

**CHINESE ‘INCELS’?
MISOGYNIST MEN ON
CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA**

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In 2020, Yang Li 杨笠, a Chinese female stand-up comedian, rose to national fame with punchlines addressing China's gender inequality and biting jokes about Chinese men, most famously: 'How can some men look so ordinary yet be so confident?' While her piercing humour resonated with many Chinese women, it was not so well received by many men. A male user on Chinese social media claimed Yang 'was repeatedly insulting all men and preaching hatred, inciting internal conflicts among the masses, and creating gender opposition'.¹ An endorsement deal with Intel fell through due to threats to boycott the brand by many Chinese men on social media platforms such as Sina Weibo. She also received death threats via social media.² These men's resentment of Yang Li is part of the general pushback on Chinese social media against women who support feminist causes and criticise deep-seated patriarchal attitudes and widely accepted misogynistic male behaviour.³

Such collective, aggressive attitudes towards women's rejections and criticism resemble the dominant sentiments in the Incel Movement in Western countries. Incel refers to 'involuntary celibate'; the term started life as the name of an online safe space for women struggling to find romantic partners, but later became a self-referential term among young men who express rage at women for denying them sex.⁴ Incels discuss their misogynist beliefs in online forums, where they might become radicalised by the manifestos of 'incel heroes' like Elliott Rodger, the son of a Hollywood filmmaker who killed six people and himself in 2014, and injured fourteen others, declaring himself 'the true victim in all of this'. Andrew Tate, the American-British self-proclaimed misogynist influencer currently facing trial in Romania for rape, human trafficking and forming an organised crime group to sexually exploit women, is another exemplar.

Incels have developed their own memetic narrative system, categorising women as either Becky or Stacy, while men who have no difficulty finding sexual partners are Chads.⁵ Chad represents the supposedly desirable masculinity in American society: muscular and sexually attractive due to their genetically masculine features. Stacy is hyperfeminine, attractive and only dates Chads, while Becky is the average-looking feminist. These categories originated on Reddit but have been popularised in recent years.⁶

Online misogyny has been on the rise in China due to a number of factors. A crucial one is the underlying strong patriarchal attitudes and an increasingly gender-conservative media and educational system under Xi. This trend is signalled by Xi's speech on the Women's Congress in November 2023, in which he emphasised the importance of 'love and marriage, fertility and family' without discussing women as members of the work force.⁷ Another factor is the gender imbalance caused by the one-child policy and preference for male heirs, leading to uncounted female infanticides and nearly 34 million more males than females (the general sex ratio being 105.07 male to every 100 females).⁸ Social and economic stagnation over the last decade means that many have no hope of finding a girlfriend or wife, especially given that prevailing ideas around gender and marriage still uphold men as the main breadwinner, and women are perceived to prefer men with wealthy backgrounds, higher education and property.

Research has shown that men from prefectures with a greater gender imbalance, and under pressure in the competitive marriage market to be able to offer a woman financial security, are more likely to commit crimes with financial reward such as robbery, burglary, drug dealing and illegal business dealings.⁹ China's most gender-skewed cohort—in 2021, the 15-to-19-year-old age bracket, with a male:female ratio of 116:100—coincides with those most inclined to misogynistic and anti-feminist views similar to those of Western incels.

While there is no equivalent Chinese term for 'incel', some comparable terms include the relatively outdated, playful and self-deprecating term *diaosi* 屌丝 (literally 'pubic hair'), referring to young men who are disadvantaged in romantic or sexual relationships compared to those who are *gaofushuai* 高富帅 ('tall, rich and handsome'), a term with echoes of 'Chad'. Misogyny, including the blanket sexualisation and objectification of women, can be observed in the *diaosi* narrative and public discussion—such as scoring women based on their appearance, feminine traits and sexual experience—but the violence that characterises Western incel culture is mostly absent, with some exceptions, discussed below.

After Yang Li's popular punchline 'so ordinary yet so confident', many Chinese women started using *pu nan* 普男 ('ordinary men') or *pu xin nan* 普信男 ('ordinary yet confident men') to describe average, misogynist and overly sensitive men. For example, a female user shared the screen shot of her WeChat conversation with a blind date, captioned 'Let me show you a *pu xin nan*'. In the conversation, the man listed the traits he deemed attractive about himself, and after the woman did not reply to him for a few days, he asked her: 'Are you worried that you don't deserve me?' Similarly, Chinese women have also used words like *zhi nan ai* 直男癌 ('straight-men cancer') and *guo nan* 国男/蝟蝟 (literally 'this country's men'; the second way of writing the characters further belittles Chinese men as insects 虫) to criticise misogynist men.



**Online misogyny has
been on the rise in China**

Source: Ewan Yap, Unsplash

Unlike in the United States and other Anglophone countries, there are no specific forums or platforms where misogynist men in China gather for the sole purpose of discussing their hatred of women. Instead, they manifest themselves on most of China's social media platforms, including Sina Weibo, in different ways and for different reasons, often in response to reports of gender-related violence or other incidents. On Zhihu, the most popular user-generated question-and-answer website in China, questions related to gender issues tend to generate polarised debates, with misogynist answers and responses often dominating.¹⁰ For example, many users use 'easy girl' or 'slut' to answer the popular question 'How do you feel about or understand the women who date or marry foreigners?' Other sites where misogynistic discussion and interaction is common include the video-sharing site Bilibili, which hosts a subculture around Japanese anime consisting largely of young men, and Hupu, China's most popular forum for sports fans, with more than 90 percent male users, who rank female celebrities on their appearances and discuss relationship issues in addition to chatting about sports. All of these platforms accidentally evolved into sites with a significant presence of misogynist men because of their large male user bases and the attention economy; that is, a tendency for the most extreme or sensationalist content to attract the most attention.

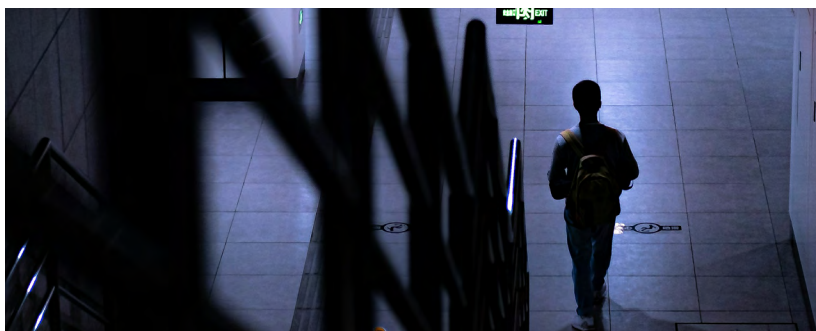
There are high-profile KOLs (key opinion leaders) among the anti-feminist influencers and incel heroes. One is Zhu Zhou 煮肘 (often referred to as Teacher Zhu 煮老师 and Teacher Precious 宝宝老师). Zhu Zhou had around 495,000 followers on Sina Weibo in 2023.¹¹ In his posts, he shows off his wealth, criticises feminists and the idea of female independence, promotes the practice of 'successful men' spreading 'good genes' by producing children with as many 'high-quality' women (younger than 23 years old, B-cup breasts, model-level beauty, more than 165 centimetres or pretty virgins more than 162 centimetres tall) as possible and, worst of all, claims that men should attack women who do not fulfil their 'reproductive duties' with sulphuric acid. Such violent threats against 'non-cooperative' women are not censored by platforms unless there is a mass reporting from platform users.

Different from the Western incel narrative begrudging women's preference for the physical masculinity of 'the Chads', misogynist men on Chinese social media begrudge women for their desire to date or marry wealthy men, yet typically express envy rather than hatred against such men.

The combination of sexual and economic frustration is illustrated in comments made after the suicide of Su Xiangmao 苏享茂, founder of a successful Beijing IT company. Men on social media quickly shamed Su's ex-wife Zhai Xinxin 翟欣欣 as 'greedy and vicious' for demanding a large divorce settlement; they blamed her for Su's suicide, doxing and harassing her online. Such narratives of 'gold-diggers' harming 'innocent men' support their argument that Chinese women are greedy and evil.

Misogynist men on Chinese social media also take issue with feminists and the rise of feminism in China (despite acknowledging that at least feminists don't ask for a bride price). They regard feminists' speech and campaigns as 'stirring conflicts between two genders' 挑起性别对立 and 'organised by "foreign agents" 境外势力 to subvert China'. Such antagonism against feminism is conveniently combined with nationalism and chimes with the Communist Party's hyper-vigilance against social instability, its tendency to blame dissent on foreign agents and its own hostility to feminism. Influencers on Sina Weibo such as 'God's Eagle' 上帝之鹰 and 'Meridian Knight' 子午侠士 repeatedly use such narratives to justify their trolling, harassment and reporting 举报 of feminists.¹² For example, Meridian Knight wrote a series of posts accusing Chinese feminists, including Lü Pin 吕频 and other #MeToo activists, of being manipulated by 'Western forces' to destabilise and destroy China.¹³ Due to their close alignment with the party-state's nationalist, anti-Western and anti-liberal narrative, such speech is usually condoned and even promoted by mainstream state-run media outlets. For instance, in 2020 April, *Beijing Evening News*—an official media outlet operated by the Publicity Department of the Beijing Municipal Committee—issued an editorial that called out feminists as toxic and harmful to Chinese society.¹⁴ The state's efforts to keep Chinese society stable in its family-based social structure and solve the issue of low birth rates also provides a supportive environment for sexist and misogynist opinions and statements.

As elsewhere, cyber bullying and online aggression also encourage offline violence. In 2020 December, a male university student attacked three female classmates with sulphuric acid in a class.¹⁵ While the exact reason for this attack was never publicised, in the comments section under the relevant news story, many assumed the victims were to blame for being ‘unattainable’—meaning refusing their attacker’s advances—and celebrated the ‘punishment’ they got. Then there was the incident in June 2022, where four women were violently assaulted by a group of men in a barbecue restaurant in Tangshan, Hebei province, after these women rejected one of the men’s sexual advances. Similarly, in September 2023, two women were violently attacked by a drunk man in Yiyang, Hunan province, after they refused to share their contact information with him.¹⁶ In both cases, the violent and graphic security footage where these men repeatedly and brutally dragged down, hit and kicked the women was shared widely on Chinese social media and shocked many Chinese citizens, especially women.¹⁷ Online public discussions demonstrated Chinese women’s anger and fear when facing the rise of misogynistic male violence.¹⁸ Due to the obvious brutality, there were few comments supporting the attackers, but the attackers were blamed for their gangster-like violence instead of the gendered violence they imposed on the women. However, there were comments blaming the women for ‘being stupid to fight back and infuriate the attackers’.



Chinese social media incel narrative stems from sexual and economic frustration

Source: Kaihao Zhao, Unsplash

An increasing gender imbalance, decreasing social mobility and the dominant misogynist ideologies and discourses left to flourish by the party-state means that more young men are likely to express their grievances online in misogynist discourses and that there will be more conflict around gender issues on Chinese social media. This is alarming because the social consequences are real and severe. While there is an official attempt to tamp down online violence in general, the misogynist discourses do not receive any special attention. Xi's crackdown on civil society and the mainstream narrative of fearing 'feminism as Western ideology' means that feminist voices in opposition to misogyny are either silent or silenced. More research is needed to investigate this phenomenon, and government and civil society should work together to slow down, stop and reverse this trend.



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