

## Big Picture

Section	Subsection	Summary
Introduction	Context	Ideological polarization has increasingly shaped online discourse in China, yet little is known about how different ideological groups structure their social networks during major controversies.
	RQ	In the context of high-profile public controversies on Weibo—defined as gender- or politics-related events that enter the platform’s Top 10 trending topics and elicit over 100,000 public interactions—how do conservative (e.g., nationalist and anti-feminist) and progressive (e.g., LGBTQ+ activists, feminists, liberal intellectuals) communities differ from the general public in their social network structures, internal cohesion, and cross-group interaction patterns?
	What does the existing literature say	Prior studies have explored online polarization and activism on Chinese social media but rarely compare network structures across ideological lines or benchmark against general users.
	Significance with respect to existing knowledge	This project advances understanding of ideological segmentation on Chinese platforms and contributes to debates on political polarization, networked publics, and digital authoritarianism.
Data and Method	State data and justify	The project collects Weibo posts, interactions, and user metadata around selected controversies, labeling users into ideological or general public groups through hashtag co-occurrence and interaction patterns.
	State analytical method and justify	Social network analysis will be applied to compute centrality, modularity, clustering, and cross-group interaction metrics, enabling dynamic and comparative assessment across groups and events.
Feasibility	Evaluation of approach w.r.t RQ	The approach combines content-based and behavior-based labeling to ensure robust group definitions, supporting rigorous comparison aligned with the research question.

	Initial results	Preliminary code for data scraping and network construction is completed; data collection is pending API approval.
	Proposed timeline	Complete data collection in May, initial network analysis by June, finalize results and interpretation by July.
	Securing an advisor	Reaching out for Professor Sabrina Nardin, who is proficient with SNA.
Assessment of the overall structure		The research question, methods, and feasibility plan are tightly aligned, ensuring that the project is achievable within the proposed timeline and contributes meaningfully to the literature.

## Literature Review

### 1. Feminist Digital Activism on Weibo

The rise of feminist digital activism in China has been notably catalyzed by platforms like Weibo. Liu (2016) traces the historical development of Chinese feminism, noting how younger generations increasingly leverage social media to challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for gender equality. Hou (2015) further highlights how grassroots feminist activists adopted Weibo as a "bottom-up" space for performance-based protest and digital mobilization, with movements like "Occupy Men's Rooms" attracting national attention. Expanding this analysis, Tan (2017) introduces the concept of "digital masquerading," demonstrating how feminist activists tactically maneuver around censorship through creative media practices. Hou (2020) refines this line of inquiry by showing how campaigns like "Naked Chest Against Domestic Violence" and "#MeTooInChina" politicized personal narratives, effectively transforming private grievances into public demands.

Together, these works illustrate not only the empowering potentials of social media for feminist activism but also the evolving tactical repertoire needed to survive in an environment of intense digital surveillance and censorship.

### 2. LGBT Networks and Digital Community Building

Parallel to feminist movements, LGBT communities in China have also capitalized on digital spaces to foster solidarity and visibility. Engebretsen and Schroeder (2015) document how queer activists and artists have cultivated multifaceted online and offline spaces, building grassroots networks despite state repression. Tao and Monteil (2018) emphasize how the internet's growth facilitated LGBT activism's cautious expansion, with activists strategically depoliticizing their claims to minimize state confrontation. Cui et al. (2022) further show how lesbian and bisexual women on Weibo build online communities through careful boundary management, balancing the need for mutual support with strategies to evade harassment and censorship. Yang (2019) introduces the concept of "bargaining with the state," highlighting how LGBT activists selectively frame their demands to gain legitimacy within a tightly controlled political context.

These studies together demonstrate that digital community building among marginalized groups in China is characterized by a complex interplay of empowerment, strategic self-limitation, and resilience against external threats.

### 3. The Rise of Digital Nationalism and Anti-Feminist Backlash

Concurrently, scholarship has documented the rise of conservative, nationalist discourse on Chinese social media. Peng (2022) examines debates on Zhihu and shows how nationalist narratives are increasingly deployed to delegitimize feminist and progressive claims, reinforcing

misogynistic and patriarchal norms. Chen et al. (2019) further find that nationalism on platforms like Weibo is often bottom-up in nature, with ordinary users actively constructing nationalist discourse rather than merely receiving state propaganda. Both studies suggest that nationalist users form cohesive and active online networks, often in opposition to progressive voices.

This growing digital nationalism is not only a political phenomenon but also a gendered one, with strong implications for how progressive and conservative communities interact, polarize, and contest the public sphere.

#### 4. Summary and Connection to Current Research

Together, this body of literature paints a dynamic and contested picture of China's digital public sphere: feminist and LGBT activists leverage online spaces for visibility and community-building under severe constraints, while nationalist and conservative forces mobilize counter-narratives that often reinforce traditional gender hierarchies. However, few studies have systematically compared the network structures, internal cohesion, and cross-group interactions of progressive and conservative communities during specific high-stakes public controversies. This project addresses that gap by analyzing Weibo data to map and compare how ideologically distinct groups organize, connect, and clash under contentious conditions, contributing new insights into the dynamics of polarization and ideological segmentation in Chinese digital publics.

### Work Cited

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