the existing

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3 Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis, Discourse theory, 9-11.
research that deals with civil society assumes a conceptual framework that is centered on long-standing democratic governments or those governments that transitioned in the so-called third wave of democracy. Participation in civil society has been seen as a way for citizens to assert their individual identities, form interests that align with those identities, and articulate those interests and identities to the government instead of the government defining the collective identity of the masses.

In regards to China, there is some debate about how to conceptualize civil society because of the relationship between the modern authoritarian government and its citizens. When a ruling political party such as the Chinese Communist Party has such a vested interest in regimenting citizens’ public and private activity as well as interpersonal relationships and cultivations of identity, researchers might find that there are very few activities or organizations that are completely independent of the government. Some researchers question whether China can even be said to have a civil society and how modern communication technologies influence civil society. No matter what position a researcher may have, everyone can agree that Chinese politics is indelibly shaped by the contentious relationship between the authoritarian government and Chinese citizens and the role technology plays in public discourse. For the purposes of this study, the best approach is one that emphasizes the role of internet culture in identity formation and adopts a concept of civil society that is unique to Chinese history and social movements.

**Nationalism Shaping the Public Sphere Leaves No Room for Personal Identity**

In his book, *Historicizing Online Protests: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China*, professor of anthropology, Zhou Yongming, analyzes political participation in China by providing a history of public discourse in China from telegraphs in the Qing Dynasty to the internet in the present day. He refuses to adopt the title of civil society and all of its attendant assumptions when discussing political activism in China. He believes that western values and assumptions entrenched in the idea of civil society make the term inadequate for addressing what is
really happening in China, especially on the internet. Zhou instead uses the term public sphere to describe the situation in China. As defined by German sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas, the public sphere is a part of social life that every citizen has access to and where a public opinion can be formed free from state coercion. To avoid the common associations with the concept of civil society, Zhou adopts the term public sphere which is supposed to be a neutral term that does not suggest organizational affiliation or societal values. Above all else, Zhou emphasizes the role of human agency over technological advances in explaining how the public sphere has evolved and this broad definition of China's public sphere emphasizes this idea.

Zhou asserts that in this public sphere, nationalism was an essential element of discourse that united citizens and encouraged them to engage in public discussions in the Qing Dynasty and in modern China. By looking at the timing of societal transformations in history, Zhou shows that waves of nationalism caused and legitimized greater political participation. The combination of nationalistic consciousness, creative uses of evolving technologies to express political ideas, and weakened state control helped to create a limited and distinctly Chinese public sphere in the late Qing period and in the reform era. The government allowed this process to take place because dramatic societal shifts like the May 4th Movement, the Beijing Spring, and the student protests in Tiananmen Square demanded the government's flexibility in some areas. Thus, Zhou is able to show a timeline that details how the public sphere evolves according to societal shifts and waves of nationalism which makes emerging technologies unrelated to trends in public discourse.

By asserting that politics dictates the use of technology and not the other way around, Zhou achieves two ends: first, he criticizes ‘technological determinists’ who assume that the internet will crack the CCP’s control on the populace and usher in an era of democratization in China and second,

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he limits his conceptualization of the internet as a space for mass political action. To Zhou, the more balanced approach to studying the internet in China is understanding it as one of many spaces of negotiation between netizens and the government and to reject the western notion that democracy is inevitable and/or desirable for Chinese people.\(^8\) With this approach, the internet is subordinate within the historical narrative of struggles between the masses and authoritarian regimes which minimizes the articulation of identity by individuals in online spaces, particularly marginalized individuals. 

**Looking Beyond Nationalism to Articulate Identity in Civil Society**

The study of the 1989 student uprising in China shows that identity was a vital tool for contesting the government, but the activist elites failed to utilize identity to its fullest extent. The focus of Craig Calhoun's 1995 book, *Neither Gods Nor Emperors: Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China*, is on the pivotal student-led Democracy Movement in Beijing. As a sociologist, Calhoun does not only recognize civil society as a valid domain in China but also evaluates the role of democracy in that civil society. He defines civil society as a domain “conceptualized typically as the realm of organized activity outside the immediate control of the state but not entirely contained within the private sphere of the family.”\(^9\) In China, intellectuals and students were the dominant political players operating in this civil society; they were the ones who led the Democracy Movement by communicating directly with government officials and articulating their specific goals.

Calhoun asserts that one of the social activists’ main goals was defining a collective identity for Chinese citizens that was both patriotic and enlightened- or, to rephrase it another way, nationalistic and democratic.\(^10\) In order to articulate an identity that a diverse nation of people could share, intellectuals, as leaders of the student movement, used nationalism to transcend class barriers.

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\(^8\) Zhou, *Historicizing Online Politics*, 3-4.


\(^10\) Calhoun, *Neither Gods Nor Emperors*, 192.
Just like in earlier revolutions, nationalism became an essential part of the political identity that they formed. The result was an ideal Chinese patriot who was an ambiguous figure that by default was most often associated with intellectualism and maleness. Every other characteristic was secondary. The language of the movement that borrowed heavily from the rhetoric of the European Enlightenment exemplifies this unwillingness to engage with identity outside of educated masculinity.

For example, though it might easily be implied, is it really undeniable that leaders of social movements will fight for the rights of women when they say they want equality for all men? There is also the problem of consistent labeling that comes along with class and gender delineations. Leaning on past assumptions, these labels become pervasive, convenient truths over time. The woman who wants to occupy a role outside of motherhood might find it difficult to disassociate from this label when men in the movement are referred to solely as activists and rarely as fathers. In this way, the democracy movement allowed intellectuals to create a somewhat artificial national identity that would, they hoped, allow for the spread of democracy across the nation. Identity expression in civil society was suppressed in this movement, but after the movement rose and fell, the internet took its place.

Based on his conclusions on the Democracy Movement, Calhoun predicted the contentious nature of the internet as a function of a democratic state. He writes, “The task of democratization is to create a range of institutions outside state control that support a lively critical culture about topics of political significance. Only such institutions can provide the necessary linkage between face-to-face gatherings like those of Tiananmen Square and the “metatopical” spaces opened up by modern communications media, and only such institutions can make both into effective vehicles of sustained

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11 Calhoun, _Neither Gods nor Emperors_, 194.  
12 Calhoun, _Neither Gods nor Emperors_, 195.
democratic participation.” By this account, China would most likely have to be democratic to have the civil society reflected in online activism that it has now. But despite the liberalization of the market and the rise of the internet, China is not a democracy and it lacks those institutions outside of state control that Calhoun describes. Furthermore, it does not look as if that will change anytime soon. This could mean that China does not truly have a civil society, not even on the internet, but I think that the better argument is that the link between online activism and ‘sustained democratic participation’ is a weak one.

**Internet Activism Interacts with Civil Society and Personal Identity Can Be Political Too**

A recent study in political activism in China emphasizes the role of the internet in privileging individual identity. Guobin Yang’s book, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, diverges greatly from Zhou’s in that it engages with civil society in a Chinese context and it explores the influence that internet has on styles of activism. It also differs from Calhoun’s work by divorcing the concept of civil society from democracy and discussing the role of individual identity articulation in internet activism. A sociologist and professor of Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, Yang broadly defines internet activism as a means by which Chinese netizens take part in a flourishing online culture and simultaneously assert their individuality. For Yang, civil society is a middle ground between members of a society and government that extends the reach of government control but is heavily rooted in society. In China this definition manifests itself in the way that the internet operates separately from the government, but cannot escape the influence of the government.

Yang challenges the common assumption that civil society is categorically democratic and western, but he disagrees with the assertion that civil society does not exist in China. Although China is one of the least democratic states in the world, civil society is reflected in the prominence of the

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internet in political culture. In China, independent churches and unions are largely absent but online activism and civil society have an interdependent relationship. This idea that modern online activism and civil society resemble the chicken and the egg dilemma is different from the one that Zhou presents where information and communication technologies are merely cheap and effective tools used for political participation.\textsuperscript{15} For Yang, the internet in China is a vast, evolving, and multifaceted network that influences how and why people participate in online activism by encouraging contentious rituals, practices, and speech genres while at the same time reflecting the attitudes and values specific to Chinese society.\textsuperscript{16} Yang's explanation challenges and adds another dimension to the western narrative of civil society—the idea that internet culture, not independent societal organizations, forms the backbone of civil society, but it does not refute it completely, and that is a critical step in adding to a growing body of scholarship that focuses on an authoritarian state.

The civil society we see today on the internet in China is a product of previous social movements as well as technology. Yang asserts that internet activism is rooted in the citizen activism of the 1989 student-led Democracy Movement. Widespread use of the internet postdates this protest, however, a few students had email accounts and were able to communicate amongst themselves and with other Chinese dissidents throughout the world. This way, they spread information about what was taking place in the protests and even obtained economic assistance. He concludes that the rhetoric of dissent employed by the protestors borrowed from political traditions of the Republican era and their methods of contention naturally influenced the norms of internet activism today.\textsuperscript{17} Chinese society is no more democratic than it was in the time of the Democracy Movement, but the internet has dramatically changed the way that citizens engage with their government.

\textsuperscript{15} Guobin, \textit{The Power of the Internet}, 12-14.  
\textsuperscript{16} Guobin, \textit{The Power of the Internet}, 16-17.  
\textsuperscript{17} Guobin, \textit{The Power of the Internet}, 28-31.
Yang describes how internet activism has recently emerged as a response to the daily strife created by the liberalization of the market and other government reforms since the 1980s. Beginning in the 1990s, political activists on the internet and off were concerned with addressing the plight of marginalized groups in society like migrant workers and HIV/AIDS patients. It was then, under globalization and the global rise of NGOs, that Chinese society put aside the one-size-fits-all cloak of nationalism and new identities began to emerge. Yang also attributes the rise of new identities to the failure of the socialist welfare system under Deng Xiaoping in the early 1990s which dramatically changed the economic structure of China's population and started the shift to record-breaking income inequality. In the wake of this societal change, the problems of marginalized groups became more acute and widespread. In this way, the modern day interplay between the government and netizens was set into motion.18

But the internet activism we see today is more than just an airing out of material grievances. Well into the era of economic reform and the rise of the middle class, Chinese netizens combine life politics and emancipatory politics by articulating their unique identity as well as fighting to climb the economic ladder. According to Yang, the identity movement can be characterized as an identity crisis where netizens resist the loss of control caused by market transformation and struggle for recognition in unfamiliar territory. Just like in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Chinese people today find it difficult to construct a modern identity and netizens experience this struggle in online activism. Just like Chinese reformers of the past, the temptation for bloggers to blindly uphold the values espoused in the European Enlightenment and other characteristically western social movements is strong.19

Given the open access to, anonymity of, and universality of the internet, blogging sites and chat rooms are ideal places for netizens to form their identities on their own terms. The access to and

creative uses of the internet to challenge the government, in ways that are unique to Chinese internet, make online spaces an ideal field for research in identity politics as it expands the battleground of Chinese politics. The contentious relationship between the authoritarian government and citizens is the main feature that characterizes civil society on the internet. The internet and the opportunities that it creates are completely impartial realms that are open to anyone for any purpose but the openness of the internet also means that it is another way for the government to promote official CCP-friendly narratives to citizens. As netizens and party officials compete against each other to accomplish divergent goals, they are both pushed to innovate technologically and creatively in ways that are unfamiliar to netizens living in democratic states. What I expect to see in Chinese internet culture is based on Guobin Yang’s research. He talks about the playful and prosaic styles of digital contention that characterize modern internet activism and delves deeply into the themes of utopian realism in online spaces.

Guobin found that in the variation of techniques for online contention, netizens’ most common approach is irreverence for all things, especially authority. This is different from previous popular movements that tried to challenge authority by appealing to it in a serious way. Instead of campaigning for grandiose ideals of a democratic republic and making deeply symbolic gestures towards the government like the students in the democracy movement, netizens come up with catchy rhymes and viral videos and images that satirize most topics. The purpose of this biting commentary is not just to laugh at authority, but to express desire for a utopia where a sense of belonging, freedom, and justice is the norm.

In online spaces, netizens can determine amongst themselves what an ideal China would look like and how truly moral citizens, not corrupt officials, would conduct themselves. The expression of the utopian ideal is very salient in modern Chinese society where a crisis of identity is

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taking place. The erosion of tradition, culture, and community that results from the pursuit of modernism and enlightenment have many citizens, particularly those who lived during the Maoist era, feeling anxious about a current state of seemingly lawlessness and the future of the country. Women’s blogs show that female identity symbolically captures the balancing of East and West, tradition and modernity, male and female. The young, internet savvy Chinese woman, just like her mother and grandmothers before her, must shape her self-perceptions and expectations around these dichotomies and much of this negotiation takes place in online spaces.

What can researchers expect to see in the contentious internet styles of women bloggers? Gail Hershatter and Elisabeth Croll, two contemporary scholars of Chinese womanhood, talk about identities of women in a greater historical and political context. In her multidisciplinary survey, *Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century*, Hershatter explains that in the highly nationalistic rhetoric that characterized late-Qing and early revolutionary period, the liberation of women was often connected to the modernization of the nation. On the other hand, all of the backwardness and weakness of feudal China was represented by women with bound feet who could not work or leave their homes. The solution was for women to become more like men so that they could enjoy the privileges associated with maleness.

Gender equality was envisioned in different ways: “Conservative monarchists promoted nationalist patriarchy, constitutional monarchs championed ‘mothers of citizens’, and radical nationalists and revolutionaries called for women’s full political participation.” In fact, female anarchist, He Zhen, organized China’s first feminist movement in Tokyo in 1907 that based the oppression of women on their exclusion from the economy. This idea further stated that family was an oppressive form of authoritarianism much in the same way that the state was. No matter how

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equality between the sexes was defined, the connection between emancipating women and the progress of the country was a pervasive notion. In later chapters, an analysis of this connection in more contemporary sources shows that the liberation of women is an ongoing campaign that, in its more nationalistic variations, can be state-sanctioned and, in more radical ways, can be opposed by the state.

Elisabeth Croll, in her book, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women*, analyzes personal narratives and autobiographies from women in three periods of modern Chinese history: Republican, Revolution, and Reform to discuss how women’s lived experiences diverged from official rhetoric. Croll reviews women’s written accounts to “explore how women interpret, negotiate, and experience gender rhetoric.” She admits that her source material for this text, particularly in the Republican and Revolution eras was not plentiful and that in itself suggests something about how women were positioned in society. But in the modern era of the internet, women do take part in internet contention and activism and I hope to follow Croll’s example in analyzing women’s personal blogs. In women’s blogs, I expect to see a more diverse picture than the one that is presented by government and societal sources. Whereas the latter sources tell women how they are expected to live, personal blogs can show how women actually live which can intentionally converge or diverge from the interests of state and society.

In contrast, Croll found that during the Maoist era, women’s expressions of identity was larger dominated by government rhetoric. Officially, women were no longer separate or different from men and this lead to an erasure of any views, needs, or desires that were specific to the female sex. Sons and daughters of the revolution shared the same terms of address and the same unisex dress. Through slogans and different forms of media, the government stressed that women now shared the same responsibilities, which were more important than the shared freedoms, as men in the new revolutionary society. Thus, government sanctioned gender equality was expressed mostly in the realm of industrial and agricultural production, and women, who were eager to take their rightful
place in society, felt pressure to devote themselves to their work units and their communities, even at the expense of their families. Women's personal expression was largely repressed during the Maoist era and most attempts to discuss issues relevant to women were silenced.\(^{25}\)

Then in the post 1978 reform era, public discourse and government rhetoric shifted to accommodate the emergence of 'feminism with Chinese characteristics'. Critics of Mao and the revolutionary period claimed that human nature had been foolishly disregarded and that gender differences should be observed in the modern age. Of course, a prosperous consumer culture aided the redefinition of what it means to be a woman. Now an endless number of products are marketed specifically to women and this has led to the canonization of mother and wife. The Confucian “virtuous wife and good mother” has reappeared and perfectly summed up the prescribed normative female identity. The downside of the reform era has been the rise (in incidents and/or reporting) of violence against women. In rural and urban settings women are left in vulnerable positions both at home and in the workplace. Cases of domestic violence, rape, female infanticide, prostitution, pornography, adultery and suicide have entered the public discourse. Moreover, the idea that women who strayed too far from an identity as a worker, mother, and wife are now condemned women is quite prevalent in society.\(^{26}\)

In order to fully grasp online activism and civil society in a modern, Chinese context, it is necessary to disregard preconceived, normative judgements about democracy and recognize the potential and power that netizens hold within the authoritarian system. I would argue that civil society and internet activism is a vital part of the political system in China for both citizens and government, perhaps even more vital than for fully democratic countries. For individual Chinese


women living in the modern age, the internet is a platform used to pushback against confining narratives about womanhood.

The methodological design of my research will be a mixed methods study with three main parts. First, I will determine how the Chinese Communist Party defines the ideal Chinese woman and how it represents and engages with that identity. Second, I will determine how Chinese netizens view femininity and womanhood. Lastly, I will qualitatively analyze the contributions of women bloggers in China. It is in this section that I hope to get the best sense of how women view themselves in light of competing representations from civil society and government. To define women’s identity, I will textually analyze the bias that is implicit in every source to determine how the authors of each source view women. Each source will be analyzed using the following framework based on the themes of Confucianism, nationalism, collectivism, gender roles, and conformism:

Women in Public/Women in Private: This idea is borrowed from the Confucian ideal. Confucius, the codifier of Chinese ritual and father of Chinese philosophy, taught that men belonged in the public sphere of politics and other realms of sophisticated thought while women should be relegated to the private domestic sphere. Familial and romantic relationships fall into the private domain while careers, political participation, and consumerism fall into the public domain. Confucius also spoke of the “good wife, virtuous mother” concept that further legitimizes the private sphere.

Women as Global citizens /Women as Chinese citizens: This binary could be considered a form of the East v. West or traditional v. modern dichotomy that characterized the struggle for a national identity in previous social movements. If women chose to see themselves as global citizens, they would be open to ideas outside of traditional Chinese culture and would see themselves as being no different from women from other countries. If women choose to see themselves as distinctly Chinese, they highly value Chinese cultural ideals and put the context of their actions within their local communities.
Women as part of a **Group**/ Women as **Individuals**: Women who define their identity as part of a group will have a collectivist mindset. They will be able to speak on their relationship to other members of the group. They will emphasize their group membership and willingness to compromise and cooperate over individual qualities and uniqueness. Researchers can also look to a woman’s stated motivations: Are her efforts primarily to improve herself or are they to make others better?

Women as **Different from men**/ Women as **Similar to men**: In articulating a feminine identity, women can choose to adopt traditional clearly defined gender roles or take a more radical approach by minimizing the differences between sexes. These differences can be based on biological determinations, but it can also be an acknowledgement of different political goals based on gender. Women who consider themselves to be similar to men might rely on the nationalistic narrative of protest that minimized feminine identity in prior movements.

Women **in the Status Quo**/ Women **outside of the Status Quo**: Women outside of the status quo are women whose behavior and attitudes are potentially subversive to traditional society. They do not conform to socially acceptable norms by participating in sex outside of marriage, not showing an interest in raising children, not planning on taking care of their parents or in-laws in their old age, and valuing money and careers over family. Women within the status quo are not contentious and can work with the government and within hierarchical structures to achieve their goals. Women outside of the status quo can activist-minded individuals looking to change the system or self-interested actors whose behavior sets them apart from society.
Chapter 1: How the Government Views Women

With the use of heavy-handed policies and pervasive propaganda, the government of the Maoist era planned out every aspect of citizen’s lives. Women especially had to look to the government for guidance to be the best workers, wives, and mothers. Even though people's lived experiences differed dramatically from government propaganda such as slogans,\textsuperscript{27} the attitudes about women defined and propagated by the government undoubtedly inform what society thinks about women and how women view themselves. This chapter reflects the government’s attempts at defining and promoting a state-sanctioned role for women.

The five sources qualitatively analyzed in this chapter are earlier publications by the Chinese Communist Party and more recent articles from the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF)\textsuperscript{28}. They are: two government white papers on gender equality, an article on a female administrator, one published interview with a feminist blogger, and a newspaper article about an internet mistress. These sources were chosen because they represented the past and present official stance of the CCP on women and gender equality in China and shows the direct and indirect ways that the CCP articulates this stance. The purpose of these documents is persuasive and/or informative, but each document reveals the ways in which the CCP uses and engages with female identity. The sources are all translated in English and show that the women most celebrated in government texts are women who promote social uplift in their lives and careers by focusing their efforts in a global context that will ultimately benefit their communities or society. There was only one woman discussed in this group of sources who was the subject of scorn and ridicule and she was characterized as a self-serving person with societally destructive tendencies.

\textsuperscript{27} Croll, Changing Identities, 1-3.
\textsuperscript{28} An organization established in 1949 that has headed the women's movement since the revolution and has worked closely with the CCP to influence policy and shape women's legal rights.
The Situation of Chinese Women

In a 1994 report published by the Information Office of the State Council entitled, “The Situation of Chinese Women,” the Chinese government introduced its policy initiatives regarding equality among the sexes. This white paper contains a foreword with eight sections that include topics such as Equal Legal Status, Full Advance in Society, and Equal Status in Marriage and Family Life. It is an opportunity for the government to articulate its position on a number of women-related issues for anyone in China or abroad. In the foreword, the author states that the document is for the international community in preparation of the fourth United Nation's World Conference on Women that was held in Beijing in 1995. Thus, the main message of this document is tied up with the standing of the Chinese Communist party on the world stage. The author of the document achieves this effect by starkly contrasting the lowly status of women before the establishment of the PRC in 1949 with the improved status of women in 1994. This comparison of “Old China” to “New China” minimizes whatever shortcomings there are in the government's current efforts to promote gender equality.

Though the 1992 Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of Rights and Interests of Women was a big step for the government in promoting gender equality in the reform era, this official report exposes some of the ways in which the government has fallen short of some of its lofty goals.

“There exist various difficulties and resistance which have prevented the full realization of equal rights to women with respect to their participation in political and government affairs, employment, access to education, as well as marriage and family. Instances of looking down upon and discrimination against women and even infringement of their rights still occur from time to time. On the other hand, the overall competence of women remains to be further enhanced.”

The language in the last two sentences is especially vague and passive. But the remaining sections continue in this unfocused vein to give a sense that the report is more symbolic than instructive.
or informative. The author of this document relies mainly on ethical appeal to make such broad, generalized statements.

In most of the sections, the author effectively ties the progress of women to the larger goals of the CCP. In the first chapter, titled “Historic Liberation of Chinese Women,” the author boldly proclaims that the women's emancipation movement was part of the “great and profound national democratic revolution” that was taking place in the 1940s and was a prime example of the current regime's success and eminence.\textsuperscript{30} The other side of this assertion is that the backwardness of oppressed women could only be possible under the feudal, corrupt government in China that preceded the CCP. This kind of reasoning equates the advancement of women with the strengthening of the party. And with these broad rhetorical steps, the report manages to erase actual women from the narrative of women's equality in China. This report does not discuss women advocating for the things that are important to them, instead the focus is on how the party has granted women “equal rights with men.” But any member of a modern social contract inherently knows that the rights supposedly guaranteed by law are just words on paper compared to actual lived experiences.

The report then mentions all of the state laws and municipal regulations that were passed to ensure women's equality and all of the units of production that women laborers were able to produce under China's socialist system. But again, it does not mention how those laws and regulations are enforced or how the wealth created from that production is distributed equally among laborers. Perhaps these unobtrusive omissions were part of the “various difficulties and resistances” referred to in the foreword. Vague guarantees about future improvements, such as “The government and social organizations are adopting measures to overcome these inadequacies,” are presented throughout the text.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
But, in the last couple of sections, the author does make strong statements about the roles that women play in society. “Women have played an irreplaceable role in enhancing social morality, improving social environment, and maintaining social stability.”32 The author acknowledges that in accomplishing these goals, Chinese women settle civil quarrels between neighbors, visit felons in prisons to rehabilitate them, serve in social welfare institutions, and volunteer to organize anti-gambling organizations. The author suggests that women in China do all of these things in their local communities and China is a better country because of such selfless efforts. But the report does not stop with this praise; in the next chapter, it goes on to outline some of the essential qualities of ideal Chinese women. The national women's rights organization, ACWF, defined these qualities in the 1991-1995 Five Year plan as the “four haves” (high ideals, high moral standards, education and discipline) and the “four selves” (self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-strengthening).33 This idea of the government upholding certain societal values is not new in China. In the past, many scholars and government officials have dictated what makes an ideal female member of society. Confucian followers wrote about The Three Obediences and Four Virtues as moral principles that would apply to every woman in China. The difference between the two is clear: modern women have more social responsibility in today's China. More than men, women are charged with maintaining stability and morality in Chinese society and because of this, they have a responsibility to improve themselves through education and morality to their fullest potential. Although, the “four selves” pays lip service to the individuality of women, but the end goal is for general societal uplift.

The theme of women's social responsibility continues into the last section titled “Active Participation in International Women's Activities.” In this section, the author makes some broad statements about women in modern China: “Over the years, Chinese women have made unremitting efforts to maintain world peace, and to fight against imperialism, old and new colonialism,

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
hegemonism [sic], racism of various forms, fascism and all forms of terrorism.” The report makes clear that the Chinese government fully supports women in their fight against all the general ills of the world and also acknowledges the benefits that the government benefits by leading the global charge for women's equality: namely, increased cooperation with other countries and international recognition.

The biggest takeaways from this report is that all of the nominal progress made in women's movements can be attributed to the success of the Chinese government and that the government recognizes an interest, domestically and internationally, in promoting equality between men and women. In regards to using this report to define women's identity, the results are clear. Using the methodological framework in this project to define one dimension of political identity yields these descriptions: women as public figures, global citizens, group members, people different from men, people who are part of the status quo.

**Gender Equality and Women's Development in China**

Another white paper entitled: “Gender Equality and Women's Development in China” was published in 2005 and continues expressing the government's official stance on women. Just like the previous white paper, this document contains a persuasive tone and reads much like an advertisement that plays up all of the party's accomplishments in regards to 'liberating women' and glosses over the actual problems that women face. The foreword of this white paper claims that it was a written account of China's progress in promoting gender equality to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the country's participation in the United Nations Conference on Women. Unlike the white paper on Chinese women that preceded it, this report is more definitive and speaks of goals accomplished in promoting gender equality rather than future challenges that must be faced. And just like in the previous

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34 Ibid.
white paper, the progress made in advancing women in Chinese society is framed in terms of the government's achievements.

In this document, the author makes authoritative claims on the government's commitment to women's progress in the economy, political sphere, and family. The language of the text is simple enough for a wide audience to comprehend, and the subtext is made explicit. The arrangement of the sections and the beginning and ending of each emphasize the government's eminence and omnipotence. Phrases like: “The state has made the guarantee of”, “The Chinese government attaches importance to” and “a goal that the Chinese government is determined to realize” signal the author's detachment from the subject matter.\(^{35}\) The content in the first section emphasizes top-down measures enacted by the government: national and local laws to protect women at home and in the workplace, national programs to track the development of women and children, and reporting to United Nations conferences and conventions on women. It also describes, in general terms, the state's increased budget on programs that promote women's development and heavy investment in statistic gathering bodies, but fails to connect these measures with actual changes in women's lives.

Subsequent sections in the paper clarify how the government has affected women. In the sections on the economy and poverty elimination, the author of the report cites statistics of improved conditions for women that have total numbers and percentages of total female populations in urban and in rural areas. For instance: “The government has succeeded in reducing the poverty-stricken rural population, the majority of whom are women, by 53.9 million from 80 million in 1994 to 26.1 million in 2004.”\(^{36}\) While it is unclear exactly how poverty is defined in this context, or how many women were affected by these programs, the reader can understand that change on a big scale has taken place. These sections also address specific issues like urban welfare programs and


\(^{36}\) Ibid.
employment/entrepreneurial opportunities. These are all issues that loosely tie into the United Nations Development Program's goals for women's empowerment.

Lastly, in the section on women, marriage and the family, the author makes clear the government's involved stance on women's status in families: “In the course of promoting family planning, the state stresses gender consciousness in society while respecting women's rights concerning childbirth, integrating family planning with the promotion of gender equality.”\(^{37}\) The Law on Population and Family Planning and the 1950 Marriage Law mentioned in this document further demonstrate the state's strong involvement in this area of women's lives, but the effect seems to be one sided; there are not many statistics to show improvement in this area. Furthermore, the author mentions the availability of household appliances and nursery services leading to lighter housework burdens on women as an intentional decision by the government rather than a matter of course. This document illustrates how the state's control over issues of social consciousness and family planning clearly took precedence over women's own desires and was a central tenant of gender equality. The document does not elaborate on how their policies might have negatively impacted women and families.

All told, this white paper is a written congratulatory gesture to the Chinese government for its achievements in gender equality and is a thoroughly incomplete depiction of women's evolving identity in China. The author mainly employs ethos (ethical appeals) to make statements about how the government has impacted women's lives. The document has no mention of any serious issues in the population that are specific to China: the extreme gender imbalance, domestic violence, sex discrimination in the workplace, etc. Within all of the sections, the author mentions closing the gap in living conditions between rural migrant and urban women and does not emphasize how women's conditions relate to men's. All sections focus on past achievements and do not mention any particular challenges the state faced in implementing these measures or any future commitments to improvement.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.
This document only provides one side of the story when it comes to understanding women's identity in China. It is clear that the government considers women's development in China to be a priority and recognizes the need for improved conditions for women in economics, family life, health, management, etc., but this document fails to give any concrete understanding of how the government's past actions have influenced actual change in women's lives and their status in society. Thus, based on this document, women's identity can be defined as: public, global, group, within the status quo, and similarities between genders.

In speaking of women as a cause to be invested in and fought for, this document fails to discuss them as citizens with political rights. Despite the progress that has been made in women’s development in China, it is clear that in 2005 the government used the status of women as a measure of the party’s competence and legitimacy rather than an integral asset to the country’s future. This is a stark contrast from the previous report where in the conclusion, the government wrote at length about how it expected women to uphold its ideals for the country and to participate on the world stage as Chinese women. In the past decade, there were no more grand policy schemes or social campaigns for women’s rights. At present, the government's goals concerning women are articulated using indirect means. Publications from government organizations such as the ALCW instrumental for this end.

**Zhang Yanhong: Campaigning for Women Laborer's Protection**

In a short feature on the ACWF website, Editor Sun Xi commends the director of the Mediation and Arbitration Management Section under the Huizhou Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau in Guangdong Province. With such a weighty title, Zhang Yanhong seems to have a job with a lot of responsibility and this 2013 article details various instances when she personally helped female workers during their “three special periods” of pregnancy, post-childbirth, and breastfeeding. In difficult cases involving female workers and their employers, Zhang serves as a
mediator, making women aware of their rights as workers and helping all involved parties to reach an agreement.\textsuperscript{38}

This article achieves what the white papers did not; it talks about women's actual efforts to protect their interests. Furthermore, the tie between women's experiences and administrative bodies is evident here. From the government standpoint, this article achieves two goals: it showcases the success of official channels in dealing with actual problems that women workers face and it upholds a model woman, Zhang Yanhong, in her service to the women in Guangdong province. The author wrote that since 2010, Zhang's department handled “358 collective dispute cases and helped 592 female workers with a mediation rate of above 45 percent.”\textsuperscript{39} These kind of figures are no small feat to accomplish within a province and the article repeatedly brings up the number of women Zhang helped in certain years to emphasize that fact. From there, the article addresses Zhang's personal characteristics of “honesty and patience” that make her success possible. According to the author, “In the arbitration process, she [Zhang] often soothes the women and helps them choose the best legal means to safeguard their interests.”\textsuperscript{40} This description shares the same idea about women serving as mediators and peacekeepers proposed in the first white paper. The same feminine quality that supposedly leads women to settle disputes among neighbors and reform inmates is praised in this article.

Zhang could have been the kind of woman referred to in the previous white papers. Her selflessness and the widespread benefit of her work highlights all the positives of the government she works for. As a public figure, Zhang devoted her life to improve her local community and she is clearly spoken about as a high-achieving member of a group. In emphasizing her patience and soothing capabilities, the article writer seems to make her feminine qualities, qualities very different from those

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
associated with masculinity, central to her work. This article portrays Zhang as a public figure, local heroines, group members, people very different from men, and people who are a part of the status quo.

**Xiao Meili: A Young Feminist's Journey**

Domestic violence and sexual assault threaten not only women in China but also women in the rest of the world. The government naturally has an interest in promoting the work of such women—especially if they promote gender equality in a way that does not threaten the status quo. The fusion of feminism and Marxist theories of women is something that the ACWF has endorsed since the 1990’s. An ACWF writer, Sophia Zhu, interviewed Xiao Meili about her career as a feminist in China after her barefoot Long March from Beijing to Guangzhou to raise awareness of sexual assault in China. The interview dealt with Xiao's life and work as a feminist in China. As a student at the Communication University of China in Beijing, Xiao was able to make the connection between feminism and her personal experiences as a girl. Since then, she has graduated from college and has continued to demonstrate her commitment to feminism by cutting all of her hair, using men's toilets, and carrying out the highly publicized 'Long March'.

While Xiao did send letters to local governments and education departments in all of the cities she passed in her march, the bulk of her work engages ordinary citizens. As stated in the interview, Xiao Meili wants to “attract people's attention” with her activities rather than to change policy. Because of this, the internet has been an asset to her work in garnering attention, but it has been a hindrance as well. Xiao says, “There are already people on the Internet who have called me a traitor, and a pawn funded by foreign organizations.” This characterization of Xiao is important to her identity because it shows the distance between her intentions and society's attitudes about feminism. Assertions by Xiao’s detractor that she is aligned with foreign forces are not unfounded. The brand of feminism that

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41 Hershatter, *Women in China’s*, 100.
43 Ibid.
often finds purchase in the media is one that is rooted in western notions of gender, and Xiao makes no secret of being inspired by popular feminist works like *The Second Sex*, a 1949 work by French Existentialist, Simone de Beauvoir. But at the same time she also talks about making feminism familiar to more people in China as she continues her work. She spends a lot of time explaining her ideas about feminism in personal conversations and in talks and seminars. In this way, the people she comes in contact with come to understand that feminism can have a rightful place in Chinese society.

Although her media presence is small, she is able to bring attention to women's causes with every person to whom she reaches out. In response to her critics who say that she is seeking self-promotion, Xiao says that “I did all this to draw attention to the issues itself, not to me.” With that statement, Xiao paints a picture of herself as an unsung hero who is truly dedicated to the cause of gender equality in Chinese society - a young woman who regards changing the minds of people as a cause higher than changing policy. This article written about a young Chinese feminist portrays her as a public figure, a global citizen educated in western feminism, a group member who reaches out to men and women, a person who is no different from men, a person who follows the status quo by pushing for the same ideals stated in government white papers.

**Woman Touts Mistress Life Online, Courts Censure**

Compared to the selflessness of women like Zhang Yanhong and Xiao Meili, the subject of this next article deviates sharply into the realm of a self-absorbed blogger. Her story, told in a less than objective light, is held up as a cautionary tale in this government-sanctioned forum. Editor Zhu Hong translates an article originally published in *China Daily* that discusses the online activities of one female Shenzhen netizen named A Zhen. The article opens with a description of A Zhen's posts on a popular Chinese website where she talks about her life as a mistress. According to the article, A Zhen's online contributions include provocative pictures as well as salacious details about her life.

44 Ibid.
A Zhen writes very candidly in her posts about her experiences living in Shenzhen. She claims that she is originally from the countryside and that her current circumstances are based on luck. She says, “Deprived of a good education, I am, fortunately bestowed with both youth and beauty, which has enabled me to live a better life.” But despite her natural gifts, A Zhen still finds that her life presents many challenges. She says that she writes what she does online because she feels misunderstood as a mistress. Whatever strife she experiences in her life comes from feeling ostracized by society.

What is more interesting than her content is the author's response to A Zhen's activities. Media bias is present in every publication, but in this article explicitly and implicitly upholds A Zhen as an individual who does not follow the official rhetoric regarding women or the common good. In this way, a disapproving tone pervades the article. For the people reading this article, this affect cannot easily be overlooked. The author writes: “A small number of netizens showed understanding and sympathy while a greater number expressed doubts and disdain.” Readers of this statement might question whether it reflects public opinion or means to dictate public opinion. Analysis in the second chapter shows that netizens do hold mistresses in high disdain and this particular article makes clear that the government’s position is the same. In closing the article, the author cites Zhong Yaoqi, a sociologist from Chongqing Municipal Academy of Social Science. Zhong writes, “[A Zhen's posts] lie[s] in the collapse of the social moral system, which has been afflicted with so many ills that views and behaviors of all kinds are understood and supported.”

The white papers written about women do not shy away from charging women with moral and social responsibilities in society. And mistresses, with not only their private activities but also their willingness to disclose their relationships to the public, pose a serious threat to the ideal image of

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
womanhood and the social stability that image is supposed to ensure. Talk about mistresses and the men who enjoy their company dominates online public forums and the ACWF website had countless articles featuring mistresses, cheating husbands, and wives who want to keep their husbands from straying. Clearly, the matter of mistresses, with the help of the internet, has changed from a private indiscretion to a public issue. Perhaps the government, in seeking to minimize the threat to stability, wants people to believe that this public issue represents a crisis of morality and public welfare which would stigmatize mistresses and cheating husbands and would hopefully curtail such behavior. This article portrays A Zhen as a private mistress and a local citizen of a big Chinese city. She is an individual who should follow the status quo, but because of her scandalous sex life and her willingness to document online, she is harshly criticized. She is different from men and alienated from women in this article, even set up as an adversary of married women.

**Government's views on Chinese womanhood: A contextual analysis of 5 primary sources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Public/Private</th>
<th>Global/Chinese</th>
<th>Group/Individual</th>
<th>Similar to men/ Different from men</th>
<th>In the status quo/ Outside of the status quo</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Situation of Chinese Women</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Similar to men</td>
<td>In</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Equality &amp; Women's Development</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Similar to men</td>
<td>In</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhang Yanhong</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Different from men</td>
<td>In</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiao Meili</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Similar to men</td>
<td>In</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistress Courts Censure</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Different from men</td>
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These 6 sources represent a variety of narratives of Chinese women endorsed by the government. Despite the different backgrounds that the women had, the articles shared some major similarities. By and large, these sources portrayed women as public role models, global citizens,
members of a group, people who could be similar to or different from men depending on the situation, and people who operated within the status quo. But there are some notable exceptions to this perception, however, and most of them revolve around mistress A Zhen.

A Zhen was also the only source that addressed women in private, individual roles and her identity revolved around her relationship with the opposite sex. What goes on in the home and in romantic and sexual relationships mostly falls out of the legal jurisdiction of most provincial courts, but because well-governed social morality has been and continues to be a prerogative of the Chinese government, the private roles occupied by women are subject to judgment bordering on proscription. But in reformed China the government does not have the control that it once did over public rhetoric. Through publicizing of such stories on the internet, the government can suggest what a woman should do and how she should think, but more often than not, these articles say what women should not do and what sort of treatment they should not be subjected to as citizens.

Aside from A Zhen, Zhang Yanzhong was also viewed in a local context. Once again, the contrasting characterization puts A Zhen in a very poor light. One was a local hero fighting a valiant fight on the behalf of other female workers and the other was a symbol of womanhood being corrupted by the temptations of a big city. The sources analyzed in this chapter featured mostly women in a globalized, group context. It is no surprise that the government wants to uphold those women who benefit the government domestically and internationally by working for the common good and giving the government reason to compare its human rights track record to other countries. A Zhen and Zhang Yanhong are both local figures, but only one of them is championed as an ideal woman.

The woman who is A Zhen’s opposite in every category is Xiao Meili. Xiao Meili is college educated, self-employed, and not afraid to challenge people's, not the government's, perception. The things she fights for: equality between genders, is well within the goals articulated in the white papers on women. She poses no threat to the social order articulated by the government. In fact, the article written on her aligns with the two white papers in every category. A Zhen challenges the example set
by the white papers at every opportunity. She wants people to think differently about mistresses and is using her own life examples to have her readers understand her better. She is not college educated and she is not a dutiful wife or a mother. She claims ownership of her struggles and positive attributes, not for the good of the many but for her own benefit. Because she provides a plausible counter narrative to the stipulations reinforced by the government, her posts are deemed threatening.

In most of its policies and campaigns since the 1980s, the government promotes economic development, technological growth, and cultural progression, and it does this by ensuring social stability. Female identity is, in large part, a tool used both to symbolize positive changes in Chinese society and reinforce ideals of model citizenship. The most important features of female identity revealed in this chapter are women as members of a larger group of Chinese citizens who at times can be distinctly female and can also stand in solidarity with men. In those areas where they are distinctly female, women have responsibilities as members of society to serve others publicly and maintain stability in their families. They also are able to share their female identity with women around the world and at the same time follow the status quo in Chinese society.
Chapter 2: How Society Views Women

Observations of online public opinion polls show that public discourse on women in China includes a few heavily debated topics, some of which were discussed in the previous chapter: conspicuous consumption, mistresses, prostitution, proper techniques and philosophies for raising children, and love and sex in relationships. These topics deal with the issues that Elisabeth Croll and Gail Hershatter identified as being salient for women living in China's modern era. In fact, Hershatter suggests that in modern China, the norm-dictating force in Chinese society is not government, but globalization and the effect is has had on women is both positive and negative.\(^4\) In public roles, women are empowered as consumers but they must also grapple with external pressures like prostitution and extra-marital affairs. In private roles, women must still ask themselves the same questions that their grandmothers did in the republican era when it comes to marrying and raising a family. What does it mean to be a modern Chinese mother and wife? Should women cleave to tradition in the home or try to forge a new path? And is that new path a western one or a distinctly Chinese one?

These polls show that in these modern issues the distinction between right and wrong is not always as clear as government publications would led people to believe and there are netizens who are willing to challenge the gender status quo from their keyboards. However, the majority of votes, sometimes won by very slim margins, usually aligned with the interests of the government to use women to promote a harmonious and wholesome society. The diverging opinion is that more netizens accept traditional ideas of love, marriage, and raising children except when it comes to prostitution.

On the microblogging site, 网易微博 (wangyi weibo), netizens debate current topics with the understanding that while these topics pertain specifically to women in some ways, in other ways,

they have broader implications on society as a whole. I chose the topics based on their similarity to
topics discussed in the previous chapter and on a moderate to high level of participation. All of the
debates were fairly recent, they all took place after 2013. I avoided trying to make distinctions
between the kinds of netizens participating in the topics and instead focused on the questions and
comments posted and the number of votes.

The topics are framed in a very limited way; each debate only has two sides to argue from
and there is no direct interaction between the two sides. Within each side people can comment on the
question and these comments can be voted for or against by other netizens. Like any online
comments section, some of the debates in this forum are volatile. The way the debates are framed as
well as the anonymity of the internet encourage netizens to react personally to the topic at hand and
gives them the power to pass judgment freely. For the purposes of defining Chinese womanhood, this
chapter will focus on those opinions expressed by the majority in these online debates. More weight
will be given to the top commenters in analyzing these debates given the assumption that the top
comments were voted up the most by netizens. The numerical results of each debate are synthesized
in pie charts.

Mistresses

Extra-marital affairs is an issue that concerns many women whether they be established
middle-aged wives or young single women trying to decide how to best spend their time. One public
opinion poll shows that professional mistresses receive disdain for being in an illicit affair, but also
gain some sympathy for being in a presumably monogamous and romantic relationship.

From July 2013- December 2014, some 636 netizens on weibo debated whether or not
mistresses (also known as the little third (小三, xiao san)) were generally deserving of forgiveness.
The results are as follows:

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The top commenter for the minority says: “I have never understood, what have mistresses done wrong? Is it wrong to love? Do married men have a patent to protect? Then how many years does this patent last? A lifetime? This might be too cruel? Only slaves last a lifetime.” A man expresses this defensive viewpoint. The top commenter in the majority exclaims: “I truly don't understand. What dignity do mistresses have to cry about love? Your father lies next to your mother, then a woman comes and shouts “I f****** love your father” and then robs your family. Will you still continue to celebrate them? I do not hate them, but men need to have a bottom line. Mistresses harm middle-aged women, and we all know that middle-aged women are volatile.” The fact that such an accusatory and threatening comment was the top one suggests that many netizens have strong negative feelings when it comes to women who choose to date married men. The comments show that this is especially true for women.

Like a lot of discussions that take place on the internet, the way that this debate is framed is accusatory and polarizing. The netizens who respond to this can only defend these women's sex lives or personally attack them as sluts. Asking whether or not women who sleep with married men deserve forgiveness presupposes that they committed a moral offense for which society can pass judgment on them. Those who refuse to forgive mistresses for violating the established family

\[\text{Do Mistresses Deserve Forgiveness?}\]

\[\text{Mistresses deserve forgiveness: 196, 31%} \]

\[\text{Mistresses are sluts: 440, 69%} \]

\[\text{196, 31%} \]

\[\text{440, 69%} \]

\[50 \text{ Ibid.} \]

\[51 \text{ Ibid.} \]

\[52 \text{ Ibid.} \]
structure are many and unrestrained in their attack. Those who choose to sympathize with mistresses must do so defensively. Not surprisingly, the same strong views against women who challenge sexual norms expressed in the article on mistress A Zhen are echoed in this discussion and the consensus is firmly planted in this side of the argument. This public opinion poll portrays women in the privacy of their sex lives. They are local citizens because their actions ultimately harm other Chinese families. This post adheres to the status quo because it supports the idea that mistresses destabilizing family life is unacceptable. Mistresses are portrayed as individuals whose actions alienate them from men as well as women.

**Conspicuous consumption**

The offenses of the young woman discussed in the next debate do not victimize families in the same way that mistresses' actions do, but for many netizens, they symbolize the ills of a society gripped by materialism. From June 2013 to July 2014, some 1239 netizens participated in a public opinion poll where they debated whether or not Guo Meimei (郭美美) should show off her wealth. Guo Meimei is a 23 year old woman who earned nearly 2 million followers online by sharing pictures of her expensive wardrobe, flashy apartment, and trips abroad—all financed, she claimed, by working for the Red Cross. Later, it was revealed that she was dating a married man who worked with the charity organization. Notably, her background and online narrative share many similarities with A Zhen, the young woman discussed in the first chapter who chronicled her experiences as the mistress of a rich man, and just like A Zhen, there are many netizens who disapprove of Guo Meimei and attack her online. She has garnered a lot of negative attention, especially after her arrest in July 2014 for betting in the World Cup. Naturally, her rise as a 'professional mistress' and subsequent fall as a convict make her a very popular topic. The close results of this debate are as follows:53

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The top commenter in the majority says, “Guo Meimei's luxurious birthday party on the evening of the 15th continues to provoke outrage. Guo Meimei took up the entire bar to celebrate her birthday, in the background the words ‘Happy Birthday Guo Meimei’ were written in large characters, the scene was full of people. She wore sexy clothes and on weibo she posted pictures of herself half-naked with her Hermes bag. One netizen joked: No wonder the soccer team lost last night, they were keeping up with Guo Meimei's birthday. This observation received two likes.”\textsuperscript{54} In contrast, the top commenter in the minority says: “So what if Guo Meimei shows off her wealth, you still can spend your money any way you please. As of right now, we still have no absolute proof that her money came from illegal activities. She is still a child and while showing off her wealth is somewhat inappropriate, to denounce her on such a large scale shows a blind, hateful mob of netizens. Everyone go ahead and leave her alone.”\textsuperscript{55}

In this case, netizens have a person to identify with as they form an opinion, whereas in the previous debate they were commenting on the actions of a general group of women. As much as netizens scorn Guo Meimei for her online antics, there are also netizens willing to defend her actions on several grounds or at least acknowledge the objective harmlessness of them. The comments in this debate show that this topic is closely tied into a greater discourse on wealth inequality. Although

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
economic growth rates have steadily increased in the last 40 years, the income inequality has also risen to alarming figures. It is estimated that a third of the country's wealth is concentrated in 1% of the population which puts the Gini Coefficient at 0.73.\footnote{Johnathan Kaiman, “China gets richer but more unequal”, The Guardian, July 2014, from http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/28/china-more-unequal-richer} This stark inequality in wealth is no doubt felt by citizens in China and Guo Meimei, by flaunting her possessions and status as a blessed member of the upper class on social media, not only capitalizes on the wide gulf between the haves and have-nots for internet fame but also makes herself a target for people's scorn.

Those who speak out most strongly against Guo Meimei are criticizing those things that she represents: the abuses and recklessness of the young, sexually liberated, wealthy elite. This public opinion polls portrays Guo Meimei as a public internet celebrity. Her notoriety is based on her individualistic mindset and her aspirations to live as a starlet out-of-touch with the regular Chinese person. The majority of netizens uphold the status quo by criticizing her lifestyle. She emphasizes her differences from men.

**Prostitution**

In the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, adopted on April 3, 1992, Chapter 6, Article 37 states: “It is prohibited for anyone to organize, force, seduce, shelter or introduce a woman to engage in prostitution or employ or shelter a woman engaged in obscene activities with others.”\footnote{Elisabeth Croll, (1988), Appendix II of Changing Identities of Chinese Women, London and New Jersey: Hong Kong University Press, 189.} The way the law is written here, prostitution is not specifically defined and thus there is much room for individuals to engage in sexual activity and still receive compensation. Professional mistresses are just one example of getting around this law.

There are no exact figures about how many people work as prostitutes in China, but as this public opinion polls shows, prostitution in some form or another is unavoidable in China and the overwhelming consensus is that legalizing it would be beneficial for everyone involved. For netizens
to condone a highly stigmatized and unsavory occupation for women, which in many cases harms their health and safety, directly opposes many of the ideals set forth by the government. One could argue that with legalization of prostitution, women engaged in sex work could enjoy legal protection, but based on the documents that the government has published on the equality of the sexes, there is not much of an incentive for the government to expend resources on this initiative.

From June 2013 to November 2014, some 23,413 netizens debated whether or not prostitution should be legalized. Of all the debates, this one had the highest number of participants and a large margin of majority. It is also noteworthy that the top two commenters clearly identify as male in their profiles. The results of the debate are as follows:§8

The top commenter in the majority says, “I do not think that legalizing prostitution will morally bankrupt this society. Those societies in western countries where prostitution is legalized do not suffer from worse social morals than we do. Honestly, I would think that those countries like ours that prohibit prostitution have many moral problems in our societies.”§9 The top commenter in the minority says, “We definitely cannot place sex in the same category as the instinct to eat or drink. The issue of desire is connected to family harmony, social stability, the improvement and continuation of human civilization, and it must be subject to strict legal and ethical constraints.”§0

§9 Ibid.
§0 Ibid.
In this debate, the clear majority favors the legalization of prostitution. The issue of prostitution is a complex one in China because while it is illegal, it is ubiquitous and many women find themselves forced into the trade by persuasive and intimidating pimps and the lure of ample monthly earnings. The sex ratio imbalance in China also means that the surplus of single adult men increases the demand for female sex workers. For many Chinese people, prostitution is synonymous with social decay and, more importantly, government corruption with many officials, local police forces, and high-ranking party members patronizing unofficial brothels and/or willing to look the other way most of the time.  

Whether or not a netizen agrees with the legalization of prostitution, he or she is likely to address the moral question surrounding the practice as well as the way prostitution is handled in other countries. In China, the law is written to punish sex workers and those who employ them, but most netizens, instead of actively condemning prostitution, condone it as a necessary evil that is best dealt with transparently rather than continuing to criminalize the actions of prostitutes. In this way, China can follow the example of other countries that do not legislate morality. This debate portrays women’s bodies as a public service. Many netizens expressed the idea that Chinese prostitutes should be given the same protections as prostitutes in other countries which makes them global figures. This debates addresses prostitutes as members of a group who are deserving of recognition and protection. Prostitutes are different from men-no one ever suggests that men could be prostitutes- and they are not part of the status quo.

Love versus Sex

Based on the previous debates, there are clearly many women in China who, whether by necessity or by choice, do not find themselves in a stable home and family situation. The government

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upholds women as dedicated workers, competent mothers, and loving wives. From a public standpoint, it is easy to condemn mistresses, prostitutes, and social media starlets for disrupting social order, but it is significantly more difficult to pass judgment on women who, for whatever reason, do not make marriage and motherhood a priority. Getting married and having children continue to be highly valued functions in Chinese society, but what most of these polls show is that at the individual level, it is not necessarily a strong mandate.

From June 2013 to August 2014, some 1424 netizens debated whether trial marriage was primarily about sex or love. This debate defined trial marriage (试婚) as men and women cohabiting before marriage. Whereas the majority of commenters in the previous debate were men, women were very opinionated on this topic. The results of the debate are as follows:62

Both top commenters in this debate clearly identify as women in their profiles. The top commenter in the majority says: “To try ass, isn't that like thinking life is like returning to a mother's womb? Where else can one have so much leeway? Trial marriages are only an excuse used by people who are unwilling to be responsible, to try this and that, it is just like going to the supermarket and shamelessly eating free food and then after one is full not pay the bill. People who abandon people after sex. I say: This is inappropriate.”63 The top commenter in the minority says, “#before marriage

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63 Ibid.
must be trial marriage. Before cohabitation, you should check for HIV; in fact, cohabitating easily filters out gay men because 'the body is the most honest'. In a sex life, you can judge whether or not a man has passion towards your body and it is easy to judge whether or not a man is interested in women.\(^6^4\)

Among opinion polls in this study, this one had the third highest number of participants and women featured heavily in this debate. In Mao's era, cohabitation was not a feasible option for women. But now, women have to decide for themselves whether or not to live with their partners and in making that decision, they are thinking about the long-term implications it would have on their relationship. Even though the question is framed in terms of love v. sex, most netizens only discuss sex and do not bring up love at all. Thus, romantic relationships can be viewed as an exchange. The majority posits that women who choose to live with their partners before marriage are unwisely forfeiting their companionship and not getting the benefits that would come in a marriage in return.

But on the other hand, some netizens are able to see the benefits of cohabitation and value them more than a formal marriage. The goal may be to eventually get married, but cohabitation can be seen as a smart way to start such a long-term commitment. This side of the debate also reveals some anxiety women might have about sexually transmitted diseases and marrying closeted gay men that makes cohabitation the preferred option. Perhaps closeted gay men are seen as obstacles to a stable family life in the same way that mistresses are by marriage-oriented women. Despite these considerations, the large majority deems women as a monolith in their desire to be, not just in a committed monogamous relationship, but to be wives. In this discussion of the private sphere, women are Chinese citizens who defy the global trends of cohabitation in favor of more family-centric values. Women also follow the status quo and emphasize their separate position relative to men.

\(^{64}\) Ibid.
Birthing Children

The next debate is an example of tradition and modernity clashing which forces new mothers to make decisions regarding the health of their families. There is no one single indisputable source of wisdom regarding childbirth, but those practices that mothers used to adhere to without question are now up for debate among netizens who did not grow up with siblings and are starting to have children of their own. This debate pits Chinese traditional medicine against Western science and challenges netizens to defend one and dismiss the other.

Article 8 of the 1988 Regulations Governing Labor Protection for Female Staff and Workers states: "The period of maternity leave for female staff and workers shall be 90 days, of which 15 days are leave prior to delivery. Those who have a difficult labor should be given 15 additional days of leave." That is what is legally allowed to women in the workplace after giving birth, but aside from what the law states, some Chinese women adhere to the rules of confinement directly after giving birth. When mothers 坐月子 (zuo yuezi), they spend 30 days after birth in their homes avoiding bathing, drinking warm water, and eating bland food for the purposes of restoring the balance of yin and yang in the body. Confinement comes from centuries-old tenants of Chinese medicine and is still practiced by new mothers today. But with the emphasis that modernity places on scientifically-sound childcare techniques, this time-honored tradition has been called into question.

From July 2013 to July 2014, some 5133 netizens debated whether or not women should confine themselves after birth. The results are as follows:

The top commenter for the majority, who identifies as a woman, says, "Birth, even today when medicine and technology is so developed, presents risks that women still cannot overcome. For women, it is a matter of life and death. Because in the stages of pregnancy and postpartum, women are all faced with health threats, especially in the month after birth, and it cannot be overlooked that they need to recover their energy in the critical moment. Confinement is not just the wisdom of the people, but it is also a practice advocated by modern medicine." The top commenter in the minority says, "There is no such thing as confinement. In the hospital the day after getting surgery you can walk around anywhere, and then three days later you are discharged. Then you can normally conduct your public and private business. Wait until the stitches need to be removed before going back to the clinic."

With a difference of 2523 votes between the two sides, the majority is clear in this debate. When it comes to public perception, the wisdom of traditional Chinese medicine wins out over modern skepticism. There is no way to know whether or not confinement actually protects the vulnerable health of mothers, but the majority of participants in this debate seem to think so. Trusting those practices that previous generations of Chinese women have trusted is a sign that netizens are more apt to accept tradition over any scientific skepticism. The wording of the question intends to force participants to briefly consider such practices in a negative light, or at the very least to question

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68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
their effectiveness. But netizens responded with a clear rejection of those viewpoints that abandon the tried and true rules of confinement. This debate portrays women as defenders of a distinctly Chinese postpartum practice that takes place in the privacy of the home. Women are members of a group of mothers who value tradition and their roles are different from fathers. The voters in this debate uphold the status quo.

Raising Children

This next debate combines the topics of conspicuous consumption and raising children. From October 2013 to November 2014, some 340 netizens debated whether or not girls should be raised in material or spiritual wealth. This debate echoes the discussion on women who indulge in conspicuous consumption, but unlike the stigma in that instance, this debate shows that many netizens are willing to excuse parents who raise their girls to enjoy the finer things in life. This forum claims that Chinese grandparents are accustomed to raising girls in wealth and boys in poverty and questions whether or not this practice should continue with smaller families in modern China. The results of the debate are as follows:70

![](Should Girls Be Spoiled with Wealth.png)

The top commenter in the majority who identified as male says, “It is necessary for girls to be raised in privilege? My little girl is a princess. There are too many outside temptations, there is only

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me to tell her what these temptations are. So when these temptations do appear before her, she will not know that these are temptations. Daughters are the loves of their father's lives. From an emotional standpoint, I want to give my daughter the best of everything.” The other top commenter in the minority says, “Raising girls in riches will give them a sense of confidence and elegance, and after they grow up they will not easily be harmed by irrational things in society and lose control and do stupid things. If the family is a good environment, then they might as well let her experience the bustling world. Her horizons will be opened and she will become much smarter. She will distinguish between vanity and culture. If you raise sons in poverty, from a young age they will be able to endure suffering, and then after growing up they will have the confidence to handle adult social issues.”

Young Chinese parents, who did not have any experiences taking care of younger siblings, are now pressured to do all of the “right” methods and read up on the “right” philosophies when it comes to raising children. So it is not surprising that internet forums are used as spaces for netizens to compare opinions and come to a consensus on raising children. And while this debate has the smallest number of participants, the narrow gap of 4 votes separating the two sides is a point of particular interest. Clearly, this debate could have gone either way. A contributing factor to the ambivalence towards this topic quite possibly could have come from the vagueness of the phrase “raised in wealth”. Even the forum allows that this idea could come in many forms and for the people participating, this idea clearly does have different connotations. Whether or not a netizen votes for or against raising girls in riches, all comments reflect netizens consideration of girls' futures. They all discuss what could/would happen to women who were girls raised in riches and what sort of qualities they might possess. In thinking of the long-term implications, some netizens envisioned a “rational, graceful woman” who has “self-respect, self-love, and ideology” while others mentioned women

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71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
who were “unruly and arrogant”.

Overall, the majority portrays girls as private figures—daughters who are the apples of their parent’s eyes. It also supports a distinctly Chinese philosophy which says that what is good for one girl should be good for the entire sex. This ideology delineates the treatment that boys and girls receive at home and upholds the status quo by promoting tried and true parenting practices.

**How Society Views Women: A contextual and quantitative analysis of 6 sources**

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The internet discussions of these topics reflects a female identity in a more private, local context that emphasizes group over individuals and gender differences over similarities and follows the status quo. This is different from the government narrative that emphasized the public and global aspects of femininity and characterized men and women as similar and different depending on the circumstances. Overall, these public opinion polls show that society views women in a ways that are more contentious than the government and it values traditional binary gender constructions more than the government's tendency to highlight the similarities between men and women.

All of these topics and the way that they are presented to netizens exemplifies certain assumptions that match up closely with the ideal woman defined in the previous chapter. The consensus

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73 Ibid.
suggests that women have responsibilities as dutiful mothers, daughters, and wives and those who do not follow through in these responsibilities (like mistresses, prostitutes, and social media starlets) should be held liable by society for their transgressions. It also suggests that women should value male companionship and strive to support themselves, their families, and their communities. Those things that are expected to disrupt a stable nuclear family structure are often criticized by the majority with one exception: the support for the legalization of prostitution. This support is in direct contrast to how mistresses are viewed. In every category, mistresses are portrayed differently from prostitutes, even though one could make the argument that, in effect, their different behaviors could potentially achieve the same affect in disrupting family harmony. But whereas prostitution is seen as a necessary evil for all involved, affairs between married men and single women are largely rejected on moral grounds.
Chapter 3: How Chinese Women Bloggers View Themselves

The conclusions in the first two chapters point to a consensus among government rhetoric and public opinion in defining women’s identity in terms of group identity and following the status quo. In articulating their own identity, the results show that women bloggers are more individual and can be equally within or without the status quo. In comparing the results of this chapter with the two previous, women blogger’s identities are more related to the narrative provided by the government in terms of public roles and global perspectives. However, this chapter shows much more diversity and ambivalence in identity than in other chapters and highlights some interesting comparisons between bloggers.

For those women bloggers who boldly adopt the title of political activist or social critic, I expected to see clearly stated issues of contention, goals, and methods of activism in their blogs. What I saw in the results was a difference in opinion and approach to activism among educated, socially conscious women bloggers that was based in a generational gap. And for those bloggers who are less concerned with political posturing but still express frustrations and desires common to all women in their personal posts, I expected to see some commonality in the ways that they presented themselves and the values that they espoused. What I saw in the results was a wide gulf in the personal presentation of netizen response to two widely known women. These unexpected differences in identity show that although all women bloggers are in part influenced by government and society, they still exercise considerable control over their individual image in modern China.

In selecting sources to analyze, I chose three different posts for each blogger. For the sake of making comprehensive conclusions about a blogger’s personal identity, I decided to categorize each of the four bloggers, rather than individual posts using my methodological framework. In some cases I grouped several posts together and considered them as a whole because of their similar content. I wanted posts that were recent, so I chose to limit my search to the first page of every blog and I also
paid attention to the number of likes, comments, and reblogs that each post received. I did not necessarily favor more popular posts over others, but I wanted to make sure that I got three posts with diverse content that had a wide circulation. I chose four bloggers to follow, two of whom, Guo Meimei and Xiao Meili, have been introduced in previous paragraphs. These women all have different backgrounds, interests, ages, and level of internet following.

李银河 Li Yinhe is a retired researcher and professor of sociology and women’s studies. She attended Shanxi University and the University of Pittsburgh, served as editor of Guangming Daily, taught at Peiking University, and researched at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences at Beijing. In 1999, the English-language news magazine Asiaweek named her one of China’s most influential people. In her blog, she critically discusses a variety of subjects: sex, gender, love, spirituality, morality, and law and how they impact society. Out of all the bloggers I surveyed, Li Yinhe posted the most regularly and the majority of her posts were text based rather than image based.

**Adultery and Qualifications:** In one of her blog posts on Oct. 31, Li posted a link to something she wrote on her microblogging site dealing with morality and government officials. This piece was titled “Adultery and Qualifications” and in it, she takes a critical view of people’s tendency to equate moral uprightness with political qualifications when it comes to discussing government officials.

According to Li, a person’s political qualifications have no connection to their moral or immoral behavior and between the two, political qualifications should be the main concern of citizens. She goes on to say that that the people who call those government officials who do not exhibit model morality hypocrites are engaging in a backwards way of thinking that dates back to China’s imperial dynasties. She writes: “The biggest problem with this approach is that moral uprightness does not necessarily mean that a person will have policy-making talent. So when a
person’s political talent is failing, they are sometimes called a hypocrite…” In this piece, she makes a strong argument against what she deems an old belief that is characteristic of Chinese history. She compares political attitudes in China with other countries and makes the claim that China has to evolve in order to progress in the world.

**Born-after-’95-Sister-Mei Presented Us with a Problem but Gave Us No Solution:** In another one of her blog posts on Oct. 24, Li posted a link to her microblog where she addressed the question of temporary boyfriends and whether or not women who use the internet to acquire temporary boyfriends can be considered prostitutes. She tells the story of a female netizen who calls herself “born-after-’95-sister-mei” who announced her plans to travel around China by spending the night with a temporary boyfriend in every city that she traveled to in exchange for payment of her travel expenses. In response to this story, Li states that this netizen was born in the right era for this kind of behavior. According to Li, 10-20 years ago, this kind of arrangement would definitely not have been made in a public forum and it could have put Sister Mei in prison because of the law defining all sex outside of marriage as hooliganism. After 1997, the law changed, and with it, attitudes around casual sex have also clearly changed. Li states clearly that she does not view this arrangement as immoral because Sister Mei is not married. But she says the arrangement does highlight some problems within Chinese society and law surrounding prostitution.

Li argues that it would be extremely difficult to split hairs between a man soliciting a prostitute and a woman receiving gifts from her friend. Even when looking at the amount of money going into the transaction or the time spent together, the law cannot make a clear distinction between what is innocent and what is criminal. The same situation applies to mistresses and married men. Li states that she is a strong supporter of legalizing prostitution in China and she uses this story to

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74 Li Yinhe. 李银河. (Blog). http://www.weibo.com/p/230418473d53360102v7d1
75 Li Yinhe. 李银河. (Blog). http://www.weibo.com/p/230418473d53360102v6xx
support her position. She says that the grey area in the legal code between the sex trade and friendly relations justifies the government legalizing prostitution and giving up trying to legislate morality.76 Clearly, her argument aligns closely with the majority in the debate on legalizing prostitution and she sees decriminalization as an inevitability and a necessity.

**In Response to Sexual Assault Petitions:** In one of her blog posts on Sept. 12, Li posted a link to her microblog account where she wrote an article that dealt with sex abuse petitions and how they distort society’s views of sex. She claims that sex should be viewed positively by society instead of being regarded as pernicious the way it is now. Because of this, she urges her readers to rethink petitions for ending sex abuse in schools because they assume that any sex between teachers and students should unequivocally be considered abuse. In Li’s view, these relationships should be given the benefit of the doubt: relationships between teachers and students can be consensual and this is no cause for outrage. She goes further to say that people should be protesting for comprehensive sex education in schools because the focus on rape measures in schools derails progress in educating young people in sex. And if all young people hear about sex is the violence, disease, and unintended pregnancies that can sometimes be associated with it, they will be crippled in their future relationships. She affirms her commitment, along with other feminists, researchers, and teachers, against gender-based violence, but concludes that China’s youth would be served better by a comprehensive sex education.77

Clearly, Li Yinhe is unafraid of expressing a critical, sociological perspective in an online forum. Her words do not threaten CCP standing in any major way, but they do argue for real change and a break from old ways which could mean anything from a change in laws to a change in societal attitudes. She presents herself as a woman who is a public figure with well-formed opinions on politics and morality, and as a sociologist, she is not afraid to point out the flaws present in Chinese

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76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
society compared to the other countries which means she has a global perspective. She is an individual who is comfortable expressing differences in opinion, a person no different from men, and a person willing to challenge the status quo.

肖美丽 Xiao Meili is the self-proclaimed feminist introduced in the first chapter of the paper. She calls herself the beautiful hiking feminist and her blog is mostly devoted to documenting her real-life activism and spreading the word about events started by other feminist groups. Most of her content is reblogged from other sites and blogs and the background on her main page has what looks like hand drawn illustrations of condoms, bloody wedding dresses, hairy legs, cell phones, miniskirts, vibrators, and the naked female form - all things she associates with feminism.

**Prevention of Sexual Assault on School Campuses in China:** In six different posts all between September 5 and September 17, Xiao reblogged a post by another blogger named the feminist voice. The original post was a petition against sexual abuse of middle school girls. According to the original post, in four days this petition had 105 signatures of primary and secondary school teachers and it was then sent to government officials across the country to gain greater attention. She tagged several other netizens in her posts and asked her followers to sign and reblog it. The original post was reblogged 114 times. In the last post she thanked her followers for reblogging the post and reblogged the feminist voice’s post where she talked about Xiao Meili circulating the petition among 31 provinces as part of the anniversary of her march from Beijing to Guangzhou.78

It was challenging to surmise Xiao’s specific involvement with this petition because rather than referring to herself in her posts, she reblogged posts from the feminist voice with very little of her own words. At first, I thought that she was merely reblogging the post as an interested netizen bystander, but by the last two posts I realized that Xiao was involved in this petition in real life and

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worked with the feminist voice to start and circulate this petition. I take her decision to reblog the feminist voice to mean her desire to remove herself from her actions as much as possible. She lets other people’s words about her communicate to her followers rather than to speak on her own behalf.

With this post, there is a clear divergence between Xiao Meili’s opinion and Li Yinhe’s in regards to sexual assault on campuses. Xiao has dedicated her career as a feminist to fighting against sexual abuse of all kinds and her efforts in this petition prove her commitment to act with the government against what she sees as a societal ill. Li, on the other hand, recognizes sexual assault as a problem, but sees ignorance and fear of sex as a much bigger problem to which sexual assault petitions contribute. Li’s solution is Chinese people demanding comprehensive sex education in schools, but she does not have any action to further this solution. Only her words, which have a larger viewership than Xiao’s does, are offered to discontented Chinese netizens. It is debatable which netizen has the more effective impact in creating change. Li who is older and more recognizable because of her credentialed career carries a lot of weight with her words in online spaces. But Xiao has youth and enthusiasm on her side and her efforts give netizens a way to participate and keeps government officials aware of the challenges that young women face.

Nandu Comments: On August 28, Xiao posted twice about a news story happening on college campuses. She reblogged a post that originated on the Nandu news blog about a sharp increase in assault cases against women in Chinese college campuses in the span of one month. The original poster dubbed this phenomenon “Black August” and concluded the blurb by saying that young women on college campuses needed to learn how to protect themselves against attackers and become more aware of their surroundings to prevent future attacks. Accompanying the text was a picture of a trampled rose laid in the dirt.

Xiao responds forcefully to this reporting of Black August: “When Ye Zhiyong died in a toilet in a school in Taiwan, they passed the Gender Equity Education Act. When three children went
missing in the US, they promoted the missing children intervention system. In contrast, in this weak country violence and injustice spawns cynicism and people are taught to only look out for themselves. Those spineless people would not dare to do anything outside of saving themselves.” In the second post she continued: “Moreover, not everyone is capable of protecting themselves in this way such as the disabled, children, the elderly, etc.” 79 Xiao is dedicated to protecting the weakest members of society and feels contempt for those who would look the other way in response to injustice. For Xiao, it is not enough to merely point out a problem and leave the solution up to the victims. She feels feel compelled to act on the behalf of every victim and she expects other people to feel the same way.

**# I Want to Talk to the World:** On December 3, Xiao reblogged a post from 麦子家 (Maizi Jia) where she and other activists interviewed staff at the Ministry of Education about preventing sexual assault on campuses after the ministry’s passing of regulations did little to slow the incidents of assault. Accompanying this post were three posed pictures of the activists and 1 picture of a map of China showing the number of sexual assault cases in each province. One of the pictures featured Xiao Meili who was styled as the woman in J. Howard Miller’s “We Can Do It!” poster. This poster was first published during World War II and is synonymous with modern western feminism. 80

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
Everything about the first image, the color scheme, outfit, wording, and pose is derivative of the second. It is no secret that Xiao Meili was inspired by feminist writings and this posed picture is further evidence of this inspiration. This tie to a western movement is something that she has been criticized for in the past, but she is evidently unconcerned with this line of criticism. One could make the argument that her inspiration does not extend past the aesthetics of the modern feminist movement, but either way this picture seems to make the point that the representation of modern feminism is applicable to Chinese culture. With Xiao’s use of the phrase, 约吗 she is co-opting a popular slang term to solidify the intentional connection between western feminism and Chinese youth culture. These posts show that Xiao’s identity is accessible to young netizens, feminists, and party officials. She campaigns for change in society, but it is a change that takes place through state mechanisms, which makes her less radical than someone like Li Yinhe. Instead of parodying figures of authority, Xiao appeals to party officials to pass regulatory laws. Xiao presents herself as a young woman who is a public figure, a Chinese citizen looking to improve Chinese society, a person who often collaborates in group with other activists, a person who emphasizes the similarities between men and women, and a person who follows the status quo.

姚晨 Yao Chen is a famous actress, a goodwill ambassador to the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees, and Queen of Weibo with more followers than any other weibo user—which as of February 2015 was somewhere around 77 million followers. She uses her iPhone 5s to blog about everything from her personal life to her work with the UNHCR to current events.

A Young Mother and Cat Lover: She routinely posts pictures of her young son (whom she calls little potato) and her cat. These little snapshots give a glimpse of domestic bliss for netizens and based on the positive feedback in the comments and likes of these posts, most netizens love seeing this side of the weibo queen. For example, on October 26, she posted four pictures of herself and her son sitting on the couch watching cartoons. In all of the pictures, she was wearing a loose-fitting
fuzzy sweater with no make-up and in some pictures she and her son were making funny faces for the camera. The caption read, “Lady, when the gentlemen is focused on watching cartoons, please do not take pictures of yourself.”

This post alone got over 14,000 comments and 141,000 likes. Most commenters expressed admiration for her and commented on her son’s looks. Add to that the 34,000 likes and 6200 comments she got on pictures of her cat’s profile posted on October 8, and it is easy to understand the kind of power that she wields in her online presence. In this instance, her power is used to present a simple, uncontroversial portrayal of herself. She shows herself as a very humble woman whom netizens will identify with: she is a doting mother who loves spending time at home.

Raising Awareness: But that domestic side of Yao Chen’s life is not the only thing that she blogs about. She also blogs about various causes that she is passionate about which emphasizes her perspective as a global citizen. On Nov. 10, she reblogged some somber pictures of the civil war in Syria: wounded people, bombed buildings, and civilians roaming the streets with homemade weapons. She wrote: “Looking at these pictures makes me think of Syrian refugees this year. Each one of them is eager to stop the war and return home. What is presented in these photographs makes the dream seem more distant.”

The likes for this post were around 7,000, considerably less than those of her more lighthearted posts, but that does not stop her from continuing to post this kind of content.

On November 25, she reblogged a post by Stella McCartney featuring a photography campaign she posed for commemorating the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. She wrote: “Today is November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Please join us in raising awareness for all acts of violence against women. With these posts, Yao shows that she is a woman who cares about global affairs and, more importantly, everyday people who are the victims of war and conflict. More than that, she suggests

83 Ibid.
that everyone else should be concerned about these issues as well. She uses her platform to raise awareness and to promote the work of international organizations. One could argue that this is her job to do such things as a UN ambassador, but it is not necessarily part of her job description to blog such posts on her personal blog- a blog with 77 million followers- alongside pictures of her family. Yao makes is clear that her position at the UN is a responsibility that she takes personally and seriously.

**Hong Kong Protests:** Yao does use her platform to discuss potentially contentious topics. On September 30, she reblogged a picture of the “well-preserved” part of Hong Kong that was dated November 2012. The caption on the original post says: The favorite place of Hong Kong is the modern downtown area, but there are still many well-preserved grocery stores, most of them hidden in the alleys...Here, there is no difference, only life. [tea emoji] To add to this, Yao says: “I love Hong Kong. May it soon return to past prosperity and calm.” The response to this post was largely mixed. There were 3782 comments and 26,732 likes. Most commenters expressed support for the non-committal statement that Yao made. Some commenters attacked her personally-insulting her looks and calling her names. One commenter called her a hypocrite.

Even though her comment was very innocuous on the surface, the comments for this post reveal the contentious nature of her words. Her comment in isolation could be interpreted many ways. Just saying that she wishes for the peace of the past does not give any indication of where Yao stands in the political tension between protesting students in Hong Kong and the Hong Kong government that is closely aligned with Beijing. But the picture and the caption contained in the original post gives a clue. The original post suggests that past the surface there is no difference between Hong Kong and the mainland. This is a sentiment that would naturally upset many Hong Kong natives who believe that their culture is unique and deserving of protection against assimilation.

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84 Ibid.
into the mainland. The Beijing government has gradually signaled its intentions in regards to absorbing Hong Kong and the resulting tension makes seemingly innocent exchanges between mainlanders and Hong Kong people a high-stakes political clash. Thus, Yao who was born in Guangzhou and lives in Beijing, unobtrusively supports the Beijing Government with this post which earns her both praise and hate. This post can also be interpreted as an ode to utopianism that Guobin talked about because she contrasts the situation of Hong Kong now to the way she wishes it was-which is the pre-protest Hong Kong that resembled the mainland.

On her blog, Yao portrays herself as a woman in both the public and private sphere as an actress and as a mother. She is a global citizen who is concerned about international issues that have relevance outside of her country. She is an individual in that she presents many different sides of herself that are all earnest and uniquely her. She emphasizes her femininity- her marketable beauty and enjoyment of motherhood- as being separate from men. And she follows the status quo by using her influence to support the CCP against instability within China and seemingly perfecting the balance between caring mother and dedicated activist.

郭美美 Guo Meimei is an infamous blogger/ internet celebrity discussed in Chapter 2 who shocked and awed netizens with her conspicuous consumption and illegal activity. Luckily, even after her incarceration, her blog is still accessible so netizens can still peruse her selfies and personal observations that were all uploaded with her iPhone 5s. Whereas most of the content on the other blogs analyzed in this chapter was reblogged, most of Guo Meimei’s content was not reblogged- most of the pictures and words were her own. The background of her blog is a photo of herself in a bathing suit sitting on a boat looking at the sunset.

Sex Sells: On June 19, she posted pictures of herself in a black bustier with the caption: “Sexiness has nothing to do with the cup size [heart emoji]”85 Netizens commented on, reblogged,

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and liked this post in the thousands. Many of the commenters took the opportunity to poke fun at her. One commenter said: “Sexiness has nothing to do with you.” Another commenter, who routinely chimed in on her posts and got over two thousand likes, said: “Your chest is looking a little swollen! In my years of clinical experience, you have early stage breast cancer, because you were sexually active outside of the law….” With such a suggestive comment, Guo Meimei invites her followers to comment and show approval of her sex appeal. Despite the potential for backlash, she celebrates her figure and sexuality and uses her blog to share those aspects of herself with her followers. For most commenters, her unsubtle display of sexuality is just one of her many vices played out on her blog.

**Guo Meimei on Motherhood:** On June 19, Guo posted 4 different pictures of white, heavily tattoed men holding small children. The caption read: “I hope that in the future, there will be a cutie with her handsome baby daddy [shy emoji][shy emoji].”\(^ {86}\) This post garnered over 5,000 comments and 4,000 likes. Just like in the previous posts, most of the reactions were negative. With this post she makes her preference for foreign men clear and expresses her aspirations to be a mother to a girl someday. By doing so, she invites Chinese netizens to react personally to her desires. Even though the desire to be a mother would be something that most netizens would identify with, this post was not viewed favorably for the most part. Commenters rose to the bait and called her names and shot colorful insults her way.

**Guo Meimei’s Shoes:** On May 29, Guo posted 8 different pictures of her shoe racks. The caption read: “I have a serious shoe addiction [sweating emoji]. This is only ¼ of my shoes, it seems like I need to order a much much much bigger shoe rack [shy emoji].”\(^ {87}\) The pictures of one fraction of her shoe collection received over 5,000 comments and over 7,000 likes. Many commenters were disgusted and dismayed at this nonchalant display of excessive materialism. One commenter said: “Wow, how many men does one have to sleep with to have as many shoes as Guo Meimei? Children

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
from poor families don’t have shoes to wear.” Another netizen said: “Your sugar daddy bought those for you and it is a pity that you can’t wear them in jail.” The comments here reflect the debate about Guo Meimei in the previous chapter. Her flaunting her wealth in her blog gains her so much attention and for the most part it is negative attention from netizens who resent the stark economic inequality in China that manifests itself in the conspicuous consumption of Guo Meimei and others like her.

Whether she receives praise or criticism, Guo Meimei does not respond to her followers in any way. She continuously posted photos of herself and her possessions with glib captions up until she was incarcerated in July 2014. Her active presence is gone from the internet, but her testimonies of rampant consumerism live on. In her blog, Guo Meimei, by sharing every inane detail of her life, makes herself into a public spectacle. She is a global citizen who delights in foreign men and brand names and is seemingly out of touch with the average Chinese citizen. She is an individual whose posts always refer back to herself in some way. Someone who uses her feminine sex appeal to set herself apart from men. Someone who challenges the status quo by emphasizing material wealth over everything else which riles the sensibilities of people who cannot afford her lifestyle.

### How Chinese Women View Themselves: A contextual analysis of 4 sources

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<th></th>
<th>Public/Private</th>
<th>Global/Chinese</th>
<th>Individual/Group</th>
<th>Similar to men/ Different from men</th>
<th>In the status quo/ Outside of the status quo</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Li Yinhe</strong></td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Similar to men</td>
<td>Out</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Xiao Meili</strong></td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Similar to men</td>
<td>In</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Yao Chen</strong></td>
<td>Public and Private</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Different from men</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Guo Meimei</strong></td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Different from men</td>
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</tbody>
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88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
The results from this chapter are much less conclusive than in other chapters. According to these results, women are public, global, individual, similar to and different from men, as well as in and outside of the status quo. Based on these conflicting results, examples of women’s self-representation prove to be more diverse than government or societal representations of women and that is what I expected to find. Between the four blogs surveyed here, two loose comparisons can be made: Li Yinhe and Guo Meimei are both global individuals who are outside of the status quo and Xiao Meili and Yao Chen are both group members who are within the status quo. These pairings diverge from what I would initially expect based on what I knew about these women’s backgrounds. But it turns out that a socialite convict and a retired sociologist have more in common in terms of an identity at odds with the status quo. Xiao Meili and Yao Chen also share similarities as they actively work to improve the lives of others- Xiao focusing on young Chinese women and Yao dedicating herself to the uplift of all victims in the world. The divergent identities emerging in this chapter show that while Chinese women can find common ground in surprising ways, they ultimately cannot be reduced to essential traits and desires which is what the previous chapters suggest.
Conclusion

All three chapters show that Chinese women’s identity is exemplified in every category and occupies the full spectrum of online activism and styles of contention. In particular, the last chapter proves that women’s personal accounts defy categorization that so neatly defines government and societal rhetoric. In analyzing blogs, there are a lot of conflicting narratives that show the illusive nature of female political identity. Very personal and very public, blogs contain a wealth of information that reveals much about a person’s values, self-perceptions, relationships with others, personal goals, as well as their daily habits and physical appearance. As this paper proves, comparing such detailed personal narratives with one dimensional narratives provided by government and society presents some difficulties. But some noteworthy observations can be made in regards to how these four women bloggers share identity traits with the women presented in previous chapters. There are the heroines like hard-working Zhang Yanhong and everywoman’s humble actress and humanitarian Yao Chen. There are the villains like self-absorbed Guo Meimei and shameless A Zhen. Then there are the academic activists of the older generation such as Li Yinhe whose position relative to government rhetoric is different from up and coming feminist Xiao Meili.

In between all of these stories are nuanced narratives about women that revolve around the strife of income inequality in China. For example, Guo Meimei’s story is part of a narrative in Chinese society that young girls should be spoiled in wealth and then condemns grown women for their conspicuous consumption. Whether or not they have the money, Chinese parents can understandably still aspire to indulging their children, especially their daughters, but a woman spending lavish amounts of money on herself can only be explained through her character faults. Also, there is the idea that mistresses and other “kept women” should be shunned by society, but prostitution should still be legalized. Perhaps this idea can be explained by the reality that only the really rich can afford mistresses but every average single Chinese person seeking female
companionship must pay for a prostitute which makes prostitution not as much of a flagrantly immoral indulgence.

Aside from income inequality, attitudes about sex and marriage are another dividing line in identity formation. There are those radical women who view sex outside of marriage and female sex appeal as a natural occurrence, like Li Yinhe and Guo Meimei. There are those like Xiao Meili who view sex without commitment as a threat to the well-being of young women. And there are those who idolize and uphold marriage, and by extension, raising families like Yao Chen and surprisingly Guo Meimei. Even though her actions in real life defy traditional ideas of love and marriage, in her blog, Guo Meimei expresses her wish to be a mother someday. These varying attitudes about sex and marriage ultimately dictate the delicate balance between public and private roles for women; just as there is no right way for every woman to neatly delineate their roles as wives, mothers, and career women, there is no right way for women to express sexuality and expectations in romantic relationships.

Understanding the nuances of identity articulation for Chinese women bloggers means a deeper understanding of societal trends and responses of the political elite in China. Despite the tendency to view women as bystanders, women’s contributions to civil society cannot be ignored in modern-day China. The internet, particularly in a country as authoritatively restrictive and socially dynamic as China, has given women the platform to be present and active at every stage of civil society, no matter their ages, cities of origin, educational background, or occupation. As active contributors to an online civil society, women also have the unique history, culture, and gendered perspective to express their femininity in a way that aligns with or diverges from Confucianism, nationalism, collectivism, traditional gender roles, and conformism.

Whether women use their blogs to attract a vast audience, organize netizen collective action, self-promote, or expound upon an opinion, all women bloggers articulate their personal identity in a political way. How women intentionally position themselves amongst other netizens, other Chinese
citizens, and other women has always been a major factor in the trajectory of the nation’s history and state-building endeavors. Only time will tell the future stability of the Chinese Communist Party, and this study of women’s blogs shows that despite the prevalence of government rhetoric and societal pressure, women’s mass political participation in the future could go in a number of ways. Only one thing is certain: women, particularly women bloggers who capture the attention of wide audiences, are poised to tip the scales in whatever direction they choose.
Bibliography


