

# **‘There are too many women with love brains’: Domestic Violence and Victim Blaming in China**

Lihan Miao  
Durham University, UK  
Nicole Westmarland  
Durham University, UK

## **Abstract:**

While there exists increasing awareness and legal remedies in relation to domestic violence in China, victim-blaming still exists - especially in online discourse. This research investigated public reactions to domestic violence in China, using comments made by women on Weibo - China's largest social media platform. Thematic analysis was used to analyse 500 comments related to four extremely high-profile domestic violence cases. The analysis reveals that victim-blaming is manifested in six overlapping ways, blaming victims for: 1) choosing the wrong partner, 2) not resisting abuse, 3) failing to leave the relationship, 4) having 'weak personalities', 5) lacking rationality, dignity, and self-love, and 6) being overly influenced by love – known as 'love brain'. The findings not only shed light on the complexities of victim-blaming on social media in China but also illustrate the ongoing clash between modern feminist thought and entrenched patriarchal values within contemporary Chinese culture.

## **Key messages:**

1. Analysis of 500 comments from four high-profile domestic violence cases on Weibo reveals that victim-blaming manifests in six interrelated ways.
2. The complex relationship between modern feminist thought and patriarchal values in traditional Chinese society highlights the need for nuanced understanding of victim-blaming dynamics on social media.

## **Key words/short phrases:**

Domestic violence and abuse; victim-blaming; social media; Chinese culture

## **Word count:**

7,590

**Funding:** No funding was received for this research.

**Conflict of Interest:** The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**Acknowledgements:** We are grateful to our colleagues who provide the supportive environment for our research.

## **Introduction**

Historically, domestic violence in China was considered to be a private matter, with societal and familial pressures discouraging victims from seeking help or legal recourse (Yang, 2011). Traditional Confucian values emphasizing family harmony and social stability were associated with a high level of societal tolerance of domestic violence. Progress has been made over the last three decades in terms of legal and policy responses. The period running up to the UN Women's conference in Beijing in 1995, followed by new Chinese legislation around women's rights and marriage significantly raised the profile of domestic violence in China (Hester, 2005). In 2001, China's amendment of the Marriage Law explicitly prohibited domestic violence for the first time, marking a legislative acknowledgment of the issue. The landmark Anti-Domestic Violence Law, enacted in 2016, expanded the definition of domestic violence and introduced new protection orders (Zhang, 2023).

Domestic violence in China is defined as 'the infliction of physical, psychological, or other harms between family members through the use of such methods as beatings, restraints, maiming, restrictions on physical liberty, as well as recurrent verbal abuse or intimidation' (Article Two of China's Anti-Domestic Violence Law of 2016, cited by Zhang, 2023 pg. 346). While domestic violence prevalence studies in China are sparse, those that exist have reported it to be a widespread social problem. For

example, Xu et al. (2005) conducted a cross-sectional prevalence study of 600 randomly selected women attending a hospital in China and found that 43% had experienced domestic violence in their lifetime and 26% within the previous year. State run surveys have tended to report lower rates, with the 2021 survey of 30,000 Chinese citizens across urban and rural communities finding that 8.6% have experienced domestic violence as defined in the Anti-Domestic Violence Law (it is unclear what period of time this refers to) (Office of the leading group for the fourth survey on the social status of women in China, 2021).

Alongside these legal and policy advances, the last decade has seen a steep increase in women's use of social media such as Weibo (the largest social media platform in China) to engage in feminist consciousness raising and online activism (Wang and Ouyang, 2023). However, despite this rise in feminist activism, research has shown that traditional Confucian values and expectations continue to influence attitudes towards violence against women (Hou et al., 2021) and there remains a dearth of research on how to address the issue (Su et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant now as recent years have seen a conservative shift and government revival of Confucian family values.

The aim of this research was to understand the nature of victim blaming by women in China. First, we describe the influence and importance of online social media platform Weibo and its role in what is known as the 'Chinese feminist awakening',

followed by a consideration of victim blaming in relation to traditional Chinese culture. Next, we describe the four high profile cases chosen for this analysis and our research methods. We follow by presenting our analysis of six interconnected themes, before concluding with what this means for responding to domestic violence in China.

### **The Chinese ‘feminist awakening’**

Chinese feminism combines Western feminist ideas with local cultural, historical, and social aspects. Since China implemented the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, Chinese feminism has primarily developed from Western feminism due to the significant economic and ideological influence of the West (Liu, 2016). Since 2000, young feminists in China have often been referred to on social media as the "New Generation" or the "Young Feminist Action Faction." They achieve their goals through "media activism," spreading their views across various media and social platforms. Unlike the earlier, more non-confrontational "feminism," this generation of young activists embraces "feminism" and proudly identify as "feminists." They employ personalised, de-institutionalised strategies, often forming loose networks rather than formal organizations. They have grown up in an era of deepening market economy and relatively rich and diverse information. Influenced by the one-child policy, many are well-educated and have a stronger awareness of and resistance to gender discrimination and gender-based violence (Wang, 2018).

Contemporary Chinese feminism has garnered widespread attention. Wu and Dong (2019) discuss "made-in-China feminism," highlighting how young urban women navigate gender power structures amid post-socialist transformation. They identify two branches: "entrepreneurial feminism," where women leverage sexual appeal and traditional femininity for personal gain in the marriage market, and the "non-cooperative" movement, which advocates for female sexual autonomy and economic independence, rejecting marriage as a means of financial security. These two perspectives reflect internal conflicts within Chinese feminism, encapsulating both the use of traditional gender norms for empowerment *and* the pursuit of independence from patriarchal structures.

### **The significance of Weibo in the Chinese feminist awakening**

Weibo is the largest social media platform in China. By 2023, Weibo's monthly active users had reached 605 million, and daily active users had reached 260 million (Zhang, 2023). Over 50% of Chinese citizens who use the internet are users of Weibo (Peng, 2021). Weibo provides Chinese netizens (people who are active in the digital world) an extensive space to discuss various kinds of social issues. Issues that spark public attention on Weibo can quickly gain heightened awareness and sometimes accelerate social changes. Some call this phenomenon 'Weibo promotes national governance', highlighting just how influential Weibo is in China (Gu, 2014). However, it is important to note that state censorship of Weibo exists and has increased over recent years.

The importance of Weibo is further emphasised by the way it has become an arena for China's younger generation to express their views on social issues, including domestic violence (Hou, 2015; Liu, Huang and Ma, 2015). Since the resurgence of the 'Me Too' movement in 2018, topics related to gender-based violence have received extensive attention on Weibo, which is seen as a sign of a 'Chinese feminist awakening' on the internet (Hou, 2020). What sets the 'Chinese feminist awakening' apart from the agendas of the All-China Women's Federation and large women's non-governmental organisations is its grassroots nature, and the way the contours can be traced through ordinary women's blogging and online debates (Liu, Huang and Ma, 2015). The Chinese feminist awakening on the internet, along with the spontaneous and autonomous desire of Chinese women for power and rights, has significantly impacted the discourse on domestic violence (Hou, 2020). For example, on November 7, 2012, feminists launched a petition campaign calling for 10,000 signatures to promote anti-domestic violence legislation in China. By November 13, when the attention to the petition began to wane, a well-known young feminist activist, Xiao Meili, posted a photo of herself topless with the slogan 'Shameful to commit domestic violence; Pride in having flat chest' written on her chest to refocus public attention on the petition. This photo went viral on Weibo, with many young feminists activists following Xiao Meili's example by posting similar photos on Weibo to support the campaign (Hou, 2015).

As Schaffer and Song (2007) highlight, Chinese women have to confront a series of powerful patriarchal traditions, including the enduring Confucian belief system, more

modern communist ideologies, the demands of the new market economy, and the influx of Western knowledge systems including feminist thoughts. This is evident in how some women against domestic violence still condemn female victims of domestic violence, reflecting the confusion and complexity within feminist expressions and the struggle to break free from traditional patriarchal constraints in response to a new gendered power dynamic in the post-socialist era. In recent years, as the government has revived Confucian family values and traditional gender norms, this conservative shift has heightened the resistance of the new generation of women especially concerning issues of gender inequality such as domestic violence (Fincher, 2016). Hence, despite progress, the expression of feminism in China is filled with contradictions.

### **Domestic violence and the continued influence of traditional Chinese culture**

Violence and aggression are widely disapproved of in China because Chinese culture emphasises harmony, discipline, and self-restraint. However, the inferior status traditionally ascribed to Chinese women means that domestic violence has received less disapproval, and has instead often been categorised as a 'family affair' (Su et al., 2022). Women have traditionally been expected to sacrifice their own needs and endure domestic violence in order to 'save face' and preserve family harmony driven by a fear of social judgment and stigmatization, which can have emotional and material impacts (Thurston et al., 2016). The Confucius teachings of the '*san cong si de*' (the three obediences that women should obey their fathers, serve their husband's

needs, and follow their sons; and the four virtues that include fidelity, tidiness, propriety in speech, and commitment to needlework) can be seen as providing fertile ground for blaming women who are abused by their husbands (Hernández, 2018). In traditional Chinese societies, when a woman failed to meet these standards she had to be disciplined, and violence was regarded as an acceptable means to do so.

Despite the enactment of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law of the People's Republic of China in 2016, Confucianism still exerts a strong influence on attitudes and responses toward domestic violence, leading to victim-blaming attitudes (Cao et al., 2023). For example, Leung (2019) found that Chinese victims of domestic violence were blamed for annoying their husband, embarrassing them, having extra-marital affairs, and/or abandoning their husband and children - implying that she was neither a good wife nor a good mother. In addition, Yang et al.'s (2021) findings suggest that despite the promotion of legal reforms which can improve social awareness and attitudes towards gender equality, traditional gender roles and patriarchal society lead to cultural legitimisation of the violence, resulting in the continuation of entrenched conservative attitudes. Zhang (2023) also emphasises that without changing the socio-cultural context, no domestic violence legislation will be able to effectively address domestic violence and enhance the wellbeing of women in China.

Though limited, there has been an increasing amount of research studying Chinese people's perceptions of domestic violence victims. Tang et al. (2002) explored the cultural myths and stereotypes associated with domestic violence victims in Chinese



societies. They suggest that Chinese conceptions of women as legitimate victims of violence are constructed through representations of men as being sick or controlled by impulses and women as sex objects or naggers who trigger men's violence. In a cross-cultural context, Li, Sun, and Button (2020) compared Chinese and American college students' tolerance for domestic violence. The findings revealed that Chinese students exhibited higher tolerance levels for domestic violence than their American peers, influenced by a stronger belief in male dominance and a lower tendency to view intimate partner violence as a criminal act. Furthermore, women across both cultures showed less tolerance towards domestic violence than men, indicating a gender-based disparity in attitudes, the finding is aligned with research by Wang (2019) who found that female Chinese students had a more nuanced understanding of domestic violence compared to their male counterparts. Female students were more likely to identify intimate partner violence, while male students were more inclined to justify it. Li, Liu, and Chen (2023) emphasised the connection between patriarchal beliefs and attitudes toward domestic violence noting that Chinese with stronger beliefs in male dominance were more likely to accept domestic violence against women.

These entrenched cultural attitudes often lead to victims remaining silent. In research focusing on how rural Chinese women perceive domestic violence, Hou et al. (2021) surveyed 339 participants. Of these, 74% attributed domestic violence to individual factors, with 34% of them blaming the victim for issues like anxiety, social isolation, or laziness. This mindset further entrenches the problem of underreporting and

addressing domestic violence in Chinese society. Blake et al. (2021) proposed that the prevalence of traditional ideas and victim-blaming attitudes can lead to a new discourse of violence concerning victimized women, evidenced by a positive correlation between domestic violence events and the number of female misogynistic tweets.

### **High profile domestic violence cases in China**

Research to date has tended to focus either on domestic violence and traditional Chinese culture *or* on the role of online activism and the ‘new feminist awakening’. This research takes both of these bodies of literature to apply to four high profile domestic violence cases that prompted a high level of discussion on Weibo, either because of the high profile of the victim on Weibo and/or because the violence (either live streamed or video footage) was widely circulated on Weibo. The four cases were selected after searching for the term ‘jia bao’ (domestic violence) on Weibo and chosen because a) they are recent high profile cases which have been extensively discussed in Chinese but have received little attention in academic research published in the English language and b) because the high level of attention meant they were extensively discussed online resulting in a large pool of readily available data. A further advantage to looking in depth at specific cases of domestic violence is highlighted by Zang (2023), who used the high-profile murder of Lhamo (see also Case 1, below) to show how case study-based research can sometimes bring a deeper understanding than more macro level studies are able to.

### Case 1: La Mu

La Mu (alternatively translated as ‘Lhamo’ in Zhang, 2023) was a social media star who had more than 720,000 followers on Douyin (a highly popular short-video sharing app known internationally as TikTok). She was a Tibetan farmer living in the southwestern part of China. She spent most of her time outdoors and shared her life online, posting videos of herself cooking, singing, and picking herbs on the mountains near her village. Living in a poor family and a tough environment, La Mu gained a high number of followers due to her strong personality, talent and attractive physical appearance. In 2020, La Mu’s ex-husband Tang Lu broke into her room, poured petrol on her and set her on fire while she was live video streaming. La Mu died from these injuries. Her ex-husband was sentenced to death in 2022.

### Case 2: Yu Xiuhua

Yu Xiuhua, born in 1976, is a famous poet with cerebral palsy. Her poetry boldly depicted her desire for love and sex, and her pursuit of freedom and independence – contrasting with the traditional image of a rural disabled Chinese women. Her relationship with her boyfriend, who was 14 years younger than herself, was regarded as an unlikely but romantic love story because of their differences in physical abilities and age. In 2022, Yu Xihua had a heated argument with Yang Zhuce during a live streaming, and then posted on her personal Weibo account that she was being domestically abused by him. She described herself as having been slapped hundreds

of times and being almost choked to death. After the live streaming, Yu Xiuhua's agent simply responded: 'The two have broken up.' No formal punishment was received by the perpetrator.

### Case 3: Wang Pengfei

In 2022, a video from a home security camera was released on Weibo of a man hitting his wife. The woman was shown being beaten while constantly comforting her child and putting up no resistance to her attacker. After the video was published, users on Weibo began searching for the identity of the abuser, who was subsequently revealed to be named Wang Pengfei, 34 years old, and the deputy manager of a company. The perpetrator was sentenced to five days detention, given a formal warning and removed from all positions by his company. The woman's name in this case is unknown and the case is extensively referred to only by the perpetrators name in China which is why we follow that convention in the naming of this case.

### Case 4: Yu Ya

Yu Ya, is an online celebrity, born in 1995. She became popular on Weibo for her makeup videos and has 1.9 million followers. Her partner at the time, Guang Weizheng, is an artist 27 years older than her. He began to abuse her soon after they lived together, using coercive and controlling behaviours. Videos of her being abused were posted on Weibo, showing Guang dragging her out of an elevator and physically beating her. The coverage of her experience by the prominent legal programme

'Today's Statement' on China Central Television has been watched 19 million times on its Weibo official account. Guang Weizheng was detained for 20 days and a protection order was granted to Yu Ya.

### **Research methods and analysis**

The aim of this research was to understand the nature of victim blaming by women in China through the lens of four high profile cases of domestic violence as discussed on Weibo. The research consisted of a thematic analysis of comments made on Weibo of the above mentioned four domestic violence cases. Weibo was chosen as the platform for data collection in this research as it is the largest social media platform in China and users come from various regions of China, representing diverse geographical, cultural, and social backgrounds.

A total of forty posts across the four cases were selected for analysis (15 for case 1, 12 for case 2, 6 for case 3, and 7 for case 4). Posts were selected based on volume of comments, with all those with over 5,000 comments selected. The comments were collected from the top down, meaning those that were the most popular (those that were engaged with the most) were more likely than others with less engagement to form part of the data. In total, 4,000 comments were collected, of which 1,000 included a comment about the victim, of which 600 included some form of victim blaming, of which 500 were from commenters who identified themselves as female on their Weibo profile. Hence, the overall number of posts analysed was 500 (made

up of 126 comments for case 1, 155 for case 2, 114 for case 3, and 105 for case 4).

The data were collected from Weibo between October 2022 and October 2023 (although most comments will have been made before these dates).

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis following an inductive approach, in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Initially, the first step involved a thorough familiarization with the dataset. We began by reading through all 500 comments to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. Each comment was logged into an Excel spreadsheet and marked based on its nature and tone, with a particular focus on those that involved victim-blaming sentiments. This step helped us identify preliminary trends and set the groundwork for subsequent coding. During the coding process, NVivo 12 was used to analyze a subset of the comments, following an open coding strategy. Each comment was examined in detail, and codes were generated to capture recurring themes as they emerged from the data, without the use of any predetermined theoretical framework. We wrote memos throughout this phase to document observations and to develop initial categories. The codes were then grouped into 25 preliminary descriptive themes. The third phase involved refining and consolidating the themes through ongoing discussion between the two researchers. During this stage, we compared the initial codes and adjusted them where necessary. In the final stage of the analysis, six key themes were identified. These themes were derived directly from the data, with each one refined through a process of iterative reading and coding to ensure they were both distinct and sufficiently explanatory. The

first author completed the coding process, and the second author reviewed the final themes to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Informed consent was not required because the comments were public but screen names were excluded to ensure anonymity, as were any comments that would personally identify anyone other than the victim and perpetrator being discussed. Ethical clearance was granted by Durham University.

## **Findings**

The victims in the four cases were blamed in six distinct but overlapping ways, for: 1) choosing the wrong partner, 2) not fighting back, 3) not leaving, 4) having a ‘weak personality’, 5) not being rational, dignified or having self-love, and/or 6) having a ‘love brain’. These are now described in turn.

### **1. Blaming the victim for choosing the wrong partner**

Commenters often attributed the occurrence of domestic violence to the victim's poor choice in partners, arguing that violence could have been avoided by selecting a more ‘appropriate’ partner to enter into a relationship with. This was even the case where victims were severely physically beaten such as in the Wang Pengfei case:

‘Domestic violence is undoubtedly wrong and should be severely punished, but the female victim should bear at least a small percentage of responsibility for choosing this man herself.’ (Case 3, Comment 24)

This was similarly found in the La Mu Case, even though she had divorced her husband due to the domestic abuse and was not in a relationship with him at the time she was murdered:

‘When the victim is repeatedly being harmed by the wrong person, perhaps it's time to reflect on her own choice of man instead of claiming that love and family responsibility made her blinded.’ (Case 1, Comment 108)

The standard of ‘appropriateness’ seemed to shift based on the victim's identity. In the case of the young and conventionally attractive internet celebrity Yu Ya, commenters stated that she should not have chosen an older partner with lesser financial means:

‘I just can't understand why an excellent and beautiful young woman would choose a middle-aged man who has been divorced three times, has no job, and no money. A women should be cautious and not find herself a man in trash.’ (Case 4, Comment 211)



Conversely, for the older and disabled Yu Xiuhua, they criticised her choice of a younger and able-bodied partner:

‘You should know what would happen when you choose a man who is 14 years younger than you! Why not choose a man who is at your age and can understand you?’ (Case 2, Comment 302)

These comments reflect entrenched societal and cultural expectations regarding women's roles and decision-making in relationships, implying that women are expected to possess the foresight to choose partners who are ‘suitable’ according to their personal circumstances and societal norms, or else they are deemed responsible for ensuing violent consequences, reflecting traditional beliefs that domestic violence is a private matter (Yang, 2021).

## **2. Blaming the victim for not fighting back**

Apart from Yu Xiuhua, who publicly and assertively confronted her abuser, the victims in the other cases faced blame for not fighting back. They were criticised for having ‘passive personalities’ and failing to put up any resistance to the violence.

Examples from each of the three cases are below:

‘Women should toughen up a bit. Her resistance is not thorough enough. In their everyday interactions women should demonstrate to men that if you ever cross me, I will fight back.’ (Case 1, Comment 178)

‘I feel pity for her misfortune but also angry at her lack of resistance. If I were her, I would have taken actions and fought back right away. My grandmother is in her eighties, she can control her husband. If my grandfather were like this abusive man, I am sure she would blow up the roof! Being a woman living in modern society she is at a better condition than my grandmother, why is she not resisting the violence?’ (Case 3, Comment 94)

‘Women who have endured long-term domestic violence should reflect on her own behaviours, being abused three times without fighting back means that she has become a target, actions should have been taken to save herself.’ (Case 4, Comment 231)

A common Chinese saying cited in these discussions is ‘*ai qi bu xing, nu qi bu zheng*’ (pity for their misfortune, anger at their lack of resistance) highlighting a complex sentiment where sympathy for the victim coexists with frustration or disappointment over their perceived inability to retaliate. Commenters often expressed a desire for these victims to exhibit greater physical and emotional strength. This underscores a broader expectation for women usually among women, particularly in modern China, to respond to violence from men with equal strength and resistance, challenging traditional notions of female passivity when encountering abuse. Previous research has indicated a lower tolerance for domestic violence among Chinese women compared to men against the backdrop of a rising feminist consciousness (Li, Sun and Button, 2020; Wang, 2019). However, our findings reveal a more complex scenario

whereby women are often the source of blaming other women, highlighting a clash between contemporary feminist ideals and traditional patriarchal values. This expectation of female victims to fight back can be linked to the ‘iron girl’ image promoted by the Chinese government in the 1950s. Due to a severe labour shortage in the newly established state, women began entering the workforce to fill positions previously dominated by men. Under the slogan ‘Women hold up half the sky’, the idea of the iron girl—strong women who worked as hard as their male counterparts—was widely propagated and became part of the social gender equality goals of that era (Yin, 2022). The recognition and encouragement of women to be ‘strong’ was itself a part of modern Chinese feminist activism.

### **3. Blaming the victim for not leaving**

Apart from the Yu Xiuhua Case in which Yu broke up with Yang, victims in the other three cases were all blamed for not leaving the perpetrator:

‘Many women tend to heal their scars and forget the pain. The most common phrase I hear is, "Apart from when he's hitting me, he's actually quite nice."'

Domestic violence and infidelity are similar, there is only the difference between zero occurrences and countless occurrences. Forgiving this time will only lead to more severe abuse in the future’ (Case 1, Comment 319)

While some commenters questioned whether the police were taking their responsibility and supporting the victim, other commenters argued that if the victims remained with their abusive partners instead of leaving, the police's ability to intervene might be limited. They observed that while younger, more 'passionate' police officers might approach domestic violence cases with greater seriousness, other officers may have become disheartened and feel powerless due to the repetitive and cyclical nature of these cases:

'My dad is a police officer, and when he was younger, he also wanted to punish domestic violence offenders. But some female callers can be quite unreliable by saying that "Officer, will my husband be arrested? I didn't really want to involve the police. After all, I also made mistakes... Please don't arrest him." That's why it's only the young, passionate police officers who truly take this matter seriously. If the individuals involved don't realize this, there's little others can do, it is her own decision.' (Case 1, Comment 34)

Victims were also blamed for looking to more informal routes including Weibo rather than using more formal responses such as the police or making arrangements to leave:

'If she doesn't intend to get a divorce, what do we do? When I see them apologise to each other and continuing to live together, I got so frustrated. Her first thought

after getting evidence of domestic violence was to expose it online and let netizens educate her man.’ (Case 3, Comment 2)

Some commenters argued that the trust and forgiveness some victims showed towards their abusers reflected a form of acquiescence to the violence, as they failed to fully acknowledge the gravity of the abuse:

‘I’m not blaming the victims, I’m a woman too, and I believe that those who commit domestic violence deserve punishment. But I can’t comprehend why they keep choosing to forgive. It leaves me feeling both sympathetic and angry toward the victims.’ (Case 4, Comment 423)

They also highlight what they referred to as a ‘saviour complex’ that some victims may develop, believing they can change, rescue or save their abuser, which can further entrench them in the cycle of domestic violence:

‘Some women have a "saviour complex", when a man engages in self-destructive words or actions (like slapping himself or drowning in alcohol all night), the woman sees it as an opportunity to "rescue the lost soul." Instead of leaving, she gets closer to him, attempting to save him. As a result, the more she invests, the harder it becomes to leave. In the end, she not only loses her youth but also her life.’ (Case 1, Comment 25)

These perspectives demonstrate the tension faced by many commenters, between not wanting to be seen as blaming the victim on the one hand, but on the other hand pointing to things that the victim should or should not have done. They posit that while the perpetrator is undoubtedly culpable for the physical harm caused, the victim also holds some responsibility for not leaving. Failure to do so, according to this viewpoint, leads to the victim being perceived as less deserving of assistance or sympathy, underscoring a complex and often controversial understanding of the dynamics in domestic violence cases.

As previously demonstrated by Wang (2018), women who are born in cities, well-educated, and have access to greater information channels often possess a more proactive and positive awareness towards opposing violence against women and the empowerment of women. This awareness also reflects the privileges of their social class. The urban-rural divide and social class disparities may to some extent result in female commenters from advantaged social positions having difficulty understanding the circumstances of female victims from different backgrounds. These victims may face resistance on personal, familial, community, and societal levels when attempting to leave abusive environments. Lack of understanding of these barriers could be associated with victim blaming from some commenters.

#### **4. Blaming the victim for her weak personality**

In three of the four cases (the exception being the Yu Xiuhua case), commenters often attributed the continuous suffering of female victims of domestic violence to their 'weak personality'. Unlike the previous theme where commenters called for physical strength in women, here they attack their femininity, to be specific, their 'kindness', 'compassion', and 'softness' - interpreting these as 'weakness', 'frailty', and even 'servility', as demonstrated in the following examples:

'A women should not be overly kind and weak, or it will only give others the opportunity to take advantage of you.' (Case 1, Comment 86)

'I can only say that there's a reason to blame the unfortunate as she is a woman with weak minds and strong servility. This man isn't a good person, but this woman is so feeble.' (Case 3, Comment 66)

'Don't be a soft and overly sympathetic woman, as bullies often pick on the soft ones.' (Case 4, Comment 111)

The language used to criticise victims here can be connected to the traditional view of women in the feudal patriarchal era. During this time, women's existence largely depended on submitting to patriarchal control, causing a decline in their mental and spiritual autonomy and an internalisation of patriarchal norms. This theme underscores a modern aspiration held by Chinese feminists for women to grow

stronger in terms of character and spirit. However, this devaluation and stigmatisation of femininity is also a manifestation of misogyny, reflecting the gender based inequalities that still exist in society (Blake et al., 2021). Rather than helping the victims out of their predicament, such criticism may further deepen the psychological pressure and social isolation they are under. By regarding women's kindness, compassion and gentleness as weaknesses, commenters inadvertently consolidate the patriarchal power structure, which to a certain extent can hinder women's true self-empowerment and independence.

### **5. Blaming the victim for not being rational, dignified and 'love yourself'**

In Chinese modern feminism, it is seen as important for women to be rational and dignified, and to 'love yourself'. These three terms frequently occurred together in the comments, which can be seen as a set of modern feminist norms used to judge victims against:

'Pain is self-inflicted. Happiness is a challenge for most normal people, let alone someone like her, with her disabilities, at her age, and with her looks. How many men can honestly accept that? Women need to love themselves and maintain their dignity, she was truly too irrational and lacked clear mind.' (Case 2, Comment 101)



‘As a famous poet, why not cherish your talent? It has been evident that she lacks self-respect and self-love.’ (Case 2, Comment 8)

‘I’m so fed up with the fact that she is being repeatedly beaten, she doesn’t love herself at all.’ (Case 3, Comment 144)

‘Please be rational and have a clear mind, if you do not love yourself, how can you count on others to love and respect you.’ (Case 4, Comment 36)

This theme has some overlaps with the previous four themes. For example, many asserted that the victims’ irrationality leads them to choose the wrong partners and suffer ongoing violence, and their lack of dignity and self-loving results in their failure to leave even after experiencing violence. These three terms were specifically chosen to constitute this theme as they are frequently used not only in cases related to domestic violence but also in other feminist-related issues, forming part of the gender norms discourse concerning modern Chinese women. In patriarchal cultures, where women are required to endure violence to preserve the family’s honor (Thurston et al., 2016), female commenters in these discussions appear to advocate a different approach. They hope that modern women can uphold their dignity to preserve modern Chinese women’s honor by displaying rationality, self-respect, and self-love. However, by blaming the victims, these commenters inadvertently stigmatize their roles as victims to some extent.

## **6. Blaming the victim for having “love brain”**

The term ‘love brain’ is a phrase that became popular on the Chinese internet in 2022.

It refers to a kind of love-first thinking mode - those who put all their energy and thoughts on love and lovers once they fall in love would be described as having a ‘love brain’. In the criticism of love brain, ‘love’ is portrayed as being connected to untrustworthy and foolish behaviours. Compared to men, women are believed to be more prone to having ‘love brain’ in some Weibo user’s opinions, and they blamed victims, attributing the abuse they suffer to what they termed as having a ‘love brain.’

This victim-blaming was particularly pronounced in the case of Yu Xiuhua as she was known for her quest for ‘pure love’ in her poems and in her public speaking engagements. Moreover, her celebrity status and candid personal expressions were seen by some as reasons why she is more susceptible to social media scrutiny:

‘Women are brainwashed by love too deeply. As a woman with fame and wealth, she should treat him like just a sexual partner, but she insists on fantasising about love, she wants too much.’ (Case 2, Comment 228).

‘It (domestic violence) is not because of her physical condition, appearance, or anything else, the primary reason is her love brain.’ (Case 2, Comment 54).

Blaming victims for their ‘love brain’ was also apparent in the other cases:

‘The victim cannot leave her husband and even make her daughter suffering from a violent father is all because she loves him and do not want leave.’ (Case 3, Comment 335)

Accusations of Yu's love brain was also linked to her celebrity status, with some commenters suggesting that Yu, as a female celebrity, should set up a more positive image for the female community and make the pursuit of career and fortune rather than love her goal:

‘She is brave, but I don't want to see female public figures talking about love every day, as if life is all about finding someone to fall in love with. Why go around promoting love as a great thing when you're already famous and rich? Love is not that important, and I hope it doesn't hold more girls back.’ (Case 2, Comment 104)

Some commenters further argued what they thought the real purpose of a women's relationship with a man was, instead of prioritising falling in love, treating these relationships as a route into a higher quality of life:

‘There are too many women with love brains, which has made some Phoenix men becoming mainstream by eating soft food. If I had everything I would stay away from men. A lot of you people talk about love, it's a stupid word, a man who can't

give you money, can't give the life you want and yet he talks about love, isn't that ridiculous?' (Case 4, Comment 38)

The accusation of 'love brain' was initially intended to remind women not to lose themselves and give up their own development for love, but as 'love brain' gradually became a 'wrong' - women who were hurt in relationships were likely to be blamed for believing in love too much, not immediately leaving unhealthy relationships, and suffering personal losses. In this theme, women commenters believed they have a duty to remind other women not to be taken advantage of or be manipulated by men, but this warning was often manifested (intentionally or unintentionally) in the guise of blame. Some commenters blame the women for having love brain, believing that instead of investing their energy in loving men, these women should leverage men for personal gain. This perspective can be linked to the branch of the 'entrepreneurial feminism' mentioned by Wu and Dong (2019). Another group of commenters believes that women like Yu Xiuhua, who already possess certain social advantages, should no longer seek love. This can be related to the 'non-cooperation' trend (Wu and Dong, 2019). This reflects the inconsistency of viewpoints within Chinese feminism and shows that their advocacy is, to some extent, built on blaming women who do not conform to their ideals.

## **Discussion**

The six categories of victim blaming identified in the analysis of Weibo comments

about domestic violence cases reflect a complex interplay of societal expectations, gender norms, and shifting cultural attitudes towards domestic violence and victims. Following Blake et al (2021) findings of a new discourse around victimised women, this study further found that victim-blaming in domestic violence is a common discourse strategy behind patriarchy and misogyny widely affects commenters. This is even reflected in comments that could be seen as demonstrating feminist or empowering messages for women - which still carry elements of victim-blaming. The coexistence of traditional patriarchal views and emerging feminist perspectives in social media comments of domestic violence cases suggests that modern feminisms are still entangled with patriarchal gender expectations in China.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of victim-blaming in domestic violence cases on social media in China, a context that remains largely underexplored in English-language scholarship. While much is known about victim-blaming in Western societies, little research has been conducted on how these dynamics play out in China's unique digital and cultural landscape. The role of social media in shaping public discourses around domestic violence in China, especially platforms like Weibo, is crucial because these online spaces serve as both a reflection of and a battleground for societal values and gender norms. Women's voices play a critical role in this context, highlighting the unique power of female perspectives in shaping public understanding of domestic violence in the post-socialist era. Research has long shown

female victims in China and elsewhere have been blamed for not conforming to traditional gender norms (Leung, 2019). However, in modern Chinese society, as women's status has risen and the concepts of gender equality have spread, traditional notions of women's position in society are less applicable and are seen by many as oppressive and restrictive towards women (Li, Liu and Chen, 2023). This research has demonstrated that while some of the traditional norms and expectations still exist and are manifested through victim blaming, there also exists new norms or expectations with feminist ideas for modern women in contemporary China. However, these new norms or expectations also blame victims albeit in different ways. In terms of behaviour, women are expected to have the foresight in choosing partners to prevent domestic violence, demonstrate resilience in resisting abuse, and be unwilling to forgive or trust abusers, ideally leaving after the first instance of violence. In terms of character and thought, women are expected to be strong-willed, rational, self-loving, and career-oriented. On the one hand, it seeks to empower women to prioritize their personal development over romantic relationships. On the other hand, it risks reinforcing harmful stereotypes and placing undue blame on victims for their perceived failure to adhere to these new norms. This echoes previous research outlined earlier that showed the ways in which women are blamed for not connecting to traditional expectations of gender roles (Leung, 2019). In this research, the victims are continuously being blamed for failing to conform to such new modern, more gender equal norms and expectations.

Although research mentioned earlier suggest that a considerable number of female victims in China remain silent in the face of domestic violence (Qin and Yan, 2018), this study shows that online discussion facilitated by social media are changing the silent attitudes towards domestic violence. Some victims (such as Yu Xiuhua and Yu Ya) and commenters are actively and publicly expressing their opposition to domestic violence, which may point to some positive societal level changes. However, in line with Yang et al. (2021), the blaming of women still reveals the influence of traditional gender norms. As Zhang (2023) and Su et al. (2022) emphasise, understanding the socio-cultural norms and their defining role in shaping the domestic violence narrative in China, changing them by raising public awareness and normalizing both government and non-government interventions, is crucial to reducing domestic violence in China.

## **Conclusions**

With limited research on victim-blaming in the context of domestic violence in China, this study provides knowledge to help understand victim-blaming against women in the modern Chinese digital landscape. Alongside the advancement of laws and policies to address domestic violence, we unfortunately see that victim blaming has shapeshifted, taking with it more contemporary feminist notions of sexual equality – but still existing. The analysis reveals a complex interplay of traditional thoughts and contemporary feminist perspectives. While these comments reflect a shift towards empowering women, they also continue to (intentionally or unintentionally) amplify victim-blaming narratives. This can reflect the challenges and dilemmas a women

may face in seeking help especially online when they are experiencing domestic violence, indicating how feminist ideology and traditional gender norms intertwined on social media, affecting public perception and attitudes towards victims of domestic violence. Therefore, changing the public's attitudes towards domestic violence and female victims is at least as important as promoting the implementation of the law. Without these understandings, government may not be able to evaluate, let alone prevent, the repercussions of domestic violence on the wellbeing of the society at large (Su et al., 2022; Zhang, 2023). Further research is needed on why some Chinese women continue to invest in shifting gender norms that underpin domestic violence and victim blaming in order to continue to advance theory, policy and practice and improve the help-seeking environment for domestic violence victims in China.

The research has some limitations. The reliance on limited social media comments may not fully capture the breadth of attitudes towards domestic violence and victim-blaming in China, as these platforms may skew towards more vocal or engaged users. Additionally, the anonymity of online comments may encourage more extreme views that do not necessarily reflect broader societal attitudes. Future research should explore the reasons behind the continued endorsement of shifting gender norms that underpin domestic violence and victim blaming. Understanding the motivations of individuals who perpetuate these narratives can inform more effective interventions. Additionally, to gain a more complete understanding of social attitudes, further investigation into the roles and perspectives of groups other than women, such as



male commenters, on issues of domestic violence and victim blaming is needed.

There is also a need to examine the attitudes of participants on different social media platforms towards victims of domestic violence, and whether and how these platforms are effectively used to challenge and change perceptions of victim-blaming. This helps further explore how the digital space itself can lead to more effective strategies to combat domestic violence.

This research addresses a significant gap by focusing on victim-blaming in the context of domestic violence on Chinese social media, especially from female commenters. It provides a unique lens through which to view the evolution of gender norms and their impact on attitudes towards domestic violence and victim-blaming in the digital age. The study also contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection of modern feminism with traditional gender expectations in China, informing future research and interventions aimed at disrupting these harmful narratives. Theoretically, this study highlights the complex interactions between traditional patriarchal values and emerging feminist perspectives, demonstrating how both sets of norms work together to promote the perpetuation of victim-blaming narratives. This helps further the theoretical discussion on the intersection between domestic violence, traditional patriarchal concepts and the wave of feminism in the context of modern China. Practically, the findings shed light on the ongoing problem of victim blaming among female commenters on social media and provide insights into the biases women face when seeking support for domestic

violence, not only from patriarchal societies but also from within women's groups. This helps explore how to design interventions and support systems that target the specific needs of female victims in China. Nonetheless, research points to the potential of social media as a platform for changing attitudes about domestic violence, highlighting the importance of online spaces in promoting discussions that can lead to change at a societal level. This has important implications for policymakers and activists in using digital platforms for public information and advocacy efforts to combat domestic violence and change public attitudes.

## References

Blake, R., O' Dean, S.M., Lian, J and Denson, T.F. (2021) 'Misogynistic Tweets Correlate with Violence Against Women' *Psychological science*, 2021 (32): 315–325.

Cao, J., Liu, X. and Gonzalez-Guarda, R.M. (2023) 'Trapped in My Roles as a Woman With No Help: Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence Against Chinese Women' *Violence Against Women*, 29(5): 964-986.

Office of the Leading Group for the Fourth Survey on the Social Status of Women in China. (2021) Main Data of the Fourth Survey on the Social Status of Women in China, 28 June 2024. [http://paper.cnwomen.com.cn/html/2021-12/27/nw.D110000zgfnb\\_20211227\\_1-4.htm](http://paper.cnwomen.com.cn/html/2021-12/27/nw.D110000zgfnb_20211227_1-4.htm)

- Fincher, H. (2016) 'China's Feminist Five', *Dissent*, 63(4): 84-90.
- Gu, Q. (2014) 'Sina Weibo: A Mutual Communication Apparatus between the Chinese Government and Chinese Citizens' *China Media Research*, 10(2).
- Hernández, M. (2018) "'Killed out of love': A frame analysis of domestic violence coverage in Hong Kong' *Violence Against Women*, 24(12): 1454-1473.
- Hester, M. (2005) 'Transnational influences on domestic violence policy and action—exploring developments in China and England' *Social Policy and Society*, 4(4): 447-456.
- Hou, F., Cerulli, C., Wittink, M. N., Caine, E. D., and Qiu, P. (2021) "'Whose Fault Is It?'" How Rural Chinese Women Explain Intimate Partner Violence: A Qualitative Study' *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12: 711-819.
- Hou, L. (2015) 'On fire in Weibo: Feminist online activism in China', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50(17): 79-85.
- Hou, L. (2020) 'Rewriting "the personal is political": young women's digital activism and new feminist politics in China' *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 21(3): 337-355.

Leung, L.C., (2019) 'Deconstructing the myths about intimate partner violence: A critical discourse analysis of news reporting in Hong Kong' *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 34(11): 2227-2245.

Li, C.K., Liu, J. and Chen, X. (2023) 'Chinese women's acceptance of intimate partner violence against women' *Violence Against Women*, 29(15-16): 3126-3142.

Li, L., Sun, I.Y. and Button, D.M. (2020) 'Tolerance for intimate partner violence: A comparative study of Chinese and American college students' *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 35(21-22): 4533-4557.

Liu, M. (2016) 'The development of Chinese feminism on weibo' *Global Honors Theses*, 32.

Liu, W., Huang, A., and Ma, J. (2015) 'Young Activists, New Movements: Contemporary Chinese Queer Feminism and Transnational Genealogies' *Feminism & Psychology*, 25(1): 11-17.

Peng, B. (2021) 'Discussion on the influence of Microblog in Internet content dissemination' *Journalism Tide*, 3: 69-71.

Qin, N. and Yan, E. (2018) 'Common crime and domestic violence victimization of older Chinese in urban China: the prevalence and its impact on mental health and constrained behavior' *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 33(6): 889-914.

Schaffer, K. and Song, X. (2007) 'Unruly spaces: Gender, women's writing and indigenous feminism in China', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 16(1): 17-30.

Su, Z., McDonnell, D., Cheshmehzangi, A., Ahmad, J., Chen, H., Šegalo, S. and Cai, Y. (2022) 'What "Family Affair?" Domestic Violence Awareness in China' *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10: 795-841.

Tang, C.S.K., Pun, S.H. and Cheung, F.M.C. (2002) 'Responsibility attribution for violence against women: A study of Chinese public service professionals' *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26(3): 175-185.

Thurston, W. E., Tam, D. M. Y., Dawson, M., Jackson, M., and Kwok, S.-M. (2016). 'The Intersection of Gender and Other Social Institutions in Constructing Gender-Based Violence in Guangzhou China', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 31(4): 694-714.

Wang, L. (2019) 'Education, perception factors, and prevention of intimate partner violence: Empirical research on Chinese university students' perceptions and attitudes

concerning intimate partner violence' *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 34(8): 1611-1632.

Wang, Q. (2018) 'Young feminist activists in present-day China: A new feminist generation?' *China Perspectives*, 2018(3): 59-68.

Wang, Q. and Ouyang, H. (2023) 'Counter-discourse production in social media: A feminist CDA of a Weibo post' *Discourse & Communication*, 17(3): 319-335.

Wu, X. and Dong, Y. (2019) 'What is made-in-China feminism (s)? Gender discontent and class friction in post-socialist China' *Critical Asian Studies*, 51(4): 471-492.

Yang, H.C. (2011) 'An alternative to impact litigation in China: the procurator as a legal avenue for cases in the "private family sphere" of domestic violence' *Pac. Rim L. & Pol'y J*, 20: 237.

Yang, M., Beybutyan, A., Ríos, R.P. and Soria-Verde, M.Á. (2021) 'Public attitudes towards intimate partner violence against women and influential factors in China and Spain' *Anuario de Psicología Jurídica*, 31(1): 101-108.

Xu, X., Zhu, F., O'Campo, P., Koenig, M.A., Mock, V. and Campbell, J.(2005)

Prevalence of and risk factors for intimate partner violence in China. *American Journal of Public Health*, 95(1): 78-85.

Yin, S. (2022) Re-articulating feminisms: 'A theoretical critique of feminist struggles and discourse in historical and contemporary' *China Cultural Studies*, 36(6): 981-1004.

Zhang, D. (2023) 'Learning to see, learning to say, and learning to eradicate domestic violence in China' *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, 7(2): 343-351.

Zhang (2023). Weibo releases Q3 financial report, monthly active users exceed 600 million, 9<sup>th</sup> November 2024. <https://m.yicai.com/news/101900321.html>



**Citation on deposit:** Miao, L., & Westmarland, N. (in press). 'There are too many women with love brains': Domestic Violence and Victim Blaming in China. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*,

**For final citation and metadata, visit Durham**

**Research Online URL:** <https://durham->

[repository.worktribe.com/output/3466231](https://durham-repository.worktribe.com/output/3466231)

**Copyright statement:** This accepted manuscript is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 licence.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>