



From one-child policy to three-children initiative: a feminist critique of the population planning policies in China

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Abstract

This article examines the continuity of heteropatriarchal discourse within China's population policies, focusing on the transition from the one-child policy to the current three-children initiative, and women's responses to these official narratives. Through the lens of Foucauldian bio-politics, the study explores how discursive practices surrounding family planning policy are manipulated to sustain authoritarian rule, linking it with loyalty to the state and fostering an anti-feminist support base that attributes collective feminist movements to "excessive education." The "optimization" of the family planning policy is analyzed as a discursive construct that conceals dehumanizing policies reducing women to mere reproductive machines, and portraying children solely as future labor force. This paper argues that the digital feminist movement in China is sustained by women's constant engagement with, and resistance against official narratives that co-opt feminism to serve the state's bio-political agenda of managing and controlling the female body.

Keywords: population policies, heteropatriarchal discourse, one-child policy, Foucauldian bio-politics, digital feminist campaign

Introduction

This article argues that digital feminist movements in China are sustained by women's constant engagement with, and resistance against, official narratives that co-opt feminism to serve the state's bio-political agenda of managing and controlling the female body. The strategies feminists have adopted are responses to China's unique history of extensive population control, spanning from the one-child policy era (1979–2015) to subsequent initiatives aimed at boosting birth rates. The one-child policy appeared to suppress reproductive rights, while the three-children initiative ostensibly seeks to promote liberation in this regard. We ask: How do seemingly conflicting population control policies reflect the same heteropatriarchal approach to state control over sexuality, and how do Chinese netizens confront this approach through feminist political communication? The population control ideology is advocated by populationists who attribute societal and environmental challenges solely to human population size. This ideology is characterized by its dehumanizing nature and disproportionately affects women, particularly those hailing from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Hendrixson et al., 2020). Among all countries advocating family planning policies, the People's Republic of China (hereafter China) has been at the forefront, officially incorporating population control into the country's Constitution in 1982 (Goldman, 2021). Amid the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) bid to bolster political legitimacy through economic development, they implemented the one-child policy to curb population growth and enhance per capita GDP growth (Wang et al., 2013). The one-child policy's implementation severely infringed upon Chinese women's reproductive rights, subjecting them to institutionalized violence including forced abortions and sterilizations (Rodriguez, 2023).

Following the implementation of the one-child policy, China's fertility rate plummeted to a mere 1.6 births per woman in 2015, significantly below the population replacement threshold of 2.1 (Fincher, 2018). Four decades later, to rectify the impending demographic crisis, the CCP ended this policy, advocating for a two-children policy in 2015, and later adjusting to a three-children policy in 2021 (Goldman, 2021; Wang et al., 2016). Contrary to the government's expectations, the anticipated rise in birth rates did not materialize. On January 17, 2023, China's birth rate hit a record low, with deaths exceeding births for the first time in its history (Ng, 2023).

On that day, major Chinese media outlets highlighted the population crisis across newspapers, official websites, and social media accounts, seeking to mobilize citizens to have children. Ironically, the state-led, top-down three-children initiative sparked widespread discontent among Chinese women, who, after enduring four decades of restricted reproductive rights, were now being urged to reproduce for the country. Expressing their anger and critique on Weibo with hashtags like #CanShorteningEducationIncreaseFertilityRates and #IsItReallyImportantToHaveOffspring, they propelled these topics to trend for an entire day, reflecting a stark critique of the government's heteropatriarchal agenda.

Previous studies investigating digital feminist activism drew mostly from the Anglo-American contexts (e.g., Linabary et al., 2020; Scharff, 2023). Among the research on Chinese digital feminism, the majority has drawn upon the post-feminist trends that have permeated Chinese social media (Peng, 2021a) and the Chinese #MeToo digital activism (Yin & Sun, 2021; Zeng, 2019; Zhou & Qiu, 2020). While previous studies on China's population control policies have primarily concentrated on aspects such as policy formulation,

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implementation, stakeholder involvement, significant outcomes, and the responses from elite feminists (Greenhalgh, 2008; Rodriguez, 2023; Wang et al., 2013, 2016), there remains a noticeable gap in the literature concerning how Chinese women used social media for protesting against these policies. To address these gaps, this article situates the latest digital protests against the “three-children initiative” within the broader context of the growing digital feminist activism in contemporary China.

The state’s co-optation of feminism

The female body and its reproductive capability hold a pivotal role in the interwoven notions of state feminism and nationalism. Why is women’s unwillingness to reproduce a political problem for the state? Women’s capability to bear children bears a symbolic representation of collective identity and honor (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Given women’s “burden of representation,” nationalistic projects benefit from exercising control over not only women’s behavior, but also their bodies and sexuality, a responsibility typically assigned to the male constituents of the nation (Slootmaeckers, 2019, p. 245). In Third World countries, reproduction is often constructed as a critical element of women’s role in rebuilding the nation (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Women’s bodies are mobilized, as they are essential for the survival of the population. Not only is women’s contribution to the state defined by their fertility, but their fertility is also treated as a resource owned by the state (Cao, 2015). In Serbia, for example, women who choose not to bear children were depicted as enemies of the people (Radulović, 2019). In this context, knowingly choosing to be single and childless thus indicates a defiant stance that challenges nationalist expectations surrounding the notion of national survival (Wu & Dong, 2019).

Through a Foucauldian lens, refusing to reproduce signifies a political object’s resistance to the state’s exercise of bio-power. Bio-power in the modern era assumes the highest role of administering and managing life through and through to ensure, sustain, and put life in order (Foucault, 1998). Replacing the ancient power to take life, modern bio-power asserts its control by fostering, intervening, regulating, and managing life based on “the expansion of productive forces and the differential allocation of profit,” aiming to sustain social hierarchization and the effects of hegemony (Foucault, 1998, pp. 140–141). The mechanism of bio-power subjects women to “the proliferating meaning” that necessitates control (Foucault, 1998). When a woman resists being affixed with a meaning-value imposed by the state’s bio-politics, she is engaged in a struggle against the state’s bio-power.

In China, the operation of bio-power often involves the co-optation of state feminism, which aligns itself with nationalism, in a shared pursuit of both national liberation and women’s emancipation. The state’s co-optation of feminism is not unique to China. It is widely practiced in former communist countries, where it reinforces the imposition of top-down policies by male elites targeting women (Outshoorn & Kantola, 2007). However, what distinguishes China is the degree to which it has enforced its population control agenda, incorporating feminist rhetoric. During the period between the communist revolution and the economic reforms (1949–1978), characterized by a demand for labor, Chinese women were not only encouraged to contribute their labor force but also their fertility—women who bore numerous children

were revered and celebrated as “mother-heroes” (Cao, 2015). The discursive portrayal of women as “holding half the sky” is materialized in the Marriage Law of 1950 and policies aimed at promoting female participation in the labor force, which led to a marked surge in both the fertility rate and the rate of women’s employment during the Mao era (Jin, 2012; World Bank, 2022).

As Foucault (1998) noted, bio-power consistently worked to align the growth of the human population with that of capital accumulation. In the Chinese context, the bio-political calculation changed rapidly in the 1980s when the large population was viewed as a hindrance to the state’s economic progress. The one-child policy was implemented to curb China’s population growth and facilitate economic development (Wang et al., 2016). The policy was materialized through the establishment of the National Population and Family Planning Commission in 1981 (Cao, 2015). Giving birth outside the family planning program was considered a crime which may result in substantial financial penalties. Bio-techniques, including coercive measures like forced sterilizations, abortions, and the compulsory insertion of intrauterine devices, were extensively employed to subjugate female bodies and control populations (Foucault, 1998, p. 140). State-owned companies helped ensure compliance by firing those who failed to adhere to the one-child policy. In this vein, both the mobilization and regulation of women’s reproductive capacity are consistently carried out through top-down approaches that perceive women as objects of control rather than autonomous individuals with their own needs (Greenhalgh, 2001).

Despite women’s victimization in this bio-political context, state feminism narratives were used to justify the one-child policy as a means to protect women’s health, promote liberation, and develop the state. The state is constructed as the heroic figure that liberated women from the constraints of traditional patriarchal family structures by imposing restrictions on childbearing. Meanwhile, the state also mobilized women to assume the role of heroines themselves, so that they would be willing to sacrifice their “freedom of reproductive choice for the greater benefit of the nation as a whole and future generations to come” (Greenhalgh, 2001, p. 853). Through associating the well-being of women with the broader struggles for national survival, the state has redefined feminism and reinforced the idea that pursuits for women’s individual rights should take a secondary role to their obligations in addressing nationalist crises, whether it is related to overpopulation or demographic concerns.

While state power once held unyielding dominance in Chinese feminist discourse, the changing social, economic, and cultural context in the reform era complicated the “strategic complexity of state action in gender politics” (McIntosh, 1978, as cited in Li, 2015, p. 522). Mao’s gender ideology that “de-gender[ed] and neutraliz[ed] femininity” was criticized as “subsuming gender under class struggle and recasting women as patriotic subjects” (Liao, 2020, p. 260). Therefore, Chinese feminists’ efforts in the late 1970s aimed to re-feminize Chinese women as gendered subjects and rediscover female identities. These efforts were seen as empowering and liberating because they provided women with greater choices and subjectivities (Liao, 2020). However, parallel to “the propagation of neoliberal post-feminism in Western democracies,” the pursuit of the feminine and the sense of empowerment became linked to women’s gendered

consumption practices in post-reform China (Peng, 2021a, p. 599). In the Chinese context, women were not only far from liberation but also emerged as a pivotal resource for manipulation by both the market and the state, because the state's primary goal is to secure political legitimacy through economic advancement (Liao, 2020). Women were thus increasingly mobilized as consumers by both the market and the state, affirming the validity of the state's economic policies and contributing their purchasing power to the state's economic growth.

Compared with such post-feminist discourse, "made-in-China" feminism challenged the state power by encompassing dissenting voices and practices that contest state policies regarding female sexuality, romantic relationships, and familial matters (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 375). While grassroots feminist discourse has faced significant pushback, with feminists being derogatorily labeled as "feminist whores" (*nüquanbiao*) and "feminist cancer" (*nüquanai*) (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 472), such discussions have nonetheless carved out a space for women in an increasingly adversarial environment in which traditional on-street feminist movements and protests remain strictly prohibited in China (Fincher, 2018).

The existing literature discussed above offers a valuable analytical framework for understanding the connection between the state and the superficial forms of empowerment that underpin the legitimacy of population control policies. Despite shifts in the state's portrayal of women, bio-techniques persist, albeit not in the overt forms of forced sterilizations or abortions. Instead, they manifest through the utilization of purported "experts" to exert social pressure on women, compelling them to conform to prescribed roles. Our analysis further exposes the complicity and tensions between state feminism and post-feminism, and how women resisted the heteropatriarchal structure that underpins the discourse surrounding three-children initiative.

Methodology

We employed a mixed method approach combining netnography on Weibo and textual analysis. We examined over 500 news reports and commentaries from state-owned media outlets including *People's Daily*, *China Youth Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, *Beijing News*, *Workers' Daily*, and *Economic Daily* from 1979 to 2023, to identify the official stance in Chinese media. We also collected textual data from semi-official outlets, including *The Paper* and *Southern Weekly*, to analyze how they utilized storytelling techniques to support official discourse.

In addition, we conducted a netnography on Weibo, a social media platform akin to Twitter, which is recognized as the primary online public sphere in China (Ye & Zhao, 2023). As of 2023, Weibo has been a central hub for numerous digital feminist campaigns, including the prominent #MeToo movement (Yin & Sun, 2021) and the campaign against menstrual taboos (Zhang & Zhang, 2023). Starting on January 17, 2023, the initiation date of the anti-fertility initiative campaign, and continuing until April 17, 2023, we observed the two trending hashtags #CanShorteningEducationIncreaseFertilityRates and #IsItReallyImportantToHaveOffspring, including original posts, re-post, and comments. This timeframe allows us to paint a comprehensive picture of the trends, and confirm that the majority of original posts were published within the first five days

starting from January 17. While more posts continued to be published until we had completed our paper, the overwhelming majority of the latest posts were either reposts or duplicates. While persistent discussions about material conditions, such as housing prices, impacting birth rates are commonplace even before the chosen period, these hashtags have achieved over 670 million and 300 million views respectively. The high viewing numbers mean that they are the most viewed and discussed hashtags, hence the focal point of our analysis.

We compiled a data sample comprising 40,846 original posts. These posts were extracted from the initial five days following the commencement of this digital feminist activism episode. This timeframe was chosen due to the heightened intensity and substantial volume of original posts published during this period. The digital campaign extended beyond the data collection period, with users continuing to utilize the hashtags up until the completion of this paper.

We conducted an inductive content analysis of the sample Weibo posts and newspaper articles using NVivo. This analysis of newspaper content yielded several prominent coding categories, which include:

- 1) Framing the one-child policy and the subsequent pro-fertility initiative as scientific measures supported by experts and professionals.
- 2) Co-opting state feminism and post-feminism ideologies to propagate these policies.
- 3) Utilizing nationalist discourses to endorse and promote these policies.
- 4) Evaluating individuals based on their adherence to or defiance of the regulations, with some being praised while others faced consequences.

We imported the Weibo data into Nvivo and used its coding feature to categorize the content. Our NVivo analysis of Weibo content revealed the following prominent coding themes from the data:

- 1) Criticizing the experts advocating for the pro-fertility initiative.
- 2) Emphasizing the importance of women's freedom and independent choice in deciding to have children.
- 3) Revealing the societal inequalities women encounter, both within their families and in their professional lives.
- 4) Recalling memories associated with the propaganda of the one-child policy.
- 5) Expressing disappointment toward the state and anti-nationalist sentiments.

Employing a Foucauldian lens, we aim to unveil the mechanisms of bio-power and the enduring presence of state-endorsed heteropatriarchal narratives in China's population planning policies, highlighting an area of contention between women and the state's official feminist and nationalist discourse. Comparing these discourses, our analysis of the digital feminist protest against the pro-fertility initiative centers on three themes:

- 1) The role of experts as active enablers of bio-power, contrasted with women's resistance to the imposition of bio-political control.

- 2) The appropriation of feminism to advance the biopolitical agenda, countered by women advocating for gender equality through storytelling.
- 3) The nationalist underpinnings of bio-power's mechanisms, juxtaposed with women's political resistance to the exploitation of nationalism.

By highlighting the Chinese state's co-optation of feminism to bolster legitimacy, our analysis enriches the existing discussions about the interplay between feminism and nationalism in the Global South and illustrates how these efforts were resisted through feminist political communication against the imposition of the national population agenda on women.

Finally, as ethical guidelines outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) highlighted, the use of publicly available social media data for research necessitates a careful evaluation of potential harm on a case-by-case basis (Ye and Krijnen, 2024). Accordingly, we have anonymized the Weibo accounts cited in the article to mitigate any unanticipated harm that may result from the identification of those Weibo users.

Persisting heteropatriarchal narratives The role of specialists (Zhuanjia)

Professionals and experts serve a crucial function in legitimizing state narratives and gauging public sentiment. Illustrating this, on January 17, the very same day that the Chinese government released its latest population report, the state-affiliated newspaper *China News Service* published an article citing experts from various esteemed Chinese research institutes and universities, such as the China Population and Development Research Centre and Renmin University of China, to highlight the negative effects of declining birth rates and suggest the government to adopt more proactive measures to encourage higher birth rates (Li et al., 2023). Similar news articles appeared in numerous other Chinese state-affiliated media outlets. For instance, *Yicai* conducted an interview with Xin Yuan, a professor from Nankai University (Guo, 2023), while *The Beijing News* published a report authored by Guangzong Mu, a professor from the Institute of Population Studies at Peking University (Mu, 2023). Ironically, most of these experts are men.

The co-optation of experts in Chinese mainstream media reflects a fundamental rationale of legitimizing population control over women's bodies under the guise of a seemingly "scientific" approach. The frequent quoting of experts, scholars, and specialists in news reports by the media serves as a communication strategy to bolster the perceived credibility and authority of the state's messaging (Song, 2023). Given the inherent associations of expertise with qualities such as scientific rigor, professionalism, credibility, and objectivity, mainstream media outlets rely on citing the opinions of experts as a crucial source of information to substantiate the rationality and trustworthiness of their reporting (Fang, 2022).

According to Foucault (1998), in the mechanism of bio-power, traditional guardians of social reality have been replaced by experts who now play a pivotal role in shaping social norms through the production of knowledge. In the Chinese context, the traditional authority is not replaced by experts; rather, it co-opts them, using their voices to highlight the government's commitment to harnessing modern science and technology in policy formulation during the economic

reforms, in contrast to the Maoist reliance on ideological factors in policymaking (Greenhalgh, 2008, p. 15). The one-child policy was formulated with the help of scientists during the Deng era and was consistently portrayed as a "scientific and correct population policy" ("Jianchi Kexuede," 1982). Yet, this "scientific-therefore-correct" rationale functions as a means of exerting control and justifies the de facto absence of women's agency in the slogan "democratized and scientific policymaking" (*juece minzhuhua he juece kexuehua*). Invoking scientific principles, experts and policymakers steer discussions away from gender-related aspects and toward the realm of natural sciences ("Juece Minzhuhua," 1986). Meanwhile, in presenting itself as a democratic and knowledgeable government that actively takes expert opinions into account when formulating policies, the CCP has sought to deflect grievances toward the experts involved in policy proposals, should those policies fail to meet public expectations. This strategy occasionally proves effective, as evidenced by the following angry post:

#CanShorteningEducationIncreaseFertilityRates I strongly believe that these experts have lost their minds, and the government should take immediate action against those who make inappropriate suggestions. (Weibo user A, 2023)

The debate surrounding the proposal to shorten education emerged from the publication of *The 2022 Report on Education and Population in China* (Liang et al., 2023). Notably, this report was authored by a group of experts consisting of entrepreneurs, researchers, and a self-proclaimed "reproductive freedom advocate," all of whom happen to be men. Netizens like user A directed their resentment toward the experts, urging the government to punish the experts. This strategy provides the state with an opportunity to shift blame, thereby preserving a certain level of public support and stability. However, this strategy could also be utilized by the public as a means of assigning blame to specific individuals, as it involves fewer political risks compared to directly confronting the state over poor decision-making.

Furthermore, it is important to note that this co-optation strategy is not always successful in diverting the public's attention away from gender-related concerns and toward the realm of public policy in discussions surrounding the three-children initiative. The quote retrieved from Weibo user B provided a good illustration:

#CanShorteningEducationIncreaseFertilityRates These days I've been seeing news about falling birth rates and all these experts coming up with ideas like longer maternity leave and subsidies for having kids. And now they're saying we spend too much time studying and suggesting shorter education (...) They know what the real issue is, but it's like they don't care about women and their needs. (Weibo user B, 2023)

Weibo user B emphasizes that fertility issues significantly impact women and attributes the absurd suggestions by experts to a disregard for women's needs. Hence, the #CanShorteningEducationIncreaseFertilityRates hashtag initially functions as a counter-frame, empowering Chinese women to reveal the gendered underpinnings concealed within the ostensibly objective scientific discourse propagated by authorities and their co-opted experts. By scrutinizing the knowledge disseminated by these experts, Chinese women

actively challenge the bio-political structures produced to measure and control their lives.

Convergence and tensions: State feminism and post-feminism

The state also utilizes mainstream media and state feminism organizations like the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) to promote the narrative that both the one-child policy and the three-children initiative are inherently feminist. Different from the Western discourse that frames population control within the context of social justice, regarding it as a means for women to responsibly contribute to environmental sustainability (Sasser, 2018), the Chinese government portrays the one-child policy as beneficial for women's health and as a means of liberating them from traditional gender roles by reducing their domestic workload (Ding, 2002; Feng, 2000; "Guanche Jiben," 2015; "Zhongguo Xingbie," 2005). On January 31, shortly after the government's population report, the ACWF launched an initiative to appropriate feminist discourse by suggesting policies like flexible work for mothers, tailored vocational training, and tax incentives for mother-friendly companies (Wu & Li, 2023).

Women are not only the primary bodies of fertility (*shengyu zbuti*), but also crucial human capital (*renli ziben*) in society. As the three-children policy is implemented, there is a growing need to provide support for women who have temporarily paused their careers due to childbirth, allowing them to reintegrate into the workforce while ensuring they can effectively care for their families and children. (Wu & Li, 2023)

Despite appearing feminist, the ACWF defines women based on their reproductive capacity and economic values, perpetuating the reduction of women to mere vessels for reproduction (Fincher, 2018) and economic functions (McNeill, 2019). This narrative unveils the workings of bio-power, consistently delineating "the functions of reproduction" concerning women and integrating "bodies into the machinery of production" to expedite economic development. The discourse generated by purported women's organizations subjects women to a dual form of exploitation, stemming from both patriarchal and neoliberal systems of oppression.

Official and semi-official policy-advocating discourses join the global post-feminism narrative that is attached to "ideologies of the freedom of choice, self-betterment, and girl power" (Yang, 2023, p. 1060). Accompanying this is a narrative infused with a post-feminism rhythm of storytelling employed to promote the state's evolving agenda more effectively within Chinese mainstream media. Among the 183 news articles that celebrate the two-children and three-children policies, 95 (51.91%) feature personal stories of mothers with two or more children, emphasizing their ability to "have a career while also taking good care of their family" (Trimmel et al., 2022, p. 404).

I went to a university in Beijing with my youngest daughter when she was only two months old, despite the challenges of breastfeeding (...) The experience of reading with my children and studying Drama ignited my passion for a new career, leading me to establish an innovative parent-child reading service company. Therefore, I disagree with the notion that raising children will impair

one's career prospects. In my case, it was precisely my role as a mother that enabled me to discover and pursue my true career and passions. (Xue, interviewed by X. Wang & Wang, 2023)

This excerpt is taken from an article featuring interviews with mothers of three children published by the *Women of China*, the official magazine of the ACWF. Such framing of Xue's "success" is part of broader popular representation of women who can fulfill "their own potential as both mothers and wives and successful workers/professionals" (Wang & Mihelj, 2019, p. 49). Emphasizing that Xue's childbearing experience did not hinder but rather enhanced her career success, the article illustrates that personal goals and collective goals can coexist, and paints a rosy picture that women are not sacrificing their personal freedom when supporting the state's population engineering agenda.

While post-feminist discourses have had successes in creating a "self-branding strategy to target Chinese women" among Chinese "feminist" social media influencers (Peng, 2021b, p. 116), the mainstream discourse's failure to address the injustice that women face becomes evident when attempting to promote the three-children initiative. This is evident in Weibo posts criticizing the burdens on Chinese women and the initiative's discrimination.

#CanShorteningEducationIncreaseFertilityRates Today, women have to juggle so much—from giving birth and taking care of kids to working and managing housework. Our lives are short, yet we find ourselves constantly busy, always prioritizing others over ourselves. (Weibo user C, 2023)

#CanShorteningEducationIncreaseFertilityRates Can men share the responsibility of raising children with women? Can you ensure equal pay for men and women doing the same work? Can workplaces become safe spaces free from sexual harassment for women? Can companies treat married and child-rearing women fairly in the workplace? (Weibo user D, 2023)

Confronting a post-feminist working mother narrative, these posts reveal the realities behind the elusive "having-it-all" dream and the "depoliticized freedom-of-choice storylines" (Trimmel et al., 2022, p. 401). They reveal a complex entanglement of traditional gender expectations and the need for female labor within the Chinese market economy, and demonstrate that "gender inequality, discrimination, and exploitation still endure in Chinese society" (Trimmel et al., 2022, p. 402). In this regard, these posts directly challenge the idyllic images depicted in mainstream discourses, thereby contributing to the critique of the "broader issues of power and injustice" inherent within the hierarchical society (Evans, 2008, p. 378).

User D's call for creating safe workplaces free from sexual harassment for women resonates with the earlier Chinese #MeToo digital movement. Despite the #MeToo hashtag being banned on Weibo, the memories and dedication to the feminist cause endure. While digital feminist movements are often seen as ephemeral (Liao, 2019), each episode of such movements that gradually gains traction on social media platforms offers women a platform to amplify their voices. Just as individual ripples eventually converge to form a

formidable tidal wave, these movements collectively shape the feminist discourse in China.

Persisting heteropatriarchal patterns

Although the one-child policy and three-children initiative may appear to be opposing policy directions, they are underpinned by the same nationalist narratives. Women's bodies are framed as a matter of national survival in both contexts. When the state needed to curb population growth to allow time for economic development, social welfare, education, and urbanization (Li, 2013) to catch up, the state framed the one-child policy as a key factor in strengthening China's national power ("Jinyibu Tuijin," 2000). When the state found itself facing a self-inflicted population crisis, it exerted pressure on women by linking their willingness to have more children with a sense of patriotism. Procreation is portrayed as a means not only to cultivate favorable demographic conditions but also to achieve the grand rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Mu, 2023). The discursive strategies that portray the state as facing threats from internal and external adversaries, as Foucault (1998) elucidated, are often employed to wield indirect control over the lives and deaths of individuals, all under the guise of defending the state. In the Chinese context, anti-Japanese sentiments are consistently utilized to ignite nationalist fervor, stemming from the historical animosity between China and Japan during World War II (Zhang & Ma, 2023). One notable example is the *Sina News* article titled "China's Negative Population Growth Exceeds Expectations; Birth Rates in These Ten Provinces Drop Below Japan's" (Paella, 2023). Sensationalist headlines like this reinforce the perception of the Chinese public that China remains a potential victim of its adversaries and generate a sense of urgency to encourage women to have children.

Yet, as Zhang and Ma (2023) noted, digital nationalism discourses represent a complex phenomenon that simultaneously provides support for the authority on one hand, while also possessing the potential to turn against the state if it fails to meet the demands of the public. Unsurprisingly, in the social media protest against the three-child initiative, the nationalist card proved to be ineffective, with a notable 26,395 (64.62%) of the 40,846 original Weibo posts actively engaging in counternarratives that contest the endorsed nationalist discourse. Some users directly challenge mainstream media's portrayal of women's fertility as a tool to surpass Japan, comparing China's policies to those of less gender-equal countries:

Japan has reduced the legal childbirth age to 16, while the Taliban is preventing women from accessing higher education, and the Sichuan government is encouraging women to become single mothers (...) Who cares if we're disappointed? #IsItReallyImportantToHaveOffspring (Weibo user E, 2023)

Several posts overtly challenged the state agenda of promoting patriotism. For example, the realization of being treated simply as reproductive tools has led to the exhaustion of patriotism among some women. Some have begun explicitly prioritizing their self-identification as women over their identity as Chinese. In doing so, they resisted the ideology of state feminism, which often calls for sacrifices of women's interests for the sake of the "collective good" (Wang, 2017).

Others opted for an indirect approach to express their discontent, articulating it through nuanced personal narratives. These stories often revolved around the hardships endured by their mothers, who were victims of the one-child policy, as well as reminiscences of the pervasive propaganda of earlier years. For example, one recounted the slogans imprinted in her childhood memories:

#CanShorteningEducationIncreaseFertilityRates I still remember the rural wall propaganda slogans from the 90s that said having fewer births leads to a happier life. But now, the fertility rate is low, and then women are expected to be more reproductive. Equality between men and women has never truly existed. (Weibo user F, 2023)

Considering that the majority of post-1980 generations were exposed to the propaganda associated with the one-child policy, numerous stories like these emerged during the protests. These stories highlight that the idealized vision of women living happily under the care of the state was never realized. Instead, women remained confined to the role of reproductive tools. This form of digital personal storytelling has proven its political significance by linking individual experiences to broader social structures. It plays a crucial role in serving as foundational elements for a broader collective effort aimed at constructing a counter-discourse (Liao, 2019).

User F's emphasis on the non-existent equality between men and women further reflects her acknowledgement of the patriarchal nature inherent in both one-child policy and three-children initiatives. As Ikemoto (2019) highlighted, the role of reproduction is a key aspect of patriarchy, with women bearing children and men not, leading to the justification of differential treatment in both domestic and public spheres. Therefore, feminists considered reproductive decisions as a means of achieving gender equality, encompassing the protection of bodily integrity against unwarranted state control over reproductive capacity. Due to the profound recognition of the patriarchal and sexist nature of both population planning policies, the government's use of patriotic rhetoric to encourage women's active participation in bearing more children evoked strong resentment among women (Fincher, 2018).

Conclusion

China's experience illustrates a convergence of feminism and nationalism, a strategy seen in the Global South due to their shared colonial struggles against foreign aggressors. This convergence highlights the Foucauldian concept of bio-power, wherein state narratives link national liberation to women's liberation. Our analysis reveals a stark contrast between state narratives and women's realities, exposing the disconnect between the state's constructed perception and women's lived experiences. While the relaxation of the one-child policy is portrayed as liberating, the coercive heteropatriarchal undertones underpinning the three-children initiative reveal that women have not experienced greater freedom. Instead, their bodies and fertility continue to be treated as resources subject to state planning and extraction as per the state's needs. In legitimating population control, both state feminism and nationalism reinforce the state's exercise of bio-power—the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations through diverse techniques (Foucault, 1998, p. 140). The power to

take life and let live is essentially the “privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it” (Foucault, 1998, p. 136). The female body is the site for political discussions as they are at the intersection of two central technologies of power—the disciplines of the body and the regulation of populations (Foucault, 1998, p. 145). Strong state control over population reflects a eugenic ordering of society (Foucault, 1998, p. 149).

In Anglo-American contexts, digital activism has been criticized for being overly simplistic in its approach to political engagement, its perceived inability to transition into street protests and its limited influence on institutional politics (Shresthova, 2016). However, challenging a more repressive regime carries with it a different weight of risk and responsibility (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016). In the Chinese context, engaging in offline actions can pose significant risks, as evidenced by cases where feminist protestors have faced arrests, harassment, and silencing.¹

Hence, online activism emerges as the only viable avenue for women to amplify their voices and challenge the dominance of heteropatriarchy. Despite stringent censorship measures, online activism keeps public discussions alive. By drawing parallels between narratives surrounding the one-child policy and the three-children initiative, women effectively emphasized the dehumanizing nature of these ostensibly “liberating” policies. The history of population engineering has led women to recognize the inherent conflict between their individual interests and nationalist aspirations. It is through such acts of resistance that Chinese women assert their autonomy over their bodies, seek freedom, and define happiness beyond oppressions and alienations (Foucault, 1998). Eventually, these endeavors undermine the state’s ability to persuade women to make personal sacrifices for the collective goal of reversing population decline.

Data availability

The data used in this article were collected from publicly available posts on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform. As such, the data are openly accessible to the public and can be retrieved from the Weibo platform using appropriate search queries and filters. Due to the public nature of the data, no specific permissions were required for their use. Researchers interested in accessing the data set may obtain it directly from the Weibo platform or by contacting the authors for further information.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have reported no potential conflicts of interest.

Note

1. A recent case is that of #MeToo activist Huang Xueqin, who faced repeated detentions and harassment targeting her family. She was sued for subversion of state power.

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