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Book Review

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Altman Yuzhu Peng. *A Feminist Reading of China's Digital Public Sphere*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 134 pp. £49.99 (hardcover) and £39.99 (e-book). ISBN: 978-3-030-59968-3

Back in 2001, a female farmer Xiaoyang Liu caught the attention of the production team of China's first feminist talk show on China Central Television (CCTV), *Half the Sky*. Xiaoyang, whose name literally translates to 'little woman', described her life in the countryside as 'too flat' and accompanied with the feeling of being 'gazed at' in her village and 'disciplined by' patriarchal norms she was living in. A woman with a strong personality is discouraged and even punished and she felt 'helpless, hopeless and alone'. Her poetic and sophisticated contemplation about self and life amazed the state-owned TV and later the whole nation after the show was aired. It was regarded phenomenal to have discovered new subjectivities of Chinese women. To this day, the case is still being discussed on Chinese social media platforms in a nostalgic way as the show has stopped production for more than 10 years (see more in [The New York Times, 2012](#)). There is a lack of clear, critical and nuanced (self-) representation of Chinese womanhood since TV dominated Chinese people's domestic entertainment and intellectual life that this book tries to fill. This is a time when a unified Chinese rural woman subjectivity is being challenged in media and public sphere where information is flooded and fragmented.

One cannot help but wonder what has happened in the past four decades for Chinese women and the media landscape/space since the opening-up and reform. Existing statistics and research suggest Chinese women's status and rights and their mediatization have changed dramatically in the spheres of cultural consumption ([Meng and Huang, 2017](#)), online activism ([Han, 2018](#); [Xue and Rose, 2022](#)), transforming working and class identities ([Chen and Chen, 2021](#)), national and supranational engagements and constraints ([Zheng and Zhang, 2010](#)), arts and literature vis-à-vis feminist subjectivities ([Zhong, 2006](#)), to name but a few.

With the penetration of the internet and social media platforms, people tend to believe marginalised women (based on origin, socio-economic background, sexualities) no longer need to write letters to CCTV to be heard. Activism seems to be just a click away. However, Dr Peng's book suggests there is more to this optimism, if not celebration. *A Feminist Reading of China's Digital Public Sphere*, is a one of many successful attempts to question this and unveil the changes undergone in a post-reform China in terms of Chinese feminisms and the public sphere.



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further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Informed by concepts such as the public sphere and networked society, the book develops a framework of the gender-politics axis in the Chinese context to understand the structure and everyday texture of gender struggles of Chinese women through online socially mediated discourses. The book is a much-needed critical addition to Chinese feminism and gender studies, since it uses a feminist cultural studies approach with an emphasis on the structural, institutional and technological aspects that co-shape the new discourses about the gendered public sphere in China.

The book has seven chapters. The Introduction chapter explains the focus of the book, its approach and structure. It offers an overarching review of the socio-cultural factors within Chinese society that influence Chinese Internet users' practice and co-creation of digital cultures. Chapter 2 advances different types of inequalities and stratifications evident in contemporary Chinese society along with the rise of social media. The chapter then narrows down to focus on Chinese people's adoption of Internet services and how this impacts the way in which they engage with public affairs online. In particular, how these engagements reflect 'the imbalanced power relations between female and male Chinese Internet users, which exploit and feed into the patriarchal definition of gender roles promoted by Chinese digital cultures' (p. 31). One crucial contribution of this chapter is that it provides a nuanced contextualisation and critique of the structural impacts of the CCP/the government in shaping the gendered digital public sphere, be it enabling or controlling, in a post-reform China.

Chapter 3 further articulates how the imbalanced gender power relations between Chinese women and men are established and how such gendered power relations influence Chinese netizens' civic engagement online. Following a social constructivist approach, a feminist cultural studies perspective is advanced in this chapter, offering a global and historical account on waves of feminism in the West and their counterparts in China. The ambivalent gender power relations have created different and clashing views shared by Chinese women and men today. This chapter offers not only the theoretical framework and approach, but also a further contextualisation of the dividing views held by Chinese new generations online.

Chapter 4, 5 and 6 offers different yet relevant case studies in the Chinese gendered digital public sphere, respectively. Chapter 3 focuses on pseudo-feminism popularised and mobilised by Chinese digital influencers, advancing a neoliberal feminism that creates new disciplines for contemporary female subjects in China. Chapter 5 examines the debates and even flames about a gendered trouble – the confrontation between feminist activism and anti-feminism campaigns and misogynist voices, linking the personal with the national. The analyses particularly highlight male Internet users' appropriation of nationalist rhetoric in such debates. Chapter 6 focuses on yet another set of highly visible cases of women in powerful positions, such as female CEOs and international political leaders, and how they are portrayed stereotypically. The socially mediated discourses highlight the gendered evaluation of women's career achievements in business and political arenas and the national-patriarchal structure that co-shapes such an evaluation. Chapter 7 concludes the salient points made in previous chapters and spells out the contribution of this book in identifying and crystallising the gender-politics axis in China's digital public sphere with an international focus.

The book is a timely contribution to several interdisciplinary areas, such as cultural studies, gender studies, media and communications, area studies, to name but a few. It is based on local insights generated through socially mediated discourses with an international perspective. The critical discourse analysis has been meticulously applied, both as a theoretical framework and method. Without question, the book would become an important and necessary scholarly source for undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD students who would like to advance their research on Chinese gender studies, media and society.

Due to the scope of this book, the selected cases focused on more visible cases across several media outlets within a heterosexual dualism, where the female subjects selected are looked at, listened to, debated about or even censored. However, like the case mentioned at the beginning of this review, women like Xiaoyang Liu are *gazed at* but not *seen*. It would be much welcomed to have included queer, trans and gender-diverse and gender-inclusive perspective, as already demonstrated by the author's and other scholars' more recent work (Peng and Sun, 2022; Pei et al., 2023). That being said, such a book lays a solid ground for representational and/or ethnographical work that investigate the everyday life lived by not only heterosexual women and men, but also other genders and sexualities yet to be fully written into being in the Chinese context.

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