**A Head-On Look: Female Claim-Making as Discursive Activism in Contemporary Chinese Cyberspace**

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# Introduction

The number of Chinese netizens has surpassed 904 million in 2020, and 49% out of whom are women (CNNIC, 2020). Since its creation in the 1990s, Chinese cyberspace has been a vibrant sphere of civil action (Herold and Marolt, 2011). Under state authoritarianism, the Chinese cyberspace stands on the margin of normality, as a carnivalesque place of dissent (ibid.). Making up almost half of the entire netizen population, women are known to be key actors of cyberspace activism. This dissertation sets out to investigate female claim-making in cyberspace. It wants to examine not only what are the claims made by Chinese women on the internet, but how are they articulated. It is particularly interested in the notion of citizenship that underpins their claims. Female fans of a cyber-entertainment reality show are examined as a case study. Their claims are analysed against the analytical framework of feminist discursive activism to see if it can challenge dominant patriarchal discourses and advances citizenship consciousness. This dissertation ultimately asks whether fan activism in cyberspace can create a new politics, a new form of resistance that empowers young Chinese women and to what extent.

What succeeds is a literature review on existing scholarly debates regarding the focus of this dissertation. Sections after that will outline the analytical framework and methodology used. The key findings of the research will ensue before a conclusion is reached. This dissertation finds that female fans’ claim-making constitute discursive activism that is essentially a politics of visibility, which resonates with the notion of performative citizenship. It solicits more scholarly attention to be paid to female fan practices.

# 2. Literature Review

## 2.1 Consensus, Dissent, Dissonance

Early studies of cyberspace saw its potential in “initiating qualitatively new political opportunities because it opens new loci of speech” (Poster, 1995 cited in Dodge and Kitchin, 2003:37). A considerable amount of cyberdemocracy studies were building on the conceptualization of cyberspace as a public sphere, drawing on ﻿Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative rationality (Dryzek, 1990; Dahlgren, 2000; Dahlberg, 2001, 2007; Papacharissi, 2002; Hague and Loader, 2005; Albrecht, 2006). The possibility of cyberspace to promote reasoned communication between rational individuals that advance a new form of deliberative democracy has been extensively postulated (Saco, 2002; Dahlberg, 2007). Yet critiques of this view came from numerous angles. Following Lyotard (1984:7)’s argument that speech acts “fall within the domain of a general agonistics”, many like Poster (1997) and Mouffe (2005) questioned Habermas because democratic politics in terms of consensus and reconciliation cannot be emancipatory. Conversely, anarchy, individuality, and disagreement, rather than rational accord, are the foundations of democracy (Papacharissi, 2002).

The case of China effectively illustrates this. Academics have written on the agonistic energies cyberspace has sparked that unsettles authoritarianism to a certain extent (Tai, 2006; G. Yang, 2009; Han, 2012). Studies of the Chinese cyberspace platforms such as bulletin boards (BBS), blogs and micro-blogs (Weibo) see them as a possible site of dissent and contention (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002; G. Yang, 2009). Under state control, the vibrancy of cyberspace has propelled “existing social forces into new possibilities” (Tai, 2006:xx). However, dissidents in Chinese cyberspace sometimes fall short in disrupting the status quo (Tai, 2010; MacKinnon, 2011). Censorship using filtering technologies, and the construction of a national firewall blocking sensitive sites have emerged to regulate cyberspace on various levels (Harwit and Clark, 2001; Deibert, 2002; Lacharite, 2002; Shie, 2004). It is easy to assume that the state *owns* Chinese cyberspace, but the reality is far more complex.

Literature suggests that it is restrictive to label the Chinese cyberspace using the dichotomy of liberation/control (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010; Cook, 2019). The future of Chinese cyberspace is arguably questionable and scholarly opinions are divided (Stevenson, 2007; Wang and Hong, 2010; Yang, 2016). It will likely be a complex network of dissonant shouting voices (Noveck, 2000). It has to be recognized that Chinese netizens are using the Internet in very creative ways to stretch the very meaning of cyberspace activism (Jiang, 2010; Tréguer, 2013; Han, 2014; Wallis, 2014; Cao, 2015; Wang, 2019). But it can also be diluted into a quasi-revolution that merely disseminate capitalist consumerism, individualism and new modes of oppression (Kahn and Kellner, 2004). This dissertation situates itself within this debate to investigate claim-making in cyberspace (ibid.).

## 2.2 Counter-publics, Microrebellions, Personally Political

Another prominent strand of critique of Habermas was targeting its gender-blindness (Poster, 1997). Fraser’s seminal works (1985,1990) have disputed the fact that Habermas ignores gender subtexts when he theorizes about social relations. This dissertation stands to redress this omission, following the steps of feminist scholars to argue that there is a need to recognize female subaltern counter-publics, in which members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses (Fraser, 1990). These counter-publics are reflexively conscious of their opposition to the dominant ideology (Felski, 1989). This reflexivity calls a counter-public into existence. It is this process of interpellation that generates a subaltern counter-public (Chambers, 2005).

In the case of China, Chinese feminism has experienced a marked paradigm shift away from the government-led All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF) and other government-organized feminist NGOs (GONGOs) that operated within the regime (Mao, 2020). A new generation of feminists refused to continue the quest of state feminism, and sought other means of mobilization. They gather themselves through non-governmental organizing based on informal networks rather than in state-sanctioned organizations (Wang, 2018; Mao, 2020). They also refute the state-centred perspective of earlier scholars that positioned them as victims under risk of government clamp-down, and argued for an unrecognized agency at the meso and micro level (Chang, Ren and Yang, 2018; Lin, 2019; Lin and Yang, 2019). They note that digital feminism in recent years is not currently able to tackle structural inequalities through mass mobilization. Instead, women under repressive regimes proliferate personal revolutions or “microrebellions” in cyberspace (Abdulkarim 2013).

There exists, in China, a similar tendency to revive the battling cries central to Second Wave feminism “the personal is political” on the internet (Tan, 2017; Chang, Ren and Yang, 2018; Han, 2018; Wang, 2018; Wang and Driscoll, 2019; Chang and Tian, 2020). Originally published in 1970 by Carol Hanisch, the phrase revokes the misconception that “personal issues” in women’s lives are unworthy of public attention and political debate (Hanisch, 2006). Issues associated with lived experiences of oppression in the everyday are increasingly viewed as the basis for politics, and not purely “private hang-ups” (Morgan, 1970; Oakley, 1981; Kennedy, 2007; Rogan and Budgeon, 2018). New information technologies of cyberspace are paramount to the facilitation of these counter-publics that houses oppositional, micro-level and personally political rebellions (Travers, 2003). This dissertation will add to existing literature on cyberspace-based female claim-making.

## 2.3 More Than a Fan

Some critics are sceptical that consumerist lifestyles on the internet revolving around the entertainment industry will crowd out interest in politics (Damm, 2007; Cao, 2015; Herold and Seta, 2015). This view is an underestimation (Marshall, 2010, 2014, 2017, 2021; Turner, 2010). Celebrity is a pedagogical aid that taught generations how to engage and use consumer culture to make oneself, a “generative centre that explains the social world’s functioning and its values” to the self (ibid.; Couldry, 2009:2). They are also key tools of Western liberal democracy because they are part of a semiotic system responsible for representing popular values and means of expression for mass mentality (Wesołowski, 2020). This has inspired a range of scholars to delve into fan activities that are potentially political acts, including that of Jenkins (1992, 2006), Duffett (2013) and Hills (2002).

These fan studies, in the past decade or so, argue that it is too limiting to see fans as apolitical, passive audiences and celebrities as neutral objects for consumption. Very much resembling political constituencies, fan groups are capable of utilizing cyberspace as a space to express their views and enact resistance (van Zoonen, 2004). It cannot be overlooked that young people begin to advocate for social justice issues as fans and participate in fan activism (Brough and Shresthova, 2011; Hinck, 2019). These claims being pursued online constitute a unique fandom counter-public that has the potential to empower young people to become civically engaged and politically aware (Earl and Kimport, 2009; Jenkins, 2011; Zhang, 2017). It is often in this fandom counter-public that mass marketing can be turned to market for “cultural acupuncture”, where fans can harness the energy of popular culture to change the world for the better (Slack, 2010).

Since then, there is a change in how fans consume the celebrity-commodity due to the rise of the idol industry in the East Asian context (Liang and Shen, 2016; Meng, 2019; Luo, 2020; Zhang, 2020). This refers to the production of carefully trained, curated young performers as a new kind of commodity (Kang, 2017). The industry is supported by and responsible for an unprecedented set of structured consumer relationships, consisting of an intimate and active connection between the idol and their fans (Fairchild, 2007).

Such recent developments are yet to be fully captured in celebrity/fan studies. Some idol industry studies have been conducted in the Korean or the Japanese context (Aoyagi, 2005; Black, 2012; Kim, 2015, 2018; Leung, Cheng and Tse, 2017; Yoon and Jin, 2017). Chinese scholarly debates on idols and fan activities are nascent (Yin, 2020; Zhang, 2020; Zhao and Wu, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2021). Most of these treat the idol industry and fan activism as distinct strands. Efforts to unpack fans’ practice of activism *as they produce, financially and emotionally invest in, protect and speak on the behalf of their idols* are observable but insufficient, especially in China (L. Yang, 2009; Huang, 2011; Y. Zhang, 2019; An, 2020; Chen, 2020; Hou, 2020; Sun, 2020). A lot of these are from the field of media studies utilizing communication theories, failing to see fan activism as real-life dissent (Wang, 2017; L. Zhang, 2019; Sun, 2019; Yang, 2020; Zhou, 2020; R. Yang, 2021; Yang and Chen, 2021; Yu, 2021). Still more lacking is a gender focus in idol industry studies, despite some references in passing (Fuschillo, 2020). Even when a feminist perspective is assumed, it is to examine the relationship between the male fan and female idols (Aoyagi, 2005; Kim, 2011; Black, 2012; Tajima, 2018). Examination of female fans, their male idols and their activism is a surprising omission, especially considering the plenitude of male idol reality shows in recent years. These shows producing male idols through training, competition, assessments and audience votes have become the predominant mode of idol consumption since 2018 with the airing of “Idol Producer” (偶像练习生), often drawing millions of views. Young females are avid supporters of these shows. Surveys conducted reveal that 79.01%--99.5% are female viewers (Meng, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2020). Their relationship with their chosen idol and their subsequent claim-making is scarcely investigated, despite the increasingly delicate gender politics with, for example, the rise of “soft masculinity” and feminized, “flower-boys” idol images (*BBC News*, 2018).

Given the scant attention paid to Chinese female fans of idols and their activism, this dissertation seeks to fill this gap. It attends to the paucity of literature on personally political consumption of male idols by Chinese women. The hypothesis is that engagement in the consumption of idols does have an impact on Chinese women’s realization of the self, sense of empowerment and citizen consciousness. The next section outlines an analytical framework against which this hypothesis will be tested and analysed.

# 3. Analytical Framework

## 3.1 Feminist Discursive Activism

This dissertation frames the Chinese cyberspace as an important site for feminist discursive activism (Steele, 2011; Shaw, 2012, 2016; Clark, 2016; Drüeke and Zobl, 2016; Gabriel, 2016; Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017; Arbatskaya, 2019). This is a highly appropriate framework considering the research questions of this dissertation. It views the claim-making of female fans of idols as a distinct form of discursive politics that consciously seek to challenge, denaturalize and deconstruct dominant discourses (Shaw, 2012). As defined by Katzenstein (1995), discursive activism is the politics of meaning-making, involving processes of reinterpretation, reformulation, reconsideration and rewriting of the norms and practices of society. As Clark (2016) asserts citing the works of Gerbaudo (2012) and Castells (2015), this is apt when used to examine cyberspace-based claim-making.

Previous usages of discursive activism as an analytical framework feature creative adaptations to the concept. Katzenstein (1995) uses John Gaventa’s three conceptualizations of power as an evaluative tool (Gaventa, 1980: 13-16, cited in Katzenstein, 1995). She identifies that feminists in the Church have demonstrated the capacity to “mount a counteroffensive” within two out of the three arenas of power. They have managed to reset the agenda for policy and public debates and reshape the way feminists define their concerns and options but fall short at influencing decision-making within the Church (ibid.). On the other hand, Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer (2017) have argued that discursive activism can take two forms, namely that of collective identity/collective consciousness and public protest/agenda setting. The first refers to how a feminist consciousness is achieved through, possibly, sharing of experiences, internal debates and creation of new rhetorical forms. The second form is concerned with the active circulation of these stories across multiple digital platforms, externally communicating their message as it gathered momentum worldwide (ibid.). Informed by these adaptations of feminist discursive activism as a framework, this dissertation establishes three aspects as integral dimensions of discursive activism, which is that of subjectivity, connectivity and agenda-setting. The following sections will provide an explanation of these.

## 3.2 The Gendered and Embodied Subject(ivity)

Discursive activism should result in the creation of a gendered subjectivity (Young, 1997; Rebughini, 2014). This should manifest on several levels. Firstly, it translates into an awareness of how particular mainstream discourses are shaped by patriarchal power (Shaw, 2013). Secondly, it is to see that this gendered subjectivity should also be, in the words of Rebughini (2014), *embodied* and grounded in *subjects*. It is a consciousness of personal experiences as political problems, that these problems are shared by other women and are socially produced (Maddison, 2013). Thirdly, it is to see the self as an embodied subject with *agency*. Borrowing a specific example from Shaw (2013)’s study on Australian feminist bloggers, it is to “challenge people to think about the way that they perceive things” using discursive practices (ibid.: 126). This dissertation will analyse whether female fans of idols’ activism can successfully actualize a gendered subjectivity and give rise to embodied subjects with agency.

## 3.3 Connectivity

Discursive activism is predicated upon a network of activists that both constitute to and are consciously producing a sense of connectivity. A gendered subjectivity, argued Shaw (2013), are necessarily formed amidst interactions with others as a feminist community. Maddison (2004) used Melucci (1985)’s idea of “submerged networks” to further illustrate this. These networks formed in discursive practices, for Melucci, are one of the most significant constituencies of contemporary movements (Maddison, 2004). They are small groups in a system of exchange that are “submerged in everyday life which require a personal involvement in experiencing and practicing cultural innovation” (Melucci, 1985: 800). What this suggests is that a sense of connectivity does not have to originate from goal-driven, regular, and publicly visible gatherings but rather it exists latently. It is embedded in the everyday acts of unobtrusive, non-confrontational resistance with the occasional militantism (Melucci, 1985; Katzenstein, 1990). Female discursive activism in Chinese cyberspace is hypothesized to have created a sense of connectivity through, but not limited to, formations like submerged networks and constitute feminist discursive activism.

## 3.4 Agenda-Setting

Finally, discursive activism should theoretically amount to a “bottom-up agenda-setting” (Yuan, 2020). There should be inhibition of “mobilization of bias” in institutions of power that prevent women’s issues from entering public debate (Katzenstein, 1995). There should be an aggregation and amplification of women’s experiences before they circulate across platforms in traditional or new media (Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017). Women’s articulation, originating from their gendered subjectivity and formed amidst their connections with other women, should be able to fracture the social silences surrounding their circumstances (Fraser, 1989 cited in Fischer, 2003; ibid.). Ultimately, this should lead to a change in decision-making around women’s issues (Katzenstein, 1995).

This dissertation draws on these dimensions as criteria, against which the claim-making of female fans of idols in Chinese cyberspace are assessed as to whether they constitute discursive activism. The next section will outline the methodology.

# 4. Methodology

## 4.1 Background

Given the framework developed and the focus of this dissertation, this study deploys feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) as its methodology. Following the tradition of critical discourse analysis (CDA), FCDA is informed by the Foucaultian definition of discourse where it denotes a way of organizing knowledge that structures social relations, produced by effects of power within a social order (Adams, 2017). It prescribes particular rules which outline the criteria for legitimating knowledge and truth within the discursive order (ibid.). Discourse fixes text with a specific meaning while disqualifying other interpretations through a number of controlled, selected, organized procedures, institutionalizing power as objective and stable (ibid.; Foucault, 1981). FCDA is, therefore, concerned with advancing an understanding of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements (Lazar, 2007).

Because of the multidisciplinary malleability of FCDA, academic adaptations of the methodology are various. Fiction, pamphlets, songs, films, newspapers in print media, memes and posts on new media platforms such as WeChat are some of the materials that came under inspection (Lehtonen, 2007; Marling, 2010; Rizwan, 2011; Edwards and Milani, 2014; Shapiro, 2017; Boling, 2020; Peng, 2021). Most FCDA studies focusing on new media content have illustrated their findings via thematic codifications (Dalton, 2019; Kolmasova and Krulisova, 2019; Nartey, 2021). Considering the research focus on fan claim-making in cyberspace, this dissertation will follow this tradition and combine it with the case study approach to have in-depth insight on how claim-making of female fans of idols can constitute discursive activism. The holistic nature of the case study approach enables this dissertation to build a contextualized understanding. Furthermore, the case study approach tends to unravel detailed workings of the relationships and processes rather than outcomes (Denscombe, 2007). This is compatible with the framework of discursive activism where the research focus is not placed upon the results of events but the mechanisms of discursive resistance.

Meanwhile, it is also important to address the limitation of this study in its deployment of FCDA. Many usages of FCDA are accompanied by a technology-assisted corpus analysis that involves an examination of linguistic patterns (Batkin, 2018; Ramanathan, Paramasivam and Bee Hoon, 2020). The qualitative nature of a non-corpus study like the present one producing “soft” data only might suffer the criticism of lacking rigour expected of social science research (Denscombe, 2007). Similarly, the case study approach is vulnerable to invalid generalizations made from its findings (ibid.). The credibility of data can be further challenged by the problem of translation, as claims quoted in the dissertation are originally in Chinese. Anonymity in cyberspace questions the premise of the study as to whether claims surveyed are indeed made by females in every circumstance. These weaknesses are considered, and the research procedure will take heed in overcoming them. The next section will briefly introduce the case study and the research methods.

## 4.2 Produce and Explore: The Case of CHUANG 2021

Produce Camp 2021 or CHUANG 2021 (hereafter PC) is the fourth season of an idol group survival show franchise developed by Tencent (Wikipedia, 2021). This is the first season where auditions were conducted on a global scale and had recruited 90 trainees aged between 18 and 29 from multiple countries (Fig.1). The official branding of the show is an international cultural exchange programme about coming-of-age and youthful explores of the world (the word for produce, 创, is homophonic with the word for explore). Contestants will undergo training and accomplish tasks set by the producing team with the guidance of mentors. Viewers or “citizen producers”/ “initiators” (创始人) produce the idols they like, voting for their contestants of choice for them to be selected as the final 11. Initial presentations and group performances of all contestants in the first episode will kick off the voting. A voting window opening, a public assessment performance and a ranking announcement make up one phase of the show, and there are three phases before the final results are published. These finalists will form a boy group and sign a two-year contract.

图片包含 人, 男人, 桌子, 前

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Fig 1. Source: Tencent Video

The results of the contest are, according to the rules, entirely determined by audience votes. Each Tencent Video application account has a daily quota of virtual votes that can be cast for a certain number of contestants. Fans can also purchase products of the sponsoring company, Chunzhen yoghurts from China Mengniu Dairy Company Limited for more voting quotas. Once the yoghurts are received, there will be a QR code inside the box that can be scanned and exchanged for 100 votes.

As of the writing of this dissertation, PC has attracted 550 million views altogether, ranking third on the most viewed internet-based reality shows in 2021 (ENLIGHTENT Data, 2021). Unofficial statistics collected by a viewer in a survey on the 1st March reveal that 94% of PC’s audience are women. PC can serve as a source from which instances of female fan activism can be drawn as examples, with the scale of its influence and its largely female audience base (Fig.2).



Fig. 2 Gender distribution of PC Viewers (unofficial poll) Source: “创造营2021观众属性大调查” in Produce Camp 2021 Official Group on Douban

## 4.3 Research Methods

This study will be examining female fans of PC and their activism. It will be using FCDA to conduct a content analysis of posts collected from two sites, Weibo and Douban, which are both key social media platforms utilized by PC viewers.

The Chinese equivalent of Twitter, Weibo, has accumulated over 230 million daily active users and more than 500 million monthly active users. Users of Weibo are predominantly female with a percentage of around 76% (Qianfan Analysys, 2019; iMedia Research, 2020). On the other hand, Douban is the loose equivalent of Reddit combined with Rotten Tomatoes in China. This social networking site allows users to rate films, music, books, and form communities of interests via its Group function. It is known as a home base of internet activists and houses numerous digital feminist groups, with a significantly higher percentage of female users at 73% in 2019 (Zhang, 2017; Qianfan Analysys, 2019).

As of 25th April, all hashtags related to PC has attracted 9 billion views on Weibo and had 698 trending topics (Sina Entertainment, 2021). As of the writing of this dissertation, there are 193 PC-related groups on Douban. The study is mainly sampling Douban threads within the Produce Camp 2021 Official Group (创造营2021官组). Created 3 months before the show was aired, it is the largest PC-related fans group (181,101 members) with over 383,340 threads (by 19th July 2021). These justify the choice of Weibo and Douban when studying the case of PC as platforms housing female fan claims. Because all threads and posts are published anonymously and Douban allows identical username handles, these will be coded in the format “initial of platform+date+number” (e.g. D0306-1) for differentiation. A full list of posts collected with its weblinks will be enclosed in the Appendix. All Chinese names of contestants will be referred to in the order of surname+given name following the Chinese grammar. The next section will introduce the key findings.

# 5. Findings and Discussions

## 5.1 Fans as Nomads

This study has analysed over 450 Douban threads and Weibo posts as results of over 35 search terms, 6 Weibo hashtags and numerous secondary sources published across platforms as supplementary data. The first finding has verified Jenkins (1992)’s seminal work. His work, largely indebted to Michel de Certeau (1984), argues that fans are nomads in constant motion. This nomadic nature of fans results in their status as, in Radway (1988)’s words, “free-floating agents” or “ever-changing, fluid subjects” engaging in a “nomadic wandering through ever-changing positions and apparatuses” (Radway, 1988: 363, 365; Grossberg, 1987: 38). This study has found that female fans of PC make claims as nomads. They oscillate between multiple personae as they make their claims. Amongst the multitude of subject positions that nomadic fans can take and struggle with, three key personae have been identified by the study, which is that of the consumer, the feminist, and the activist. These are not collapsible identifications, and female fans often occupy an intermediary space. It is at the *intersection* of these personae can these claims be coherently understood (Fig.3).

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Fig. 3 Source: author.

The rest of this section will evaluate examples drawn from various moments of enactment of these personae against the analytical framework.

## 5.2 Subjectivity

### 5.2.1 Institutional Sexism

The study finds that female PC fans do display a gendered subjectivity as feminist activists. They challenge the dominant patriarchal discourses, manifest in institutional sexism of which Tencent is guilty of as they watch the show. Some fans interrogate the inherently sexist modes of production of PC. They raise the crucial comparison where the previous season selecting female idols, PC 2020, have had them live in a pink fairy-tale castle and had their measurements done on camera, whereas male idols in PC 2021 are made to live in neutral-toned dorm rooms and camp on the beach with survival kits (D0118-2). Such implicitly sexist setups were noted and compiled into a post labelling it as patriarchal reinforcements of gender stereotypes. The Original Poster (OP) of this thread has studied media and gender, commenting that gender differences are not innate but socialized by dominant patriarchal discourses such as those manipulated by Tencent (D0118-1). These prove that female PC fans’ claim-making can constitute discursive activism.

Besides the OP of D0118-1, other claims also drew on personal experiences, showing that female PC fans are gendered, embodied subjects. At one point during the show, Tencent announced that they are hiring more translators to work on set, and they specifically asked for male applicants only. This was explained by some as to avoid workplace romance between female staff and male contestants (D0328-1), but fans were quick to argue that this is sexist. This is denying females of their opportunities, fans claim, and also implicitly exacerbating the stereotype that women are “enticements” in workplaces. One post made by a student majoring in Foreign Languages related this to wider sexism already confronting female interpreters in her sector (D0328-2). This shows an understanding of personal experiences in relation to other women in similar situations, which is a key aspect of discursive activism.

### 5.2.2 Inward Turn

What’s particularly noteworthy is how female PC fans’ challenge of patriarchy as a dominant discourse is concurrent with a challenge of the dominant, predetermined identity of The Feminist. Their defiance of patriarchy converges with a defiance of arbitrary qualifications that define feminists as a monolithic, unified category. There circulates the opinion, amongst some female netizens, that you can’t be a female fan of a male idol when you are supposedly an “independent” feminist. It is often asserted that these identities are incompatible, but others note that it is posing another kind of oppression for women (D0124-1, D0626-1). Feminism is supposed to liberate and not further incarcerate the female subject (D0319-1). Rather, to strike a balance between admiring a male idol and opposing patriarchy, young women call for a *prioritization of their gendered identity*, seeing the self first as a woman *before* as a fan. This is particularly prominent in the AK controversy.

During the show, there occurred a boycott of the rapper Liu Zhang (also known as AK), on the grounds of his misogyny in his previous “diss track” of idols, the idol industry, and female fans of male idols. He has referred to male idols as “sissies/faggots” and “eunuchs” because of their feminized features, while calling female idol fans “bitches” who masturbate to photos of their idols. The hypocrisy of him dismissing idols and fans with sexist slurs and then competing in an idol show has attracted immense criticism, especially from feminists. There is a marked realization of the need to give precedence to the identity of the woman because of their gendered subjectivity. Anti-AK feminists claim, vehemently, that anyone who vaguely sees oneself as a woman would naturally boycott AK (D0427-1).

Indeed, a fundamental aspect of feminist discursive activism is this inward turn to examine and negotiate one’s intersectional identities. As Young (1997) has remarked, it is paramount in discursive activism that “women” as a group are not reduced to the monolithic construct “woman”. Female PC fans agree and argue that it is equally important to not create archetypal Feminists for it to overrule, again, as another kind of dominant discourse over women. They argue that it is acceptable to be a feminist female fan, but a prioritization must be a due course if required.

### 5.2.3 Discursive Boundaries

On the other hand, AK’s fans’ defence of him leads to a broader debate on the nature of feminist activism. They turned the anti-AK attack on its head and accuse some feminists of double standards. When some are boycotting AK, misogynistic, disparaging language is equally used in reference to fans of AK as “dick-worshippers” (拜屌癌, D0322-1). Some has labelled AK fans as “bitches” because it’s “what AK called you and you seem to be okay with it” (D0425-2). This is not healthy activism either, fans of AK correctly point out, because feminists themselves are guilty of misogyny. The term “elastic feminism” (弹性女权) has been coined to criticize these double standards and anti-AKs’ wavering position (D0425-2).

Anti-AKs’ exploitation of feminism has been noted by a self-proclaimed feminist-activist fan of AK. She has written a renowned thread on Douban, alerting others that feminism has been overly abused. It became an irrefutable, omnipotent label, slapped on various instances with vested interests to disarm anyone opposing them (D0425-1). This over-sanctification, ironically, is a desecration and total erosion of the term. It is used in lieu of “correctness” and “authority” in too many instances, and weaponized to misogynistically attack fans of AK. Interestingly, the same argument is again upended by anti-AKs, saying that he is still misogynistic even if feminists claimed to like him. It is true that feminist should not be used interchangeably with “correctness”, and so a feminist’s support should not go unchallenged as a superior mark of approval that ignores AK’s misogyny.

What’s integral to feminist discursive activism is precisely this kind of internal discussion as struggles of discursive boundary (Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017). Female PC fans are seeing themselves as the site of the struggle, using feminism as a lensthrough which to re-view and negotiate their fan practices (D0321-1). This continuous process of negotiations, argued Shaw, is the opposite of popular misconceptions that characterized these internal questionings within the movement as “infighting” (Shaw, 2013). Rather, it should be the case that discursive activists are also making sense and reflecting on their own claims with their new gendered subjectivity.

Their reflection leads to a public self-disciplining. There is an outright rejection of misogynistic discourse used by fans themselves in daily communication as they interact with other fans. A cluster of posts found on Douban ask for an official banning within-group, or at least everyone’s self-refrainment from using words such as “sissy” (娘) to express dislike for an androgynous contestant in a derogatory sense (D0315-1). Fans also protest against the usage of “motherly” (母) or “aunty” (姨) as deprecatory adjectives along the same lines (D0225-1). Feminine attributes, fans claim, should not be a point of attack and weaponized as synonyms of insults. A fundamental aspect of discursive activism is this open reorientation of the ways feminist shape their concerns and opinions *amongst* themselves, and female PC fans have demonstrated their capability to do so. It can be said, then, that claims made by female PC fans as feminists-activists are a form of discursive activism.

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### 5.2.4 Actively Consuming

As aforementioned, discursive activism should consist of a gendered subjectivity that creates embodied subjects with agency. The study finds that female PC fans have demonstrated their agency first by being a consumer. It lies with their ability to “produce” idols with hefty financial investment in their chosen contestant-commodities. This happens in the form of fan-idol crowdfunding (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Fan-idol crowdfunding, as explained by Wang, is an online activity within fandom where fans raise money for the idol’s benefit. In this case, it is organized by the idol’s supporting fan club (后援会, hereafter known as SC) to collect funds via mobile apps like Owhat and Taoba (桃叭) from the wider fan community, to purchase either virtual votes (bulk-buying bot accounts on Tencent for app-based votes) or physical votes (boxed yoghurts). This is a highly organized event often involving hundreds of millions of Chinese RMB and hundreds of thousands of fans. Unofficial statistics show that fans of Liu Yu, the contestant ranked No.1 in PC finals has raised over 244 million RMB (2.7 million pounds) to secure his place (Fig.4).

表格

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Fig. 4 Unofficial statistics collected by viewers of crowdfunding (up to 1:30pm on 24th April). Source: Douban

Despite their agency as “citizen producers/initiators”, female PC fans know that Tencent overpowers them. They often accuse Tencent of vote manipulation where votes cast for contestants are allegedly blocked by the system and are not processed (D0323-1, D0324-2, D0403-5). After each ranking announcement, SC would cross-reference the announced votes with their internal records of accounts that correlates to the number of votes cast. Explicitly agonistic claims will then be made from the position of the consumer-activist. In other words, suspicions of violation to their agency incite and propel a profusion of claims in defence of it.

### 5.2.5 Tactical Manoeuvres

Jenkins (1992) confirms De Certeau’s distinction between strategies and tactics, whereby the former are large-scale operations performed from a position of strength, and the latter belong to the population of the dispossessed and the powerless. Female PC fans are fully aware of their position of inferiority, both as a feminist-activist with a gendered subjectivity and as a consumer-activist, so that they deploy a wide range of tactics. The claim-making of consumer-activists, as a defence of their agency, involves a series of highly tactical manoeuvres. These include the publications of carefully worded statements, sufficient statistical evidence, and a list of questions/demands for PC producers (W0519-1). Posts are deliberately structured to submit convincing proof, persuade, protest, stir up discussions and invite sympathy. They often use terms like “rightful”, “reasonable” or “normal” (正当、合理、正常) to back up their claims and self-legitimize. Meanwhile, a lot of threads surveyed are directly confrontational, since it is rumoured that staff from the producing team are also members of the Douban group. Claim-making as consumer activists, then, is a space of experimentation and incubation. Female PC fans can test out different methods of activism and as they target the authority, there culminates a rebellious consciousness which is complemented by, echoes with and feeds into their claim-making as feminist activists.

The most pronounced accusation is made by fans of Caelan Moriarty. He is a popular international contestant from the Japanese company AVEX who, despite evidence suggesting otherwise, has failed to enter the top 11 in the finale. It is suspected that Tencent has made secret deals (“resources swaps” 资源置换) with more affluent management agencies beforehand. They locked in some finalist places for some contestants, pushing “people-elected” contestants like Caelan out (D0306-3). His SC has initiated a series of cross-platform campaigns. They have written and published a statement fully detailing vote counts, records of accounts from crowdfundings, headcounts of donations and other relevant statistics for public viewing (W0426-9). This has attracted over 54k reblogs, 47k comments and 173k likes on Weibo. They have also created a hashtag “Caelan’s SC rights-advocacy statement” (#庆怜粉丝后援会维权声明#) which has attracted some 400 million views overall. What sets this case apart from others is the intensity of fervour, the scale of impact and the level of creativity as well as organization of fans. They have successfully “soberized” their claims, consciously revamping their activism as socially significant, relatable for all who’s ever experienced injustice and no longer solely an issue within the entertainment media context (W0426-14, W0426-20).

They have intentionally directed the discussions towards asking whether this is an instance of anomie in PC who, by manipulating votes, fail to stand as an exemplar for young viewers because it is selling fake democracy (W0426-11, W0426-19). Claims have questioned what kind of values (价值观) are PC promoting and what kind of an ethical role model is PC (W0426-17, W0426-18). Under recent state regulations of media content to be upright and ensure “correct guidance” of youths, fans are hitting the sore spot of PC producers by accusing its potentially malicious influence. Furthermore, it is claimed that PC is culpable of indulging and actively baiting irrational consumerism in crowdfundings (W0426-10, W0426-11, W0426-18). They name-shame Tencent as a fraudulent corporation that incentivizes fan investment, an evil capitalist in a socialist country (W0426-15, W0426-16, W0426-17).

Caelan’s case is also argued rhetorically. The David vs. Goliath discourse is extensively explored in multiple posts, sometimes via a Chinese idiomatic equivalent (螳臂当车, literally meaning “arms of a mantis against a car”), positioning Caelan as a symbol of the “grassroots” (草根) and PC as the top-down authoritarian power preventing his success. This scenario constructs a power struggle between the innocent, hardworking victim (contestant), his loyal followers (fans) and the autocratic villain (PC producers). Similes are manipulated for the cause too. In one post, a fan has drawn a parallel between the experience of Caelan and a previous National College Entrance Exam (Gaokao) identity theft scandal which exposes systemic cheating (W0426-13). The latter feature thousands of higher-performing students from less developed areas who got their results swapped with imposters from a more privileged position (*BBC News*, 2020). Caelan’s case has been likened to this, with his position being equally “stolen”.

穿着西装笔挺的男子

描述已自动生成 Fig 5: Caelan crying in the finales upon hearing his results. Source: Baidu

It is clear, then, that there permeate usages of recontextualization as a key method of female fan activism. An important analytical concept of traditional CDA, recontextualization refers to the de-location of a practice from its original context to re-locate in another, e.g. from political to media (Ietcu-Fairclough, 2008). Caelan’s fans have aligned their claims with larger bodies of critiques of capitalism, social injustice, and ethics to borrow legitimacy. It is through this recontextualization, this relating of their claim-making to more common criticisms that their activism has gained momentum. In a way, recontextualization has helped them identify valid precedents, and establish reference points for onlookers and sympathizers as to *what* and *how* *should they feel* for Caelan. Recontextualization here is to instruct, inform and dictate how activism should be perceived by associating it with its source contexts. This demonstrates that female PC fans can act as embodied subjects with agency. This is exactly how Shaw (2013) has characterized feminist discursive activism, which challenges how people perceive things (126).

### 5.2.6 A Chasm, A Void

However, their claim-making as consumer-activists is not without incongruities. Female PC fans value their financial agency so much that they argue money *buys* them more discursive power. Financial consumption, firstly, is female PC fans’ credentials. There permeates the argument within idol fandom that you’re not a real fan until you’ve spent money on them. Crowdfundings make the nebulous notion of “fan admiration” no longer unquantifiable but concrete (Scott, 2015). From here, consumption is also the *grounds* upon which claims can be raised in the future. Financial investment buys them the bargaining chip that can be thrown out when appropriate, to emphasize the gravity of their activism as devoted fan-consumers and secure a higher chance of success. Liu Yu’s fans, for example, remarked that there needs to be a drastic lead or, in their words, a chasm (断层) ahead of the contestant ranked below in crowdfundings (D0306-2, D0330-1). Crowdfundings is the only “tangible, effective” means to back up their future claims as consumer-activists (D0412-1). They commented, in a pep-talk thread during the contest, that money needs to be spent to assure that Tencent won’t dare to touch his rankings (D0330-1). Fans invest enough in the show to evoke a threatening presence, to *raise the stakes* for Tencent *if* they consider manipulating votes. It is very much like a fail-safe fuse for when Tencent shows signs of fraud to immediately counteract.

What’s problematic is how feminist discursive activism somehow requires the *permission* of financial consumption to work. Still the more complicated is how fans make use of choice feminism (Ferguson, 2010; Thwaites, 2017; McIntyre, 2021). This is the idea that all choices made by women are expressions of liberation, and scholars should abstain from judging the content of the choice women make. Their investment in their idols is, fans claim, a consumer’s rightful choice, demonstrative of their freedom and their financial autonomy of having “a room of their own” that should not be impeded (D0304-2, D0403-1). This choice discourse is commonly found in proclamations like “I earn my money and I spend it myself” (ibid.).

The reality of this choice discourse is that they perpetuate rather than disrupts dominant discourses. This emphasis on choice is at the expense of systematic radical change, as it sides with neoliberal values of individualism and consumerism (Ayrelan Iuvino, 2017; Delaney, 2017). Literature warns correctly against a postulation of consumption as signs of female empowerment, and therefore a neoliberalist co-optation (Gonick, 2006; Gill, 2008; Kantola and Squires, 2012; Fraser, 2013; Rottenberg, 2014; Banet-Weiser, 2015; Wu and Dong, 2019). The idea is that women can now somehow “buy their access to power and equality” (Crispin, 2017 cited in Ayrelan Iuvino, 2017). The ambivalence behind the female consumer’s right to choose in a neoliberal society, as Thwaites (2017) contends, should be constantly questioned. An ACWF article has also critiqued how this co-optation creates an illusion of agency disguised under patriarchal control (Liu, 2019). In a way, female PC fans engage themselves in discursive activism against PC as much as they are *complicit* in PC’s crime. They help Tencent as it exculpates itself from accusations of baiting consumerism, by claiming that “fans *chose* to spend on the contestants” (Wei Zhang, 2021). Fans proliferate a problematic phenomenon while criticizing its existence. Despite some exceptions, the majority of female PC fans fail to realize this. These tactical manoeuvres, although enabling female PC fans to become embodied subjects with agency, are dangerously driven by a disillusionment and cannot constitute discursive activism.

## 5.3 Connectivity

### 5.3.1 Comrades-in-Arms

The study finds that female PC fans can create and place themselves within a wider network of activists as part of their claim-making, displaying a level of discursive activism. As feminist-activists, they have engaged in a mass self-disciplining. Moreover, fans do understand the need to stand in solidarity with each other in a sexist society to challenge dominant patriarchal discourses (D0228-2). Many have acknowledged that beyond PC “we are all comrades-in-arms” as feminists, especially after 13th of Apr when Douban had a large-scale removal of feminist Groups. Female PC fans, while busy voting for their constants, took note of this clamp-down and rallied to post a series of threads protesting the removal (D0414-1, D0425-2).

As consumer-activists, Caelan’s fans have sought different tactics *without* a particular movement leader, but are informed and guided by each other’s moves. Fan groups’ high social viscosity means that individual fans can act independently, creatively but still maintain a level of cohesion with the larger goal and others in the fan group. They chip in by drafting their own threads, but can also educate and encourage each other to be “tough and assertive”. Together they brainstorm on how to collect evidence for lawsuits, how to find lawyers, what kind of legalistic measures can be taken, how their activism can evolve into offline action etc. (D0308-1, D0413-1, D0423-1, D0428-1). This loose structure is characteristic of female digital communities (Jouët, 2018). Less hierarchical and more participatory for everyone to be involved, this kind of connectivity is crucial for feminist discursive activism (Carter Olson, 2016).

Beyond their fan group, Caelan’s fans were aware that they need to ally with fans of other contestants, because “what happened to Caelan might have happened to others” (D0426-7). They called for support from, and actively supported claims of other contestants with their rankings adulterated (ibid.). This is a perfect demonstration of Bennett and Segerberg (2012)’s concept of connective action where fans, connected via weak social ties in digital networks, can fall in and out of coalitions within one fan group or across fan groups depending on the occasion. This kind of contentious politics no longer needs a traditional, organizational membership structure at every level to cultivate activism, but can happen organically and sporadically (ibid.). This indicates that female PC fans’ claim-making are conceivable as discursive activism.

### 5.3.2 The Problem of Standpoint

Despite that female fans are able to form a unique connective alliance in some circumstances, their claim-making is almost always backpaddled by inter-fan group clashes. PC is a highly competitive show, making a long-lasting alliance between fans of different idols very unlikely.

For example, the AK controversy, because it took place between fans of AK and fans of other contestants, often end up deviating from the locus of debate. It was less of an issue about misogyny but more about contestant competition. Fans of Caelan, because they claim that his position was stolen, were adamant on hinting which contestant in the final 11 was the suspected “thief”.

More generally speaking, there is an obsession with questioning each other’s “standpoint” (立场) and leanings amongst female PC fans that prohibits a genuine connection between them. A claim can never be accepted until the claimant is thoroughly interrogated. The discourse of standpoint is normalized and used compulsively, to doubt whose fan are you, whose side you’re on, why are you of a certain opinion at this point in time etc. Female PC fans’ claim-making resembles a politics of “mobilized categories”, where individual interest groups (fans of a certain contestant) can stir up discussions but have very extreme points of views in opposition with other groups (Abramson *et al.,* 1988; Hills and Hughes, 1998 cited in Edwards, 2004). In a way, the division between fan groups is only semi-permeable.

What Shaw has called, quoting Ziarek, an “ethos of alterity” where feminists should be accepting each other’s differing experiences is difficult to upkeep as a fan (Shaw, 2013). Throughout the show, there is hardly respect for differing experiences and differing aesthetic choices, but only an endless policing of differences. This undermines the sense of connectivity and, again, cannot be deemed as discursive activism.

### 5.3.3 Resistive Reconstruction

Besides acting as feminist-activists and consumer-activists, some female PC fans take a less combative route. They form unstructured, submerged networks which drive everyday non-confrontational resistance. They connectively consume the show as feminist consumers in a potentially counteroffensive way, constituting discursive activism. This dissertation illustrates this through an analysis of a new mode of fan consumption of idols, which is that of *nisu* (泥塑).

Nisu, in the simplest sense, refers to the act of seeing one in its opposite gender. In this case, it features female fans queering the male idol, fantasizing and appreciating the beauty of them as a woman. This is highly pervasive amongst PC fans. On Douban, there surfaced a PC Nisu Competition as early as 1st of March, where fans started to nisu the contestants (D0301-1). Liu Yu owes much of his popularity to nisu fans, is known amongst his fans as “wifey” and is almost always constructed into a female idol (Fig 6). Unofficial poll shows that 323 out of 459 fans of Liu Yu, an overwhelming 70% are nisu fans (D0304-1).

穿白色衣服的女人

描述已自动生成 Fig 6: Liu Yu (nisu-ed)

Only a handful of Chinese media studies scholars have looked into nisu since it came into prominence circa 2019, and all of them agreed that this is an act of potent feminist resistance in submerged networks on multiple levels (Yu, 2020; Chen *et al.*, 2021; Wenjie Zhang, 2021; X. Yang, 2021). Firstly, nisu is a reclamation of feminist discursive power that, through articulation, rebels against masculinity figured in the idol. Literally meaning “building with mud”, nisu’s etymological root can be traced back to the Chinese ancient myth of the goddess Nv Wa (女娲) creating mankind from mud (Fu, 2021). Female fans literally *remould* male idols at their disposal. This is a fierce, but more of an insider’s trick kind of power reversal submerged as an everyday practice. Female PC fans have opened threads entitled “gender appraisal convention” (性别鉴定大会) to connectively decide who can be nisu-ed, who is the most nisu-able and who looks the best nisu-ed (D0221-1, D0413-2). Many nisu fans also tend to come up with a more feminine name for their idols, therefore creating an entirely new persona (BluMay, 2020). That reinterpretation of gender and a re-birthing of them into a new person is a connective challenge of dominant discourse of masculinity, constituting discursive activism.

On the other hand, nisu is a reassociation of femininity with popularity and “good”. When nisu is met with criticism, nisu fans rush to illustrate that this is not how nisu of *female idols* are received. When female idols are called “stud”, “bro” or “hubby”, it is to celebrate their coolness and independence. It is only when male idols are queered into females does criticism and unease surface, delineating that femininity is perceived as innately inferior (D0703-1, D0703-2). Nisu is therefore an act to openly laud beauty as it equates with femininity, refuting masculinity as a dominant discourse. By calling male idols “wifey” “mummy” “sis” and the likes in a celebratory sense, nisu fans are “praising with their own gender”, and rebel against female inferiority. More importantly, nisu is a reaffirmation of the *self*. By aligning their male idols with their own gender, female PC fans are finding ways to celebrate their femaleness. Their nisu of a male idol is a confidence-building act, a siding with a familiar-looking female companion to come to terms with their own gender (Baoqing *et al.*, 2021).

### 5.3.4 Female Gaze?

Contrarily, nisu has been recognized as somewhat transgressive because it is still a type of male gaze *disguised* by a female gazer. On the one hand, it is still reinforcing gender stereotypes (D0315-2, D0330-2). Nisu fans tend to objectify their male idols into feminine constructs either physically provocative and promiscuous, incredibly vulnerable or unobtainable (except via nisu). Fans realized that there is also an embedded age discrimination against nisu-ed idols, as with actual females, to only be young and beautiful instead of “motherly” or “aunty”.

On the other hand, nisu posts are hypersexualized. They contain some of the most obscene language and the most audacious eroticisation. It has been optimistically argued that nisu provides an outlet for young women to touch on traditionally taboo subjects such as sexual desires (D0305-1). Lin (2021) has remarked concisely that it is just too hard to “objectify men under patriarchy”, and it is only when sexual fantasies are directed at the male-turned-female can it be freed. It is only when these fantasies *imitate* the male gaze can female fans *escape* their own objectification.

Yet this imitation cannot escape from misogyny. Some anti-nisu fans call nisu “another kind of perv(ert) fantasy” (D190517-1, D200408-1). Nisu desires originate from an imagined relationship where female fans are now the male predators, and male idols are now the femme fatale to be sexually conquered (D0407-1). This kind of female-initiated male gaze, because it is excused by the presence of the female gazer, can become an even more aggressive form of sexism. What’s subversive is, some fans acutely argue, how nisu is inherently suggesting that it is only appropriate to consume an object when that object is female (D200114-1). Nisu’s logic is that it is only through feminization, and then objectification of the male-turned-female can power be reclaimed. Practiced in submerged networks, nisu is a form of discursive activism that challenges discourses of masculinity, but its failure to challenge patriarchal objectification of women makes it less so.

## 5.4 Agenda-Setting

### 5.4.1 A Topic of Contention

Nisu, as a specific type of cultural innovation practised in submerged networks, is a form of resistance with complex gender politics behind it that deserve its own study. It suffices to say, at this point, that nisu is inconclusive, but it is a form of discursive activism in that discussions around nisu allow fans to realize that gender is socially constructed. This can enrich their gendered subjectivity. It has also been proposed that nisu, while it is reinforcing stereotypes, grants the specific nisu-er agency and *liberates* them (D0102-1). This therapeutic personal liberation should not be completely disregarded (Y. Yang, 2021). It marks the beginning of an era of females gazing upon the male that disciplines their behaviour, although through a patriarchal detour (J. Zhang, 2019).

Nisu also constitutes discursive activism because it has brought a women’s issue to the forefront. It has attracted mainstream media coverage, and explicitly feminist Douban groups such as “Feminism Research” are passionately discussing its implications (D0313-1). Stories of female nisu fans have been circulating across platforms, discussed in videos, podcasts and articles (Tianyin, 2020; Baoqing *et al.*, 2021). Some fans have upheld that the sheer emergence of nisu as a cultural phenomenon is a sign of progress where gender binaries are shaken and loosened, although with a blurred vision (D200213-1, D0401-1). It has opened up conversations surrounding queerness and lesbianism, challenging the discourse of heteronormativity. Some articles have related this phenomenon to the emergence of Beatles, David Bowie and Queen in the 60s that have reconstructed masculinity (Ma and Pu, 2021). It has diversified aesthetic choices and labels deemed acceptable by the public (Hu, 2020). Social silences surrounding gender politics are shattered (BluMay, 2020).

Some non-sexual posts, subjecting male idols to oppressive female experiences have taken nisu to incredibly intricate and philosophical heights. As a famous nisu-er on Weibo, @白媚娘bfk writes, nisu is how female fans are abducting their male idols to share the same fate as them:

*If in nisu, you are slut-shamed, impregnated, humiliated, pursued, hurt in the name of love, it is not because I hate you—it is because I hate myself. I give you all the suffering and passion my gender has endured. I live and die with you. And in the ashes of our shared fate, there is just me, you, and our humanity* (Lin, 2021).

This eloquent defence of nisu denotes that it has a potentially profound implication. Nisu, despite its contradictions, has reset public agendas. It breaks into dominant discourses with its subversions and became a topic of contention to be discussed. Likewise, female PC fans’ claim-making as feminist-activists and consumer-activists have achieved the same end. They have enunciated their thoughts regarding misogyny and injustices, positing fan practices and fan experiences as topics of contention in the public’s view.

### 5.4.2 Performance of Power

This enunciation and fracturing of social silences is very much a performative act. Female PC fans’ agenda-setting is not driven by an urge to influence decision-making, but is staged for public viewing. Most nisu acts, firstly, are not intentional acts of feminist activism, *nor is* its misogyny an intentional act of sexism (D0315-2). Interviews conducted by scholars on nisu fans discover that nisu is often not committed towards a certain goal but more an act of leisure and entertainment (BluMay, 2020; Yu, 2020). They are not trans-gendering male idols in an ontological or political sense, but only seeing and *claiming* parts of them as feminine (D201111-1, D0316-1). Nisu fans’ claim-making, this dissertation finds, is rather a casual performance of power in a deliberative space.

This element of performativity speaks to female fans’ activism as consumer-activists. Fans know that what they are essentially invoking is their *performative* agency. A considerable number of posts surveyed know of activism’s futility but still decides to pursue it for publicity’s sake (D0425-3). They invest to have astonishing numbers in charts that looks like a threatening presence. They later express their dissatisfaction to “declare an attitude” instead of asking for compensations, producing a didactical show to warn the onlookers of Tencent’s misconduct (D0403-2, D0426-2, D0426-4). The production process of this performance can pacify fellow fans and boost morale since it *looks and feels like* they are trying something (D0403-3).

Feminist-activists perform their resistance too. They want to appear like they *are able to utter* claims, aiming for a public demonstration of their feminist consciousness rather than substantial outcomes. Many threads speak of “clarifying” and proudly disclosing their feminist leaning, often citing iconic sources like Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Kate Manne’s *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* and Chimamanda Adichie’s speech *We Should All Be Feminists* to flaunt their attitude (D0218-1, D0228-2, D0321-2).

This dissertation finds, ultimately, that these performances of power are a demonstration of a spirit of dissent which does not go as far as to influence decision-making (D0426-3). It is not entirely discursive activism, because it is not seeking official approval or making formal requests to authorities. They are not concerned with public responses to their claims while they reset public agenda. It is good enough, fans claim, for them lowly “garlic chives” (internet slang, someone who can be repeatedly exploited under capitalism) to perform a resistance in any way large or small (D0423-2, D0426-8; Wiktionary, 2021). Many fans claim that a performance is better than doing nothing (D0403-4). Their performance itself constitute weight and this agenda-setting is political in its own right (Young, 1997). Female PC fans’ claim-making is to assure that they have the “rights to have rights”, and that the public allows for claim-making as an end in itself (Fraser, 2005).

Female PC fans’ agenda-setting, then, cannot be treated as a separate dimension distinct from subjectivity and connectivity, but they are inextricably linked. Their agenda-setting *consists* of a performance, a knowing exposure of their embodied, gendered subjectivity; their personal experiences and agency; their repressed status and their tactical manoeuvres; their ability to reflect and see themselves as *the site of* struggle; their formation and undoing of connective alliances; and their creative, submerged networks of cultural innovation.

### 5.4.3 Towards Performative Citizenship

The discursive activism practised by female PC fans, then, can be understood in terms of what Isin (2017) has called performative citizenship. Moving beyond the traditional legal or constitutional definitions, performative citizenship rests on Holston and Appadurai (1996)’s idea that citizenship concerns more than a set of government-mandated rights and obligations. It concerns the performative *struggle* for citizenship as much as what it is struggling for (Isin, 2017). Citizenship is practised, Isin contends, not only by exercising rights given to you by the state but also by *claiming* them in creative ways. Borrowing Isin (2017)’s words, this perspective allows one to examine their staged creative resistances to see not simply what a right is but also about what it is *they do* when they make claims (Zivi, 2012). This concept is a protection from the danger of “over-doing democracy” where the obsession with constituencies, allegiances and the idea of citizenry usurp a genuine concern for, say, *experiences and practices* of citizenship in social life (Talisse, 2020).

Understood in terms of performative citizenship, female PC fans practice a discursive activism that is essentially a politics of *visibility* (Jouët, 2018). Their politics of visibility is a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, female PC fans are beginning to see themselves differently. Cyberspace enables them to parade a public self that dispute, challenge, self-refrain, manoeuvre, unite, reconstruct and speak up. In that parading, they start to see oneself as a performative citizen (Harris, 2008; Keller, 2012).

In addition to seeing themselves differently, female PC fans, through their discursive activism as acts of performative citizenship, are making themselves *seen*. Their politics of visibility demand not material or physical changes, but to be “directly viewed” (正视, literally means a head-on look). They demand to be *noticed* rather than attended to or taken care of (D0426-3, D0426-4), drawing attention to their very act of “making rights claims”. They commit to that rendering visible via democratic iterations consisting of local contextualization, interpretation and vernacularization of claims (Benhabib, 2009). Marchart (2011)’s concept of minimal politics is especially needed here. It is a kind of resistance “no longer afflicted by the question of scale, of intensity”. Quoting Rodriguez’s 2001 book, Gleiss (2015) summarized minimal politics to be the act of creating minor fissures in the mediascape rather than pushing for upheavals. Female PC fans’ politics of visibility are minimal because it is a creation of minor fissures, of glaring gaps in the very fabrics of the hegemonic order with their activism that attracts visibility. The purpose of these gaps is fulfilled at the very moment of articulation, as they perform a challenge to the dominant discourses.

It needs to be added that not all steps of performative citizenship are progressive or transformative. A key feature of performative citizenship, according to Sanghera *et al.* (2018), is the fact that it does not lead to predictable outcomes on an upward trajectory. Claim-making may be ambiguous and even contradictory, causing more questions than answers. This is true in the case of female PC fans. Although they have managed to secure a degree of change with their discursive activism, their action is often dangerously entangled with, if not already co-opted by, neoliberalism as aforementioned. Berdahl (2005) shows how consumption is fundamental to the making of citizen subjects and economic integration. In the case of this dissertation, the problem is that female PC fans sees their consumption, and their knowing collusion with the neoliberalist agenda as a precondition of their performative citizenship. On the other hand, female fans can paradoxically perform *masculinity* at points during their activism to apply additional pressure on authorities. Besides an implicit man-acting in a nisu relationship, they often call Tencent their “son” and self-refer as their “dad” to express power (D0306-1, D0409-1, D0422-1, W0426-12). As much as this can be argued as a militant reappropriation of masculinity, it is equally a *consolidation* of masculinity as an equivalent for authority. Moreover, their acts of performative citizenship can sometimes be, purely, a letting off of negative emotions and anger rather than anything meaningful (D0228-1, D0324-1, D0403-2). These contradictions and complications are part and parcel of performative citizenship.

Perhaps it is more appropriate, considering these contradictions, to see female PC fans’ performative citizenship as an exertion of their living rights (Hanson and Nieuwenhuys, 2012). The concept of living rights outlines that people, while exercising rights, shape what these rights are in the social world (ibid.). As Judith Butler has remarked, performativity necessarily involves the moment in which the subject asserts a right when “no such prior authorization exists” (Butler, 2004). Female fans’ discursive activism, as a cultural phenomenon, is exhilaratingly unprecedented. Each step taken as a consumer-activist, as a feminist-activist and as a feminist consumer is a torch placed in realms no longer uncharted, within the boundary of which can discursive powers be identified, investigated, and questioned. Young feminist cultural commentators on Weibo sees it very much as the beginning of an overstep, pregnant with potentialities and a force of change. Even though female fans are still revolving around patriarchy, it is a space where young females assemble, and resistive energies will naturally come into being (W200529-1).

# 6. Conclusion

The study concludes that female PC fans’ claim-making does constitute a discursive activism that is a politics of visibility, underpinned by the notion of performative citizenship. They have managed to see themselves as performative citizens and have made themselves seen. They are performers as well as *fans of* performers. Cyberspace is an enabling factor of their politics of visibility. It permits articulations of private experiences in a public deliberative space, and provides access to personal consumption and political claim-making.

Indeed, contemporary feminism like the aforementioned has been denounced as being too performative, focusing on visibility and merely circulating resistive energies without much offline action (Jouët, 2018). But digital communities are more than just virtual existences and fan practices should not be underestimated in academia. During the writing of this dissertation, Operation Clarity (清朗行动) spearheaded by the Cyberspace Administration of China has swept across the internet, specifically targeting irrational fan-idol crowdfundings, corporate baiting of consumerism, inter-fan group clashes and cyberbullying etc. (W0702-1). It is rumoured that Tencent has been fined. This is a direct official response to some of female fans’ discursive activism.

Yet this can’t be viewed with too much optimism. Operation Clarity marks a nationwide shutdown of cyber-entertainment that will likely result in more censorship. Idol reality shows are now completely prohibited from airing. Fung (2009) has remarked accurately that fans preoccupation with fan practices will “divert them from the critical discourse and civic engagement that could undermine state legitimacy” (290). Their discursive activism has, although liberated the fans to a certain extent, legitimizes more stringent state control. Fans’ occasional appropriation of official discourses for self-legitimization to protest against Tencent aided a tightening grip.

It is far too early to decide whether female fans’ discursive activism can cement transformative changes to the statuses of Chinese women. The complexities of Chinese fan cultures, fan economy, and fan practices are in dire need of closer examination. Problems such as structural inequalities that prevent access to discursive activism in cyberspace are not covered by this dissertation. It calls for more scholarly debates on female fan practices as cyberspace discursive activism, especially in relation to wider societal problems and state decision-making.

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# Appendix

**A1. List of all posts cited**

PC 2021 Official Douban Group: <https://www.douban.com/group/707998/?ref=sidebar>

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| D190517-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/140874355/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D200114-1 | https://www.douban.com/note/748998228/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D200213-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/164960885/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D200408-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/170662385/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| W200529-1 | https://m.weibo.cn/1370505990/4509999138819756 |
| D201111-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/200693961/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D0102-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/206927752/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D0118-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/208718788/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D0118-2 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/208624682/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D0124-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/209292249/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D0218-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/211772308/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D0221-1 | <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/212228029/> |
| D0225-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/212777835/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D0228-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/213320338/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D0228-2 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/213312703/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D0301-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/213436952/ |
| D0304-1 | <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/213783244/> |
| D0304-2 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/213845544/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D0305-1 | <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/214044707/> |
| D0306-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/214169106/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D0306-2 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/214177616/?dt\_dapp=1 |
| D0306-3 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/214177616/ |
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| D0626-1 | https://www.douban.com/group/topic/232380279/?dt\_dapp=1 |
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| D0703-2 | Screenshot attached (original post deleted) |

W0426-9

图形用户界面

描述已自动生成 W0519-1

一些文字和图片的手机截图

描述已自动生成W0702-1

报纸上的表格

中度可信度描述已自动生成W0703-2