



# From Entertainment to Empowerment: How Chinese Female Stand-Up Comedians Expand the Safe Zone for Gender Discourse Through Humor

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## Abstract

The rapid development of the Internet in the 21st century has given rise to Chinese fourth-wave feminism, which challenges deeply rooted Confucian values and gender norms in daily lives. This study examines how Chinese female stand-up comedians use humor to expand the safe zone of gender discourse under the current gender order and role structure. Using a qualitative content analysis, this study draws on gender order and gender role theory to examine three female stand-up comedians' scripts and 59 audience comments collected from Chinese online platforms. The findings reveal that female comedians use humor not merely for entertainment, but rather as a tool to resonate with female audiences, crafting narratives that reflect shared gendered experiences. Through strategic storytelling, satire, and digital interaction, they construct a safe space for discussing gender issues while minimizing backlash. Through these efforts, Chinese female stand-up comedians peacefully expand the scope of public discourse on gender issues and challenge patriarchal gender order and gender roles. This study contributes to Chinese feminist studies by highlighting the role of stand-up comedy as an effective tool for the feminist movement. It also offers strategies of strategic humor for other feminist movements in non-Western contexts.

**Keywords:** Feminist Humor, Gender Role Reconstruction, Micropolitics of Resistance, Performative Femininity, Fourth-Wave Feminism

## 1. Introduction

Fourth-wave feminism, powered by digital media, emphasizes personal narratives of everyday sexism (such as period shame) rather than abstract ideology. This shift has drawn more women into feminist discussions (Barker, 2019). This global wave also impacts China. For example, the "Sisters Are Here" social media campaign, in which celebrities rallied online to demand an investigation of a rape case, shows how Chinese feminists use storytelling and collective outrage to challenge patriarchal norms (Baidu, 2018).

Feminist movements in China frequently challenge deeply ingrained traditional Confucian family values, which still pressure women to obey fathers and husbands and define female virtue through sacrifice (Gao, 2003). In this context, stand-up comedy has emerged as a semi-permissive medium to tackle gender issues with humor and honesty. Hit shows like

*Roast!* (2016) and *Rock & Roast* have together amassed over a billion views online (CGTN, 2019). Onstage, female comedians practice the "art of offense," joking about social taboos and gender inequality. This brings women's experiences into the mainstream spotlight, sparking public debate.

In this context, Chinese female stand-up comedy provides an ideal opportunity to examine how feminist critique is expressed through humor under conditions of platform regulation and cultural constraints. This study draws on gender order and gender role theory to analyze how Chinese female stand-up comedians resist the gender norms and expand the boundaries of acceptable speech. While their humor subverts traditional roles, greater visibility also creates new pressures. As Day and Wray observe, popular fourth-wave feminism can redefine successful female image narrowly and marginalize others (Day and Wray, 2018). This risks replacing old patriarchal norms with new ones, rather than truly embracing the diversity of women's lived experiences. This study also examines whether and how this humor expands the "safe zone" of permissible speech, challenging rather than reproducing the existing gender order. Theorizing comedy as a form of adaptive feminist resistance contributes to fourth-wave feminism and feminist media scholarship by extending analytical frameworks to a non-Western, semi-permissive cultural context.

Through qualitative content analysis of audience comments and transcribed scripts from female comedians, this study seeks to identify recurring patterns in public response, aiming to understand whether these performances extend or challenge the gender order in Chinese digital discourse. It examines how comedy in China offers a distinctive feminist strategy that carves out a safe zone for expression and suggests how oppressed groups can expand the boundaries of gender expression and negotiate the current gender structure. In doing so, this research contributes to global feminist studies by presenting a compelling case of adaptive resistance and offering insights for feminist movements in non-Western contexts.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1 Gender Order and Its Manifestations Between the Western and Chinese Contexts**

This study employs Connell's gender order theory to examine how female stand-up comedians actively negotiate visibility and power within China's patriarchal structure. Connell's concept of gender order examines how societies structure roles and power between sexes. It highlights hegemonic masculinity, which legitimates male dominance, and emphasized femininity, an ideal of women as submissive, appearance-focused supporters (Connell, 1987).

While Connell's theory provides a strong theoretical starting point, it cannot be uncritically applied to the Chinese context without considering the country's unique cultural and social dynamics. In China, Confucian ethics historically reinforced male authority: agrarian ideals like "men plow, women weave" and practices such as footbinding or the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" firmly placed women in subordinate roles (Attané, 2012).

Although modern laws now grant women equal education, work, and divorce rights, these cultural norms linger. For instance, media often labels jokes about women's lives as "female issues," suggesting women's stories are a niche, while men's experiences are seen as universal. Analyzing comedy performances, we see women use humor to expose and challenge these deep-seated inequalities, indicating that gender order can be confronted even if not easily overturned.

### **2.2 Gender Roles as Micro-Level Manifestations of Gender Order in Western and Chinese Contexts**

Building on Connell's concept of gender order, this section examines gender roles as its micro-level manifestation. While gender order explains institutional power, division of labor,

and cultural norms, gender roles represent everyday behavior and expectations within those structures. At the everyday level, gender roles are behaviors and expectations assigned by society based on sex (Blackstone, 2003).

In the West, these roles have been shaped by Judeo-Christian values; in China, they stem from Confucian, pre-industrial contexts. The traditional division "men plow, women weave" made men breadwinners and women caretakers (Bray, 1997). Practices such as the "Three Obediences and the Four Virtues"<sup>1</sup> and footbinding<sup>2</sup> reveals women's roles as sexual objects, reproductive tools, and household servants (Gao, 2003).

These legacies persist in media and entertainment industry. For example, the traditional art of crosstalk (*Xiangsheng*) was almost entirely male-dominated (Moser, 1990), and early female performers were often dismissed or ignored (*Global Times*, 2021). In stark contrast, contemporary stand-up includes notable female comedians. In the Chinese stand-up comedy TV show such as *Rock&Roast*, female comedians are a non-negligible part.

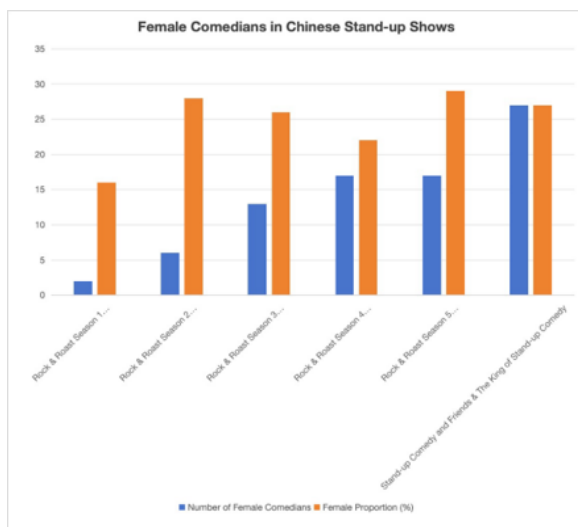


Figure 1: Number and Proportion of Female Comedians in Major Chinese Stand-up Comedy Shows  
 Source: Nanjing University "Data Journalism" course. "Data | 'She' Content Among Stand-up Comedians."  
 Pengpai News, March 2, 2025. Accessed May 5, 2025. [https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_29970533](https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_29970533)

In fact, recent data show that although female comics are fewer, they draw higher average attention: in 2024, 27 female comedians generated trending topics on Weibo averaging 1.56 million views each, while 77 male comedians generated 257 topics averaging 1.07 million views (Nanjing University "Data Journalism" course, 2025). This suggests Chinese women are using humor to subvert old roles and expand gender discourse. In both cases, the gender order and gender roles is shown to be changeable, not fixed.

### 2.3 Safe Zone Definition and Application in Stand-Up Comedy

In education or culture context, the term "safe zone", also called "safe space", refers to places intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversation (Merriam-Webster, 2022), especially designed to support marginalized communities like LGBTQ+ individuals in Western countries (LGBT Center UNC Chapel Hill, n.d.).

<sup>1</sup> Three Obediences and Four Virtues: A Confucian gender norm requiring women to obey their father before marriage, their husband after marriage, and their son if widowed. The 'Four Virtues' referred to proper morality, proper speech, modest appearance, and domestic skills.

<sup>2</sup> Footbinding: A traditional Chinese practice where young girls' feet were tightly bound to alter their shape, resulting in extremely small, deformed feet, which symbolized femininity, obedience, and was designed to appeal to male aesthetic desires.

In this study, the "safe zone" is adapted to Chinese female stand-up comedians to describe an environment that allows for the expression of gender issues in a more moderate, low-conflict manner. In this framework, comedians' content does not directly lead to gender conflict or confrontation with authority, thus reducing the risk they might face in public opinion. Its significance lies in offering a replicable model of resistance for feminist movement, showing how to expand feminist discourse in places where cultural and social pressures limit direct expression. The stand-up stage thus becomes a rare site of micro-negotiation—empowering women to speak, laugh, and critique without immediately triggering systemic defense. For operational purposes in this study, the *safe zone* is defined by observable boundary conditions and measurable indicators. Boundary conditions include (a) absence of formal or platform-level sanctions against the performer (e.g., content removal or account suspension), (b) predominance of supportive or neutral in the immediate discussion thread, and (c) the presence of sustained, substantive audience engagement. Empirical indicators used therefore include: engagement (likes, reposts, replies), polarity of comments, proportion of comments containing personal narrative or reflective interpretation, thread length (number of substantive replies), and documented instances of platform or commercial backlash.

### **3. Literature Review**

Feminist scholars have long explored humor as a tool of resistance. Early foundational work conceptualized women's humor as a subversive practice to challenge patriarchal authority. McIntosh and Judith Butler's (1991) idea of subversive repetition posits that repeating norms can expose their fragility. Regina Barreca (1991) argues that women's humor isn't just entertainment, but actively challenges patriarchy—making audiences laugh at injustice rather than accept it. Similarly, Walke (1988) and Kathlee (1995) demonstrate that women's humor has functioned as a feminist critique by disrupting patriarchal authority and destabilizing gender hierarchies through satire, irony, and excess.

Humor emerges as a gendered strategy that enables women to negotiate and disrupt hierarchical power structures without relying on direct confrontation. Lawrence and Ringrose (2018) analyze how feminist humor on social media uses irony and memes to promote feminist connectivity, solidarity, and counter-publics. According to Shifman and Lemish (2010a, 2010b), popular internet humor about gender is dominated by postfeminist narratives that repackage traditional stereotypes in seemingly empowering and individualized forms. Meanwhile, explicitly feminist humor that addresses structural inequality remains marginal due to platform dynamics that privilege depoliticized and essentialist representations.

Recent years have also seen a surge of scholarly attention to gender discourse and audience co-construction of meaning on Chinese social media. Building on foundational work in feminist media studies (Butler, 1990; McIntosh, 2019), scholars in the Chinese context have expanded understanding of the role of gender discourse in digital environments to negotiate gender norms and resist hegemonic narratives. Research on online female communities demonstrates that Chinese gendered norms are actively reproduced and contested through everyday interaction. For example, Liu Siyu's study of the "Women Fitness" Douban group shows that female discourse reexplains femininity through narratives of empowerment and body discipline, illustrating the process of "redoing gender" in digital communities (Liu, 2025). Similarly, Yang Lingxi's research on unmarried women's "cloud pet-raising" (云养宠) practices on short-video platforms highlights how alternative caregiving performances become a strategy for negotiating maternal identity outside marriage norms (Yang, 2024). In their studies, humor, reflected by female users' comments and discussion, served as Chinese women's resilience against disadvantaged gendered norms.

Many studies in Chinese focus on gender representation and media. Typically, an analysis of female-centered variety shows argues that "she-variety" programs construct a mediated

spectacle of female empowerment simultaneously embedding market preference (Xu, 2021). Another work on the same genre demonstrates the effect of these programs to shape and regulate public expressions of gender anxiety in online show and discussions (Song, 2022). As one of the most popular programs in China, stand-up comedy became an important field to explore further about gender, media, and humor. For example, Xu D. and Liu (2022) indicated that Chinese female stand-up comedians usually employ what they term "soft," "safe," and "marketable" gendered humor: narratives that resonate emotionally with audience remained compatible with platform or commercial regulation. Popular programs such as *Rock & Roast* offer effective platforms for female comedians to translate everyday gendered experiences into widely intelligible public narratives, which successfully foster emotional identification (Li, 2022; Chen, 2023). Yet these research paid less attention to explain why softness and safety serve effective feminist strategies under China's specific media and gender regimes.

This study aims to fill a critical gap in the field by introducing the concept of the "safe zone" as an analytical framework for understanding feminist humor and its underlying mechanisms. This study argues that the "softness" should be read as a response to gendered constraints embedded in nowadays governance, expectations of audiences, and patriarchal discourse. The "safe zone" refers to the conditional discursive space in which feminist humor can circulate with reduced backlash and maintain critique.

## 4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, dual-context design that combines both production and reception analysis to examine how Chinese female comedians navigate gender discourse within national media landscape, drawing a dual-layered analysis of data collected to capture both the production and reception of feminist-inflected humor.

### 4.1 Data Collection

This study collected data from *Weibo*<sup>3</sup> posts between December 2024 and September 2025, corresponding to the peak streaming periods of *Stand-up Comedy and Friends*<sup>4</sup> (Tencent Video) and *The King of Stand-Up Comedy: Solo Season*<sup>5</sup> (iQIYI). Posts were identified through keyword and hashtag searches, including but not limited to: "#脱口秀(StandUpComedy)", "#女性脱口秀(FemaleStandUpComedy)", "#杨笠(YangLi)", "#Echo脱口秀(EchiStandUpComedy)", "#女性力量(GirlsPower)", "#脱口秀女演员(FemaleStandUpComedians)", and program-specific discussion tags.

The demographic characteristics (gender and approximate age group) of posting audiences were explored based on publicly available profile and interaction. Specifically, the study explored gender information from their self-reported profile labels (e.g., pronouns, gender markers), user display names, and profile pictures when available. The approach followed practices in social media research where platform APIs do not directly provide demographic variables but where profile cues allow reasonable classification. The study also identified the approximation of age group based on publicly visible user-generated information. Age groups were shown into broad categories ( $\leq 24$ , 25–34,  $\geq 35$ ) to avoid over-precision. The descriptive overview below showed regarding the composition of audience voices in the dataset and contextualizes subsequent thematic analysis.

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<sup>3</sup> *Weibo*: *Weibo* is a Chinese microblogging platform similar to Twitter, where users post, share, and interact with short-form content, combining features of social networking and news media.

<sup>4</sup> *Stand-up Comedy and Their Friends* is a stand-up comedy competition show produced by *Tencent Video* and *Qie Ying Studio*, serving as a continuation to the popular series *Rock & Roast*.

<sup>5</sup> *The King of Stand-Up Comedy: Solo Season* is a stand-up comedy competition on *iQIYI*, initiated by Stephen Chow and featuring veteran and fresh talents battling through solo-performance rounds to embody the journey "from ordinary people to the king of comedy".

Table X. Demographic characteristics of identifiable commenters (n = 59)

Demographic Indicator	Category	Count
Gender	Female	48
	Male	11
Age Group	≤24	10
	25–34	37
	≥35	12

**Note.** Demographic data were based on self-reported user profiles and may not fully reflect users' actual identities. Some users may misrepresent their gender to avoid online harassment.

Moreover, the study incorporates production-side data in the form of transcribed stand-up comedy scripts (approximately 3,800 words) from three female comedians: Xiangyu Tang, Echo, and Zhen Yu. They were selected because of their high visibility in gender-related online discussions and their inclusion in nationally programs.

Initial retrieval generated approximately 200 threads. Threads were screened in two stages: first, the study applied engagement thresholds (for example,  $\geq 60$  likes or  $\geq 15$  replies) to ensure visibility and public interaction; second, qualitative screening retained threads that contained at least three substantive comments demonstrating personal narrative or interpretive engagement. The study excluded threads dominated by repetitive emojis, single-word affirmations, or purely abusive language without discursive content that produced the final corpus of 59 discussion threads.

## 4.2 Data Analysis

As a single-coder qualitative study, all data were coded by the author in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, with repeated rounds of coding and reflexive checking employed to enhance analytical rigor. This study uses Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for thematic analysis to examine how gender structures and roles are challenged and reconstructed in stand-up comedy texts and audience comments. This study employed NVivo for qualitative coding. Coding nodes were created to reflect key themes such as "safe zone," gender order, and emotional resonance. Word frequency analysis informed the refinement of codes, supported by iterative memoing and coding cycles to ensure analytical rigor.

The analysis begins with the procedure of familiarization, involving careful reading of all transcripts and comments to note initial impression. This was followed by the generation of initial codes by identifying key expressions data set. For example, comments such as "*Girls are so wonderful!*", "*Kindness, courage and strength bring us together*", and "*Thank you for your bravery, and for giving strength to so many of us*" were coded as *Pattern 2: Praise of women's courage*. These codes were then clustered into broader, more refined themes. For instance, *Pattern 2: Praise of women's courage*, were grouped with *Pattern 3: Collective awakening of female community* and *Pattern 5: Gratitude toward female comedians* under *Theme 2: Emotional Resonance and the Collectivity of Female Experience*. The final step involved validating the themes by cross-referencing additional data and selecting representative examples to present the findings.

Codes were further refined into themes through repeated comparison to ensure internal coherence and analytical consistency. The themes are: *Departure and the Formation of Female Subjectivity*, *The Expressive Space of Collective Resonance*, *Negotiating Visibility: Creating Conditional Safe Space*, and *Humor as Resistance: Satirizing Patriarchy and Rewriting Gender Norms*.

To enhance reliability, the study examined internal consistency. The study recoded Approximately 15% of the dataset (randomly selected threads) in two intervals. Coding comparison indicated the substantial consistency in thematic allocation. The iterative coding, reflexive memoing, and delayed recoding jointly strengthened the rigor of data analysis.

Regarding ethical considerations, this study analyzes only publicly accessible *Weibo* comments. There were no private accounts, deleted content, or restricted posts included. Usernames and identifying details were anonymized. Comments were treated as public discussions rather than personal testimony, in line with established ethical guidelines for social media research.

## 5. Findings

Thematic analysis of the scripts and audience comments identified four key themes that illustrate how female comedians construct *feminist subjectivity*, *foster emotional resonance*, *navigate visibility under gender constraints*, and *employ humor as resistance*. These themes collectively reveals how they expand safe zone of gender discourse and challenge patriarchal gender structure and gender roles in China's public sphere.

### 5.1 Departure and the Formation of Female Subjectivity

Chinese female stand-up comedians uses stories of leaving their families, hometowns, or traditional relationships, to construct a new form of female subjectivity. Although this storytelling powerfully challenges traditional gender roles, it also carries of creating new gendered mindset that can marginalize other women.

The stand-up scripts depict women who reject traditional gendered expectations to marry or have children, instead seeking educational or career opportunities in big cities. For example, a comedian named Echo shared her story of self-empowerment through education:

*My hometown is a Tujia and Miao Autonomous County...it used to be a poverty-stricken area...I wanted to change my fate, I wanted to walk out of the mountains, so I really studied hard. In the end, through my own effort, I got into a 211 university<sup>6</sup>. (Echo)*

Her narrative of "walk out of the mountain" embodies a rejection of the gender order that limits women's roles. By constructing a self-directed identity through upward mobility, Echo challenges the patriarchal notion that the value of females is tied to domesticity or procreation. In another performance, the comedian Xiangyu Tang humorously critiques male entitlement in a relationship:

*He said, "That's exactly the problem, don't you see? The thing about you is, your personality is too aggressive. I can't see any sense of admiration in your eyes. And men—we need to feel admired." I replied, "You spend my money, and I'm still supposed to admire you? Why don't I just worship you instead?"<sup>7</sup> (Xiangyu Tang)*

The exchange used in the comedy reveals a safe-zone strategy of satire to confront hegemonic masculinity, which is built on the expectation of female admiration and subordination. Her punchline affirms female agency and avoids. (Connell, 1987) These narratives demonstrates a shift from passive, male-centered roles toward active, self-directed female subjectivity.

However, this narrative also highlights a significant tension within feminist discourse. When the public celebrates stories of women achieving economic independence and rejecting traditional marriage, the narrative can inadvertently establish a novel set of rigid norms. For

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<sup>6</sup> A "211 university" is a designation for one of China's top universities supported by a national government project to promote elite higher education

<sup>7</sup> "崇拜" (admire) and "祭拜" (worship) rhyme in Chinese, adding a humorous effect to the punchline.

instance, praise women who "break free from their constraints and walk out of the mountains in their hearts." However, the ideal of independence may be narrowly defined, which could lead to the marginalization of women in traditional heterosexual marriages or economic dependence on their husbands. A moral absolutism develops within the discourse: Women who do not conform to the dominant narrative of advancing subjectivity are seen as less successful or weak. This creates ideological boundaries within the female community itself. (Gill, 2007)

## 5.2 The Expressive Space of Collective Resonance

Through the humorous sharing of personal experiences, Chinese female comedians transform individual trauma into collective experience (Barreca, 1991), thereby creating a unique safe zone of emotional resonance on digital platform. Chinese female comedians frequently shared personal experiences, especially stories about their families, to build a collective sense of female identity. Through humor they transform these often-painful experiences into public gendered discourse, expanding the safe zone for emotional release and mutual support (Xu D.&Liu, 2022). Echo, for example, uses irony to highlight gender inequity in traditional Chinese families.

*There are four children in my family: my eldest sister, my second sister, me, and then my younger brother. Just looking at this order, you can tell—we really **love daughters** in my family. (Echo)*

When appearing to praise her family, Echo's sarcasm gently reflects the patriarchal gender order at the micro level--an order that sustains itself by prioritizing sons as the bearers of family honor and the presumed future breadwinners. Her joke allows the audience to instantly recognize and laugh at the underlying injustice without a "fight". The approach effectively generates a sense of emotional shared among female audiences. A large percentage of female audience members commented that they had similar experiences with discrimination or oppression as women. They expressed gratitude, praise, and empathy toward the performers. These comments have collectively created a space of women empowerment, building deep connection to comedians and all female audiences, and transforming passive spectatorship into a form of communal resistance and mutual uplift. (Ahmed, 2004) In this digital enclave, humor becomes a bridge linking fragmented personal struggles into a collective feminist consciousness. Their comments reveal a deep connection to the comedians' narrative:

*"Watching her performance, I'm crying on the subway."*

*"Thank you for the amazing performance, Echo—just being able to document, create, and perform takes so much courage."*

*"It doesn't sound like she's talking about me—and yet every word feels like it is."*

*"Echo's family reflects what countless son-preferring households look like across the country."*

These responses transform the stage and the comments section into a public space for female expression. These comments create a sense of shared female experience, gradually turning the comments section into an outlet for emotional release and supportive interaction (Fraser, 1990). This reflects an expansion of the safe zone for gender discourse. By grounding their narratives in relatable personal experience, female comedians convey gendered realities in a way widely accepted by audiences. The authenticity of these stories, combined with the visible support from other female mitigates the risk of being accused of "inciting gender division". This process expands the safe zone for women's voice, allowing them to transform personal pain into a shared collective feminist consciousness in mixed-gender public spaces.

## 5.3 Negotiating Visibility: Creating Conditional Safe Space

Stand-up comedy functions as a conditional safe zone, which appears open to gender discourse, but only within boundaries shaped by dominant social and cultural norms. To remain visible

and avoid backlash, Chinese female comedians must strategically perform safety by using humor in ways that avoid provoking male audiences or directly challenge the patriarchal gender order and power structures.

A case in point is a joke by stand-up comedian Li Yang, which unexpectedly sparked heated Chinese online discussions beginning in August 2020 and continuing to this day. Yang's joke was: "*Why are men always so confident when they look so ordinary?*" (Yang, n.d.). This violated the unspoken rules of the conditional safe space by positioning herself in opposition to the male audience. On Weibo, the topic of Li Yang's venting about men's blind confidence has reached about 210 million hits and 84,000 discussions. Millions of Chinese men responded strongly, accusing her of starting a "gender war" (Yang, n.d.). Some comments framed her performance as a deliberate provocation aimed at creating gender antagonism, while others described it as evidence of "Western feminist infiltration" and an attempt to sow internal division in Chinese society. The backlash ultimately led to the cancellation of brand endorsements, such as her deal with JD.com<sup>8</sup> (Feng&Wang, 2024). These hostile responses reveal the fragile and contested nature of the conditional safe space constructed by female comedians.

However, the core of the backlash lies in Li Yang's direct challenge to the patriarchal gender structure. By mocking male self-perception, she undermined the ego foundation in patriarchal gender order. Unlike safer, low-conflict humor seen in other performances in section A and B, her joke directly targeted male individuals, underscoring the fragility of China's gender order, which male dominance is so normalized that even a light satirical remark becomes intolerable (Feng&Wang, 2024). Paradoxically, while this digital backlash seemed like a setback, it also had positive implications to challenge traditional gender order and gender role. The magnitude of the reaction exposed strong sexist and misogyny embedded in the culture, making visible the limits of male tolerance for female criticism and the fragility of patriarchal gender order. This moment ignited broader public discourse, allowing more women to recognize and articulate their own experiences of patriarchal suppression. In this way, this incident expanded gender discourse in Chinese society, transforming conflict into culture awakening of women (Feng&Wang, 2024).

Therefore, although female stand-up comedians are eager to use the stage to advocate for women and reveal gender inequality, they must self-monitor to avoid being perceived as progressive and aggressive. They employ strategic expressions in their scripts, such as self-deprecating humor, ironic phrasing, and quoting male perspectives (Barreca, 1991). These tactics align with the traditional gender role of women, which helps diminish their female identities (Blackstone, 2003).

Thus, the efforts of female stand-up comedians to expand the safe zone are very valuable, as they carefully negotiate the boundaries of visibility within gender structures. Fortunately, some of them are doing this successfully. In doing so, they slowly expand the boundaries of the conditional safe zone, opening up space for more complex and layered gender narratives in the public sphere.

#### **5.4 Humor as Resistance: Satirizing Patriarchy and Rewriting Gender Norms**

In the current gender structure, humor is a strategic form of female resistance. Female stand-up comedians use satire, irony, and exaggeration to challenge the patriarchal norms embedded in everyday life (Barreca, 1991).

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<sup>8</sup> JD.com (Jingdong) is a technology-driven Chinese e-commerce and retail infrastructure company—one of China's two largest B2C platforms.

*I came from the countryside—a real, authentic girl from the mountains. I was the first in my entire family to get into college, but now I'm doing just okay... I basically have nothing. Sometimes I even envy the girls who stayed back in the village—at least they already have ex-husbands. (Echo)*

The line uses humor to highlight the oppressive logic of traditional marriage in China. Through self-mockery and inversion, Echo expresses how women from undeveloped area lack of personal choice for their life and are forced into early marriage. By not directly mocking cultural norms, she use the low-conflict strategy within a conditional safe zone, allowing for critique without triggering backlash. Many female audience members resonated with the critique and expressed a collective desire to change gender roles and structures. They pointed out society's oppression of women directly and called on women to support each other.

*"Women's struggles were voiced through humor."*

*"When a woman holds the microphone and has five uninterrupted minutes onstage, it becomes almost impossible for her to speak only for herself."*

*"I hope this world shows more respect, care, and compassion to all women—and that women can learn to love themselves and one another."*

The performance is hence no longer seen as a personal story but as a shared expression of collective gendered experience. The comments section itself transforms into a digital safe zone for gender discourse, where women find support, empathy, and solidarity for each other (Walker, 1988). These interactions form the unique experience for Chinese feminists in digital feminism.

Thus, humor functions as a tool for awakening and creating solidarity. It enables women to expand the safe zone for public expression and call for systemic changes to gender roles and structures (Rowe, 1995). Female comedians blend personal stories with collective memories to weave fragmented individual experiences of suffering under a shared gender culture, order, and roles into the collective memory and identity of women. Through this process, stand-up comedy has been transformed into a potent force of empowerment.

## **6. Conclusion and Discussion**

### **6.1 The Dilemma of Feminist Visibility and Normative Power**

Feminist discourse is expanding, becoming fashionable and commercialized in China. However, its expansion of feminist visibility in the fourth wave, as Day and Wray (2018) argue, frequently comes at the cost of producing new behavioral norms and ideological boundaries. When female comedians and audiences criticize traditional gender norms, they still internalize the "admiring strength," which values independent, career-driven attitudes and criticizes those who marry or financially depend on men as unsuccessful and weak. In these narratives, feminism risks replacing old patriarchal norms with new ones, rather than embracing the diversity of women's lived experiences.

Another prominent example of its controversy is the debate over "beauty practice." Chinese women's preference on makeup and beauty is argued as created and imposed by patriarchy as an invisible oppression (Jeffreys, 2005). Some people critique dressing up as submission to the male gaze and entrapment in gender roles, while the others criticize that "refuse to dress up" has already become a new restriction on women. (*Phoenix TV*, 2024). These findings demonstrate that the expansion of feminist visibility in Chinese stand-up comedy still stays in the paradox. With more visible and codified feminist discourse, the likelihood of new expression hierarchies forming increases.

## **6.2 Humor as Adaptive Feminist Strategy: From Entertainment to Empowerment**

In the Chinese context, humor with less conflict helps feminists to touch on deep social inequalities (Walker, 1988). Many female comedians adopt irony, satire, and self-deprecating humor to expand the safe zone; humor enables them to transform their subject that defy traditional gender norms. According to Judith Butler's (1990) subversive repetition, through ironic exaggeration, self-mockery, and stylized performances, female stand-up comedians could disrupt the stability of patriarchal structures. On the other hand, their humor is also restricted by current gender structure and market, as stand-up comedy is a service-oriented entertainment with a mixed-gender audience (Xu D. &Liu, 2022). Thus, many female comedians are asked to ensure broad appeal.

Chinese women reflect on their historical trauma and the social reality behind the gender order, including the patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism. Humor embodies the resilience of women who insist on speaking out in the midst of oppression, to laugh in the face of life's injustices. Humor therefore completes the transition from entertainment to empowerment. That female comedians use it to create "relatively safe" spaces for expression to maintain their visibility while gradually introducing conversations about gender inequality. The expansion of the safe zone by humor shows the reconstruction of gender roles and demonstrates the growing social agency of women, giving them more freedoms under the current social structure (Barreca 1991).

## **6.3 Digital Backlash and the Loosening of Gender Order**

In the wave of fourth-wave feminism, digital space is also a contested arena where dominant gender orders are both challenged and reproduced because of negative public opinion. Digital platforms are functioning under regulation and breakthrough, restriction and freedom. On the one hand, social media provides an unprecedented stage for feminists to rapidly spread feminist ideas, awakening millions of feminist consciousness. Yet all content posted online must be vetted by the platforms; even the jokes of female comedians can easily be seen by millions of viewers on the Internet, and they have to avoid being too progressive.

As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, "popular feminism" means that feminist discourse has been absorbed and repackaged into mainstream media and branding mechanisms in a consumable and acceptable form. In media's times, women's empowerment and misogyny coexist: their voices are more frequently heard now, but they are only understood when they are moderate and non-threatening to the gender order. Therefore, this form of feminism that can be seen by the public is the harmless popular feminism, and the feminism that is critical and strives for systemic change of the gender order is marginalized.

This study shows that digital space is complex as to feminists. The online backlash, while seemingly suppressing feminist expression, paradoxically exposes the fragility of existing gender order and creates openings for renegotiation. At the platform level, these dynamics highlight the need for more gender-sensitive moderation and recommendation. Platforms could actively support diverse forms of women's expression by recognizing context, intent, and the structural nature of gender critique. Feminists should remain vigilant about how their discourse may be softened, depoliticized, or absorbed into popular feminism online, where visibility often comes at the cost of losing its critical edge.

## **6.4 The Chinese Experience in Global Comparison**

Scholarly comparisons between "East" and "West" should be presented cautiously because regions contain diverse and changing feminist practices. Western feminist movements have employed public protests, strikes, or institutional advocacy, which are suggested as universally dominant across Western contexts or uniformly effective. Not really likewise, Chinese feminist

practices include more affective and culturally situated repertoires, for example, the use of humor, metaphor, self-deprecation, and cultural performance.

Obviously, the concept of "safe zone" in the Chinese context is shaped by gender norms and multiple structural constraints, including audiences' perceived acceptability and considerations of speech-security. These constraints limit yet enable feminized action: within regulated and marketized spheres, humor can create locally effective zones of community and resonance (Banet-Weiser, 2018), even as they remain circumscribed by broader institutional boundaries. Thus, the Chinese case illustrates how feminist expression is adaptively negotiated in a particular ecology.

The findings show that the Chinese experience is an analytically instructive example. The soft, humor-based strategies may be comparatively more viable in settings with strong moral regulation or limited avenues for protest, their effectiveness depends on local culture and policy and affordance of platform; in some non-Western contexts; sometimes different mixes of visible protest and cultural tactics may be preferable or necessary. Chinese stand-up comedians offer one repertoire of adaptive practice, but it should be understood to complementary to other feminist tactics, rather than as a superior or universally applicable approach.

## 6.5 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the dataset focuses on highly visible online discussions with relatively high engagement that may overrepresent more vocal or polarized audience groups and underrepresent less active viewers. Future research could combine qualitative discourse analysis with survey or platform-level data to better capture broader audience reception patterns. On top of that, although a reflexive audit trail and re-coding were implemented to ensure rigor, the thematic analysis is inevitably influenced by the researcher's interpretive lens.

The study focused on highly visible comedians who have successfully navigated mainstream media, which may overlook the experiences of grassroots or "underground" female comedians who lack of commercial support and whose humor might be more radical. Expanding the scope to include less mainstream performers could provide a more comprehensive view of Chinese digital feminism. Moreover, given the rapid shifts in China's digital regulation and gendered expectations, the boundaries of the "safe zone" are constantly being renegotiated. Longitudinal studies in the future are required to track how their adaptive strategies evolve as the patriarchal gender order reacts to increasing feminist visibility.

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