Behind the Witch-Hunting on China's New Media Platforms: Binary Gender Conflicts Brought about by the Spread of Neoliberalism

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Abstract:

With the frequent occurrence of "online witch-hunting" incidents on Chinese social media platforms, the issue of binary gender conflicts has received widespread attention, but there is still a gap in the analysis of the impact of neoliberalism on binary gender conflicts. This article analyzes and concludes that neoliberalism has led to the distortion of traditional Chinese concepts and family structure. At the same time, with the development of digital platforms, gender responsibilities have shifted. The dual effects of these two have exacerbated gender conflicts and deepened gender dilemmas. Based on this, this article proposes some suggestions to eliminate binary gender conflicts at the individual, media, and national levels: individuals should face up to the redistribution of gender responsibilities. The media should refuse to promote gender opposition. The state should establish relevant laws. Individuals, media and the state should work together to eliminate gender opposition on the Internet and create a more harmonious online environment.

Keywords: Gender conflict; witch-hunting online; Neoliberalism; digital platform

1. Introduction

In China in recent years, with the rapid development of digital platforms, a large number of "online witch hunts" have occurred. Users label and stigmatize female victims of cyber violence, creating an image of a witch and radiating this image to all women. This phenomenon has led to serious binary gender conflicts on the Chinese Internet. The public's criticism of the "witch" image mainly focuses on the issue of interest exchange in intimate relationships, which profoundly reflects the impact of neoliberalism on the ideological development of Chinese audiences and the distribution of material resources in Chinese society. This article attempts to start from the phenomenon of "online witch hunting" and explore the reasons why the development of neoliberalism and digital platforms leads to binary gender conflicts and

how to resolve binary gender conflicts.

2. Analysis of the „Witch" Image based on Case Studies

This article studies three high-profile online cases that occurred in 2023-2024. The victims of cyber violence in these three cases were all women. This article selects the two most viewed videos, 10 related rumors, and 100 most liked comments from the three cases on the Douyin and Weibo platforms for text analysis, to determine the image of "witch" constructed through social media in these three cases. The image of a witch can be seen as a form of stigmatization. The word stigma originated in ancient Greece and originally referred to a mark on the body. The reason for making such a mark is to highlight the low social status of the carrier. It is a personal characteristic that deviates from social recognition, which makes the individual regarded as a loser by society and causes the individual to suffer social humiliation [1].

The images of "witches" in online witch-hunting are often very purposeful. These purposes can be divided into two categories: the pursuit of material things, that is, the simplest desire for money and the pursuit of self-worth, and the pursuit of career and studies. Online public opinion believes that "witches" use their close relationships with men to achieve their own goals. For example, in the "Fat Cat" case, at the beginning of the case, the account "Fat Cat Sister" posted a large number of videos and chat records accusing her younger brother "Fat Cat" of being mentally controlled and defrauded by his girlfriend, which eventually led to his suicide. Some users and even public figures guided public opinion when the details of the case were still unclear, blaming the cause of Fat Cat's suicide on his girlfriend Tan. An actress also mentioned in the video she posted, "Don't let your spirit be controlled by other people's intentions." In the official notice of the Chongqing police on the case released by CCTV News on Weibo, the money transactions between the two during their relationship were mentioned several times, which indirectly shows the public's high attention to the money transactions in this case. Under this official announcement, 76% of the 100 most-liked comments still considered Tan Zhu to be a "gold digger." In the engagement rape case, the situation of the female victims is the same. After the People's Daily issued a notice, 68% of the 100 most liked comments still believed that "the price of the bride price has not been negotiated" and "women's sexual consent can be withdrawn." It can be seen that in these two cases, public opinion mainly focused on the material level. In the case of Jiang Ping, public opinion is more focused on her "falsifying grades", and there is no official conclusion on the case yet. But one rumor mentioned that "Jiang Ping had an improper relationship with her teacher and the teacher took the exam for her." Women are stigmatized as "witches" who are incapable of themselves but take advantage of men with a strong purpose.

These cases not only led to the emergence of the "witch" image that stigmatized women but also spawned large-scale "online witch hunting". Internet witch-hunting refers to a group of mainly male users who use the image of a "witch" to stigmatize the victims' supporters and other female user groups, which has caused an emotional backlash among female users, leading to the intensification of gender conflicts on the Chinese Internet. The clash of ideas among the audience on the Internet platform eventually evolved into meaningless verbal abuse and emotional catharsis. It was difficult for audiences with different ideas to reach a balanced state of mutual understanding. They simply consumed hot topics, exhausted themselves, and eliminated the true value of the discussion in the constant fermentation of emotions, which led to the inevitable "group extremism" [2]. Gender confrontation cannot promote the development of feminism in China. Instead, it weakens and emotionalizes women's voices again.

3. Causes and Harms of Binary Gender Conflicts

"Online witch hunting" can be seen as negative feedback from male users to the widespread spread of feminism on the Chinese Internet. At a deeper level, it highlights the serious binary gender conflicts on Chinese social media platforms. In addition to some men who are deeply influenced by China's long-standing patriarchal ideology and reject gender equality, more people are dissatisfied with the extreme ideas derived from the influence of neoliberalism. At the same time, the media is deeply influenced by consumerism and capital, and the images of men and women are stigmatized to varying degrees. Gender conflicts conceal the binary gender dilemma, making it impossible to resolve. In this chapter, this article will analyze the causes and harms of gender conflicts derived from the "Internet witch-hunting" phenomenon from the perspectives of ideology and material resources.

3.1 Distorted Ideology under the Influence of Neoliberalism

As China's socialist transformation continues, neoliberal ideas are also prevalent in Chinese society. The spread of this idea gradually changed the traditional Chinese family structure and also made Chinese feminist thought go to

extremes. This chapter will discuss how neoliberalism distorts traditional Chinese ideology and deepens class oppression and gender conflicts.

3.1.1 Neoliberal transformation of gender stereotypes

The term stereotype was first coined in 1922 and refers to "expectations or beliefs about characteristics associated with different groups", that is, fixed views people have about individuals or groups [3]. Since ancient times, Chinese families have followed the family concept of "men outside and women inside". Men are considered to be the source of family finances and the actual controllers of the family, while women are considered to be men's assistants, taking on the task of "supporting their husbands and raising children" and needing to have the dedication to sacrifice enjoyment for building a family. However, postfeminism has distorted the concepts of second-wave feminism, packaging female sexual objectification, self-enhancement, and consumerism as empowerment [4]. Therefore, to succeed in their careers, women need to pay more, such as improving their bodies, balancing family and career, etc. The public's stereotype of successful women has changed from simple and frugal housewives to independent and free elite mothers. Feminism driven by commercial capital also portrays men in a very elitist way, as men have social status and are particularly gentle. The public's stereotype of men has changed from a silent and hardworking head of the family to a wealthy elite who can provide valuable emotions. This makes it difficult for most men and women to meet this standard and find a partner who fits this stereotype and has led to the spread of extreme feminist and masculinist ideologies.

3.1.2 Neoliberal transformation of family structure

The division of family power structure in China can be roughly divided into two stages: the first stage is the "uterine family" based on "men outside and women inside". The second stage is the extreme heterosexual system caused by the change in social structure. In traditional Chinese culture, the concept of male superiority and female inferiority is firmly established in the various rules and regulations of patriarchal society. While constructing class hierarchy, Chinese culture has established the ontology and values of the gender order of male superiority and female inferiority. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the family structure of "men outside and women inside" is still the mainstream concept, that is, men focus on career success, while women pay more attention to family responsibilities. However, in this family power structure, Chinese women do not completely lose their voice. Chinese women take on the early education of boys in the family and use education to cultivate the

relationship between their sons and themselves. When they grow up, mothers can use their sons to expand their influence and power in the male-dominated family. This "uterine family", centered on the mother, both challenges and cleverly maintains male dominance in male-dominated families, explaining the family structure and internal conflicts within the Chinese cultural framework [5]. As China transitioned to post-socialism, neoliberalism spread widely in China. This concept of "men outside and women inside" was distorted and gradually became extreme, that is, the value of men lies in the economic support they provide to women, while the value of women lies in their reproductive value. This has created a new gendered power structure - a heterosexual system that emphasizes women's economic dependence on men and the market logic of men's sexual objectification of women [6]. In this system, women are completely objectified, forming a distorted concept of "economic power determines discourse power". The emergence of this family structure is deeply influenced by neoliberalism. Neoliberals reinterpret the long-standing individualism in Western culture, forming extreme individualism and using it as their own philosophical foundation and value premise. If family relationships are constructed based on extreme individualism, kinship, and love will no longer be dual human emotions with rights and obligations but will simply become a means for individuals to satisfy their interests and gain happiness. The family will no longer be an ethical affiliation for emotional and spiritual exchanges between people, but just a loose collection of individuals living together. The distorted utilitarian view of love and marriage advocates the supremacy of money and self-interest, replaces the equal and pure love between the sexes with profit calculation and equal exchange, and makes marriage profit-oriented and commercialized [7]. In the past, it was difficult for Chinese women to change this situation because in the traditional labor market, due to differences between men and women, women had relatively few social relationships and social resources, which often became an external restriction on their participation in social production and social participation. With the development of self-media platforms, women have gained more employment opportunities. In 2021, the number of female e-commerce creators increased by 41% year-on-year. Among Douyin influencers, female influencers accounted for 58% of the total number and 64% of the sales revenue. Digital platforms have provided women with new ways to gain wealth, which has enabled many women to gradually stop relying on men for financial support and naturally get rid of the situation of being objectified. However, some men have lost their voice in intimate relationships. The traditional family structure that used to follow " Eco-

nomic power determines discourse power" has become a constraint for some men, and men have become objectified objects that can only provide "emotional value". The rise of women has not brought about the dissolution of patriarchy but has instead evolved into the oppression and objectification of low-income people by high-income people. This deformed ideology has become another form of patriarchy. The rise of women under the influence of neoliberalism has not empowered disempowered men but has deepened class oppression. This has led to a backlash in public sentiment, with feminism being seen as an extreme ideology and women being described as emotionless and materialistic cold machines. At the same time, after the change in family roles, men still find it difficult to escape social stereotypes. Men who rely on women are considered to be unmasculine and become a disempowered group. These contradictions are attributed to gender issues, and gender conflicts are thus intensified.

3.2 Gender Dilemmas Hidden by Gender Conflicts

With the rise of the "She economy", commercial capital's coercion of women has become more covert under the consumerism of the new era. "She economy" was proposed by economist Shi Qingqi. It refers to a unique new economic phenomenon formed around women's consumption and women's financial management, which has supporting and leading power and is sustainable. It indirectly confirms the increasingly prosperous development of the women's consumer market and its importance in economic development [8]. However, this inevitably led to feminism being coerced by consumerism. For example, the idea of "If you love her, spend money on her" promoted by a large number of media has greatly hindered the development of feminism in China, equating money with love. At the same time, the output of this erroneous ideology has deepened the status quo of women being objectified, that is, spending money on women will win their love. This phenomenon obscures deeper issues such as whether women are being treated worse than men at work, whether women can earn the same amount of money as men, and whether men and women have access to the same opportunities. The economic inequality between men and women is romanticized. For example, childbearing, as a natural function of women, will lead to a decline in the employment rate of employed women, and women who are still employed after giving birth will also work fewer hours. The "work-childcare" conflict that women generally face will put them at a disadvantage in the labor market [9]. If women choose to return to traditional gender roles, it will be difficult for them to realize their

social value, and their husband-wife relationship will lose its equal economic foundation. If they choose to endure work pressure and return to the workplace, they may face unequal treatment based on their gender identity and be absent from family affairs such as educating their children and accompanying their husbands. Neoliberal feminism starts from the individual perspective and paints a dream of "work-family balance" for middle-class women, shifting gender exploitation to the lower and middle classes of society. This cannot solve the fundamental problem, but will only exacerbate gender inequality at the social level and lead to a new family ethics crisis. Gender issues cover up not only the plight of women but also the injustice faced by men. Although men are not subject to gender oppression, it is undeniable that men, like women, face the pressure and constraints of social gender norms. Men are disciplined and called to be a group of people with fixed characteristics. While compromising their gender identity, internalizing and manipulating patriarchal gender norms, they will eventually backfire. According to statistics, in 2010, China's Gini coefficient exceeded 0.4, which means that the gap between the rich and the poor in China is quite large [10]. Under the premise of a market economy, personal income is affected by market supply and demand. High-paying jobs are often only available to elite talents, while the income of ordinary jobs is relatively low. The development of the market economy has led to the privatization of some social resources, resulting in some high-income people having more resources and opportunities, while low-income people are often unable to enjoy these resources [11]. This has led to men in low-income groups also being disempowered. At the same time, because the media is overly focused on women's issues, the issues of vulnerable men are ignored. The employment and marriage problems faced by vulnerable men are not solved, and they can only vent their dissatisfaction with the social system through binary gender conflicts. This phenomenon is still a reproduction and reproduction of the stereotype of "men are strong and women are weak". It is difficult for individuals to form correct gender and rights awareness in this cultural environment, which may intensify gender confrontation, affect gender equality, and undermine the formation of a public sphere for gender issues. This phenomenon may further lead to gender anxiety and gender distress, that is, having to bear corresponding pressure because of being in a certain group.

4. Revelation

The phenomenon of "online witch hunting" reflects the increasingly intensified binary gender conflicts on Chinese online platforms. This phenomenon not only leads to

more serious gender bias but also conceals the real gender dilemma, so binary gender conflicts must be eliminated. This chapter will explore the solution to binary gender opposition from the perspectives of individuals, media, and the country.

First, individuals should face up to the redistribution of responsibilities brought about by the transformation of social roles, abandon the stereotype that "a certain responsibility should belong to a certain group", give full play to individual advantages, and actively assume their responsibilities. Eliminate the influence of utilitarianism on intimate relationships, abandon the concept of "economic power determines discourse power", and avoid the objectification of gender relations.

Second, online media should be brave enough to shoulder their responsibilities, not just focus on topic dividends, but also shoulder social responsibilities and play a positive and positive guiding role. The media should avoid escalating individual incidents into attacks on the group, which will increase the definition of individual incidents on the group stereotype, such as avoiding the occurrence of "online witch hunting" and allowing the public to shift the focus of conflict from gender confrontation to the social issues that should be paid attention to.

Third, the state can strengthen supervision and management of online media, restrict accounts that use "gender conflicts" to attract attention, maliciously stir up "gender conflicts", and other accounts. The state should guide the media to improve the quality of account content, guide the public to correctly view social hot issues, and dialectically analyze, recognize, and respect gender differences. At the same time, legislation should be enacted to protect equal rights for men and women, narrow gender inequality, and promote correct feminist concepts.

5. Conclusion

The frequent occurrence of "online witch hunting" has created the image of a manipulator "witch" who relies on men to achieve her goals, exacerbating binary gender conflicts on Chinese Internet platforms. This has hindered the development of Chinese feminism while obscuring the real gender dilemma. When talking about the binary gender opposition on Chinese online platforms, it is necessary to mention neoliberal thought. This article argues that with China's post-socialist transition, this ideology has spread widely in China. The extreme individualism it promotes has caused extreme changes in China's traditional gender stereotypes and family structure, forming an extreme ideology of "economic power determines discourse power".

This ideology objectifies women, commercializes intimate relationships, and makes women, who are already in a disadvantaged position, even more powerless. At the same time, digital platforms have increased employment opportunities for women and changed the social identities of men and women. However, extreme family structures and stereotypes have backfired, causing men who have lost economic power to lose their voice, and causing women who have gained economic power to objectify vulnerable male groups, forming another form of patriarchy. This situation has led to the intensification of binary gender conflicts, while also covering up real social problems, such as women's inability to balance family and career, as well as the voicelessness of disadvantaged men and gender inequality caused by the social system. The various "online witch-hunting" phenomena on current digital platforms are nothing more than a manifestation of the accumulation of social contradictions, and the various problems behind them are complex and far-reaching.

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