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BODIES THAT PAIN: AN EMERGENT RESISTANCE IN NEO/NON-LIBERAL CHINA

Exploring Weibo hashtag activism #FacingBirthInjuries from an affective-ethical perspective

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ABSTRACT

Following a male obstetrics/gynaecology influencer's videos on perineal laceration and stretch marks on Weibo, there were polarised discussions under the associated hashtag of #FacingBirthInjuries. I situated this phenomenon against the backdrop of the state's three-child policy, social-cultural taboos of women's health issues, thriving Weibo feminism, and reactionary anti-feminism/misogyny sponsored by the platform and the state in 'neo/non-liberal' China. Adopting an affective-ethical lens, this dissertation investigates what discourses are articulated under the hashtag and how they relate to dominant affective regimes of motherhood. 242 most popular posts generated within 12 hours of each video have been collected, followed by discourse analysis with an innovatively hybrid framework integrating new materialism, poststructuralism, and critical discourse analysis. Five entangled assemblages/discourses are identified, including establishing, affirming, challenging, defending, and pushing for the visibility ethical regimes of pain. I argue that a maternal body in pain is continuously asserted and contested, constituting an emergent resistance against dominant affective motherhood regimes in neo/non-liberal China. Existing studies have rarely explored public communication of birth injuries in Chinese context, which nevertheless might be important for understanding the impediments Chinese women face in striving for her bodily autonomy. Through affective-ethical perspectives, this study contributes to understanding how various embodied emotions function in online activism, and how they may simultaneously promote and ethically problematise feminist endeavour for social justice.

INTRODUCTION

On January 18th and February 3rd, a male doctor's videos introducing perineal laceration and stretch marks went viral on Weibo. The hashtag attached to it, #FacingBirthInjuries ('zhimian shengyu sunshang'), reached Weibo's Hot Searching twice. Weibo is a Chinese microblogging site resembling Twitter, but it allows much longer posts and short videos (Jia & Han, 2020: 305). Hot Searching is a list of 50 tags that are mostly searched in real time, which often trigger heated discussions and entail profound social impacts (Jia & Han, 2020: 315). The doctor is a verified obstetric and gynaecologist with more than three million followers on Weibo. His videos evoked polarised debate. While some celebrated it empowered women by informing her of childbirth risks, some criticised him maliciously evoked anxiety around childbirth. His second video was followed by the platform's warning that if he updated too frequently, the whole series of videos would be deleted, which he revealed in the comment section. Later, presumably to keep lower profile, he changed the hashtag's name to #SeeingBirthInjuries ('kanjian shengyu sunshang'), and his videos never reached Hot Searching.

It is often argued that childbirth is associated with a sense of crisis/risk in post-modern western culture (Reiger & Dempsey, 2006; Scamell, 2014), as birth giving is framed as a medical event relying on biomedical science to predict and minimise its risks (Chadwick & Foster, 2014: 70). This sometimes evokes feminist critiques that it disempowers labouring women by pathologising childbirth in a masculine medical model (Rothman, 1982; Martin, 1987). Feminists' relationship with bioscience has long been ambivalent. On the one hand, there is a hope that women can better understand her lived experience through biomedical knowledge; on the other hand, there is a distrust against various notions and practices that have been historically and contemporarily reducing women as 'figures of dense, unspeaking, gross corporeality' (Price & Shildrick, 1999: 146).

Such case seems to be even more complex in China. The three-child policy has been implemented since 2021, as a response to low fertility rate and associated social issues, such as aging population and growing labour cost (Tatum, 2021; Gao & Li, 2021: 254). This is accompanied with intensive state-sponsored propaganda urging childbirth in recent years (e.g., Zhao, 2023; Hua, 2023; Mu, 2023). Additionally, as Confucianist mores link reproductive/sexual health to sensibilities of shame, sex education is lacking in schools and public (Lyu et al., 2020; Fang et al., 2022), and women rarely openly discuss her birth sequala out of embarrassment (Liu & Zou, 2023: 1). Chinese medical

influencers are found to be liberating gynaecological illnesses from shame, while also complicit in treating women as 'baby incubators' (Liu & Zou, 2023: 8). The intricate interplays of biomedicine, the state, and women's bodily autonomy make the hashtag a compelling case for analysis, which can shed light on possible obstacles that impede women from gaining her bodily autonomy.

The heated debate triggered by the videos is also inextricable to the growing feminism in Weibo and the backlash of anti-feminism and misogyny sponsored by the state and the platform (Xue & Rose, 2022; Liao, 2023). In the context of widespread stigmatisation against Weibo feminists as irrational or anti-national (Wang & Chang, 2023; Huang, 2016; Huang, 2022), even labeling someone as 'feminist' seems to be capable of delegitimising what she is saying. In my data corpus, some women explicitly disassociate themselves from feminist labels, yet their participation in hashtag discussions in defending her reproductive autonomy is still identified as feminist activism in this dissertation. Weibo feminisms might be understood as plural and variegated yet with common objectives against sexism and gender injustice. This study is partially driven by a desire to do justice to Weibo popular feminisms that are stigmatised and sometimes seen as similar to neoliberal feminism in the West that is market-friendly and depoliticised (e.g., Yin, 2022; Ling, 2022).

Weibo feminist hashtag activism is also saturated with emotion and sometimes accompanied with derogatory terms (Huang, 2023). This evokes my thinking about adopting an affective-ethical lens to examine Weibo feminist activism. Silverstone (2006) conceptualises media as significant sites for constructing moral order. Morality and ethics are used as synonymous by Silverstone (2006), but he also distinguishes these concepts. Morality concerns general principles and their justifications, and ethics deals with specific applications contingent upon different contexts (Silverstone, 2006: 7). This study seeks to understand how media morality/ethics may be conducted or problematised through embodied emotions and how specific meanings of ethics may vary according to different media contexts.

In investigating the hashtag activism of #FacingBirthInjuries, I situate my study in the context of the state's three-child policy, ambiguous relationships between biomedicine and feminism, and Weibo polarised debate on gender issues in 'neo/non-liberal' China. I'm particularly interested in exploring how these posts are related to dominant motherhood culture that aligns with the state's population goals, given communicating birth injuries can be precarious nowadays and anxiety about the low fertility rate is widely spread.

In the theoretical chapter, I will address how emotions can be mutually supportive with neo/non-liberal order, and theorise motherhood in mainstream Chinese culture. This is followed by my conceptual frame, a brief review of literature on Weibo feminism that adopts affective lens, and the research question. In the chapter on research design and methodology, I will elaborate on my hybrid approach to conducting discourse analysis with an affective lens, in addition to discussing ethical issues and reflexivity. Afterwards, findings and analysis will be discussed, ended with a conclusion.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

Emotions in neo/non-liberal China

Chinese society in post-reform eras can be conceptualised as 'neo/non-liberal' (Wallis & Shen, 2018: 397). Neoliberalism in the West is marked by a free market with minimum governmental interventions and liberation of individuals' entrepreneur freedom (Harvey, 2005: 2), while neo/non-liberalism in China features a socialist market economy encompassing privatisation and strict political control. In neo/non-liberal societies, individuals are encouraged to be self-enterprising amidst economic uncertainties and are forbidden to make fierce political critiques (Ong & Zhang, 2011: 7, 12; Yan, 2009: xxxi-xxxii).

Nonetheless, self-reliance intended in the economic realm coincides with individualisation with implications of undermining collectivist values and socialist ethics (Yan, 2003: 226; 2009: xxxi-xxxii), potentially endangering the party-state's authority. Such issue is attendant with exacerbated income inequality and urban/rural divide given the state's prioritisation of privatisation over social welfare provision (Piketty et al., 2019; F. Tang, 2022). To cope with these problems, one strategy adopted by the state is psychotherapeutic interventions (Yang, 2013; Zhang, 2017).

Illouz (2007: 5) proposes 'emotional capitalism', referring to a culture where economic practices of capitalism and emotional life mutually support each other. Arguably, there similarly exists 'emotional postsocialism'—postsocialism referring to the period after market reforms here—where happiness has become a governing tool to induce ideal citizenship to sustain neo/non-liberal order. Yang (2013: 292) labels a series of psychotherapeutic strategies adopted by Chinese state as psycho-politics. Strategies, such as counselling and social work, are used to mobilize individuals into self-help, and to unleash their positive potential to become more productive (Yang, 2013). Happiness, in

Yang's view, is instrumentalised to divert public attention from inequality (2013: 294; 2015: 17), and reflects the government's incapability of offering adequate and equal resources to citizens (2013: 306).

Happiness' role in maintaining non/neo-liberal order arguably lies in its two functions. The first is its obscurant capacity (Lorde, 1980: 50; Ahmed, 2010: 83) of covering up social issues that cause suffering. This is distinguished from affective dissonance, arising from discomfort due to a gap between the embodied experience and social expectations (Hemmings, 2012). While affective dissonance, a signal of unhappiness, invites a transformation of social environment (Ahmed, 2010: 79), happiness requires individuals to adapt themselves, which contributes to social harmony established upon hierarchical order.

Second, happiness is future-oriented (Ahmed, 2010: 32, 54) and renders current suffering endurable. 'Promoting common prosperity' (Ma, 2023) is the state's slogan for achieving economic equality. Underprivileged groups, especially those from rural areas, are encouraged to discipline themselves and improve their 'suzhi', a Chinese euphemism used to describe humans' quality based on their consumption power and educational background, so as to achieve modernity and affluence (Sun, 2009; Anagnost, 2004: 190-192). In eliciting public confidence in the country's commitment to lift all the people out of poverty in the future, forward-looking subjects are induced who are devoted to economic development at present.

Happiness is further assigned with significant moral value and employed to discipline relevant behaviour. 'Positive energ', originally meaning positive mindset, is reconfigured by the state into 'socialist core values', such as patriotism, prosperity, and harmony ("Core socialist values", 2017; Yang & Tang, 2018: 16). Individuals perceived as embodying these virtues are celebrated and glorified ("China publishes typical", 2020). In contrast, negative energy is censored and banished on the Internet (Chen et al., 2021), which means criticism towards the dark side of society and the political system (Yang & Tang, 2018: 20). Individuals' happiness and nationalism are thus obfuscated, so that political control becomes more implicit, and embodying happiness/positive energy becomes an ethical imperative.

Happiness, therefore, arguably constitutes the 'dominant affective regimes' in neo/non-liberal China. These regimes work to create ideal neo/non-liberal subjectivity in alignment with national interests of economic development and political stability. Moral imperatives and disciplinary power

associated with happiness are also applicable to marriage, childbirth, and childrearing. The next section will address how dominant affective regimes of motherhood are established to suit the state's population goals.

Dominant Affective Regimes of Motherhood

Dominant affective regimes of motherhood in neo/non-liberal China arguably convey twofold messages. First, personal happiness is indispensable from marriage and having a baby. Second, birthing and rearing a 'high-quality' child bring joy to mothers and qualify them as 'glorious'. They work to naturalise women's maternity and retrench what I call as 'nationalist patriarchy', referring to gender inequality sustained and justified by national interests.

Miserable 'leftover' women

Happiness promised by marriage and childbirth is largely shored up by the unfavourable binary opposite, namely pathetic 'leftover' woman ('shengnü'). 'Leftover' woman is a disparaging term referring to those who remains single in her late twenties or older. Interestingly, the official definition provided by the Chinese Ministry of Education (2007, cited in To, 2015: 1) is restricted to urban professional females with high educational level and salary, and they are implicitly blamed for setting excessively high expectations in selecting male partners. The state-led discourse of 'leftover' women (To, 2015; Fincher, 2014: 3-4) is also sustained by commercially oriented media. In some TV series and matchmaking shows, late marriage is constructed as abnormal, and high educational achievement is represented as contradictory to femininity (Feldshuh, 2018: 50; Gu, 2021).

Sticking unpleasant feelings to 'leftover' women arguably is oriented to meeting national population goals. Given the low fertility rate and birthing outside wedlock is virtually impossible in Chinese culture, government has been encouraging marriage to promote childbirth (To, 2015: 2). To enhance the 'quality' ('suzhi') of population, well-educated women constitute major targets, as they are conceived as more capable of rearing a 'high quality' baby (Fincher, 2014: 20-35; To, 2015: 2).

The disciplinary power of fearing late marriage and a childless life also operates in more intimate sphere and induces 'unhappy' embodied consequences. Chinese women are frequently urged to get married by their parents to carry on the family's line (S. Tang, 2022: 17), and they also feel a need to do so out of moral imperatives to reciprocate her parents', especially her mother's love (Evans, 2008).

Parental and social pressure makes lots of single women depressed, angry, and helpless, as they are accused of being selfish, unworthy and leading an inadequate life (S. Tang, 2022: 21-26). Anxiety attached to becoming a 'leftover' woman renders women with less bargaining power in marriage to defend their property rights, as they fear they may not be able to find another husband (Fincher, 2014: 54-62).

Notably, pressing women to marry often serves as a benevolent warning in the name of for her own happiness. The logic is that if women were married too late, there would be fewer eligible choices, since successful men are seized by younger women, and women may regret when they get older without a husband or a child (To, 2015: 1). Women are thus reduced to their reproductive value, and are assumed to be destined to get married and give birth. A reason for this lies in a miserable, unfortunate and lonely single woman in Chinese cultural imaginaries, where they are assumed to face physical and financial uncertainties and lack children's care in their elderly life (S. Tang, 2022: 17). In this regard, normative gender roles that treat men as major breadwinners is reinforced, and the society's incapability of addressing gender violence and offering aged care is obscured.

'Glorious motherhood'

Compared to 'leftover' women, mothers in marriage evoke more favourable feelings. Nonetheless, birthing a baby does not equivalise having become a glorious mother. Notions of 'glorious motherhood' in neo/non-liberal China arguably are simultaneously governed by ideas of 'modernity' and Confucianist virtues.

Childbirth

While women birthing over ten children were celebrated as 'guangrong muqin' (glorious mother) in Maoist eras (Cao, 2015: 301), such conduct has been labelled as "backward" (White, 2006: 14), ever since the one-child policy was implemented in the late 1970s. The key notion has become 'shaosheng yousheng' (fewer births and better births), with the aim of improving quality of Chinese populaces to achieve national modernity (Suter et al., 2022). Nevertheless, it is predominantly women's bodies that are regulated and disciplined. In the early stage of the one-child policy, women who had given birth were frequently persuaded by local family planning centres to adopt contraceptive methods, either IUD or female sterilisation (Cao, 2015: 304). When families tried to have more children than permitted, women needed to hide in enormous pressure (Shi, 2014: 124). If caught, she could undergo

abortion through coercive means (Shi, 2014). To become a glorious mother, woman must follow birth control policies, even though it sacrifices her health and reproductive autonomy.

The medicalisation of childbirth constitutes the other avenue for a 'glorious mother' to birth a 'high quality' baby. Intimately related to the cult of modernity is a nationally intensive belief in science's and technology's role in liberating China from being 'backward' (Harvey & Buckley, 2009). Endorsing Western biomedical science is one manifestation. Traditional midwifery births and births outside hospitals fade away after market reforms, as China has been following European industrialised countries' paths and increasingly hospitalises birth practices (Cheung & Pan, 2020: 234-235). Although the maternal and infant mortality rate has largely decreased with childbirth modernized, the quality of women's access to such 'modern' birth rituals is contingent upon their economic-social status. While spacious and private rooms for labouring are accessible in privately-owned hospitals in a few large cities, delivery process is highly impersonal in more affordable state-owned hospitals, as vaginal deliveries occur in rooms with lots of other women (Harvey & Buckley, 2009: 60; Raven et al., 2015: 6). As for impoverished families who cannot afford most basic care or who attempt to give unauthorised births, they can only birth at home, excluded from medicalised rituals conceived as 'modern' and 'scientific' (Harvey & Buckley, 2009: 63).

Paradoxically coinciding with medicalisation in pursuit of modernity is a traditional culture that continuously shapes the way of childbirth. Although the government has been making an effort to promote pain relief in recent years, most women are not given pain-free treatment, not only because of unequal access amongst hospitals, but also due to cultural biases (Wang, 2017: 5; Ye, 2022; Wu et al., 2020). As pain relief is frequently deemed as potentially causing harm to babies, women are told to endure pain and not to be too delicate by their husbands, parents, and in-laws (Ye, 2022; Zou & Wallis, 2022). This speaks to selfless motherhood in Confucianist culture that women's willingness to overcome pain leads to their self-transformation, and birthing a healthy body compensates for their suffering (Zou & Wallis, 2022: 9-10). Celebration of 'glorious motherhood' thus mutes women's expression of childbirth pain and demands her endurance.

Child-rearing

Confucianist culture and the quest for modernity also construct ideal ways of childrearing. As the state retreats from providing equal working opportunities in post-reform eras, Confucianism is

revived to prioritise women's domestic responsibilities. Under the backdrop of 'fewer births and better births' are widespread notions of scientific childrearing, with predominant responsibilities placed upon mothers, who become childrearing 'managers' through activities such as developing child development plans and selecting educational resources (Kuan, 2015: 7, 209; Xiao, 2016; Yang, 2018; Tao, 2015; Meng, 2020). State-sponsored media campaigns are also inaugurated to celebrate 'model mothers' who 'demonstrate family virtues' and 'educate their children scientifically' (Guo, 2010: 49).

Notably, women from rural areas or preoccupied with careers are often excluded from being 'glorious mothers'. It is middle-class stay-at-home mothers who are mostly celebrated in mainstream representation, as they can 'scientifically' educate her child into a 'high-quality' citizen through consumption (Jin, 2013; Yang, 2018; Orgad & Meng, 2017; Tu, 2016). This sharply contrasts against 'supermoms' portrayed in advertisements and TV series in the UK and the US, who are capable of juggling career with child-rearing (Orgad & Meng, 2017; Tu, 2016). Interestingly, career mothers who have limited knowledge of rearing children tends to be represented as inept and unqualified in Chinese reality TV shows, which invites public shaming (Ho, 2022).

Recently, regulating postpartum bodies emerge as another component of desirable 'modern' motherhood in Chinese social media among middle-class cohort (Liu & Wang, 2022). Underlying mothers' body work is a pursuit of 'girlishness' that is dichotomised against anti-feminine postpartum bodies (Liu & Wang, 2022: 8). Engagement in bodywork, for instance, through pursuing slimness, seemingly liberates women from domesticity (Keyser-Verreault, 2021), yet its emancipatory values never extend to challenging patriarchal order. Crucially, mothers' engagement in her body work is required not to conflict with her childrearing responsibilities (Liu & Wang, 2022: 10). Additionally, to regulate postpartum body is conceived as a moral imperative to set an example for the child in being self-disciplined, and to avoid letting the child lose face (Liu & Wang, 2022: 9-10).

Thus, dominant affective regimes of motherhood in neo/non-liberal China reinforces women's mandatory motherhood responsibilities with the aim of achieving 'high-quality' Chinese populaces and a modern country. This is based upon curtailing women of her equal citizenship as men by sacrificing her health, bodily autonomy, and equal opportunities in career advancement, which yet are reconfigured as able to be compensated by the happiness arising from marriage and the child. The regimes are also exclusionary, since rural and career mothers are dismissed for the incapability

of rearing a 'high-quality' child. Urban middle-class cohort seems to derive a sense of emancipation through consumption and body work in mainstream motherhood culture. This resembles 'postfeminist sensibility', featuring women's bodies as crucial property, naturalised sexual differences, and commodification of (rural/urban) differences (Gill, 2007: 149).

Conceptual Frame and Rationale

My thinking about how power operates via emotions or happiness above is primarily drawn from Ahmed's (2010, 2014) and Hochschild's (1979) theorisation of social-cultural dimensions of emotions and McLaren's (2012) feminist reassessment of the Foucauldian body. Arguably, social hierarchies are not only discursively ordered, but also emotionally operated, since what makes common sense so powerful is related to people's emotional investments which render them 'felt as natural' (Ahmed, 2014: 56).

Notions of 'happiness' are thus to some extent constructed and ideological. What objects can be defined as sources of happiness is contingent upon social-political context, and they may work to sustain existing social order. We are socialised in a way that certain objects (including values, lifestyles, and social norms) do not evoke our uncomfortable feelings, or we are promised that pleasure is attainable if we conform to those norms or 'happiness scripts' (Ahmed, 2010: 2, 59). This perception echoes Hochschild's (1979: 566) conceptions of 'feeling rules', meaning appropriate feelings are demanded to be generated and performed by individuals in certain situations, so that ideologies and social inequality are sustained. 'Feeling rules' and/or 'happiness scripts' may work somatically by affecting individuals' psychological patterns and behaviour. Crucially, individuals are neither passively complying with rules, nor are they duped by culture; instead, there are rewarding and punishment systems that motivate individuals' adherence (McLaren, 2012: 97), and pleasure may also be obtained in conformity. The feeling rules/happiness scripts coupled with social institutions that enforce them together compose dominant affective regimes. These regimes may simultaneously induce 'docile body' and 'resistant body' (McLaren, 2012: 83). While 'docile body' may identify with feeling rules of happiness, 'resistant body' may develop alternative emotions (Hochschild, 1979: 567) potentially subverting existing power relations. Emotions can contribute to maintaining or disturbing social order and thus deserve scrutinisation.

The 'happiness scripts' or 'feeling rules' focused on in this dissertation are that getting married and having a 'high-quality' baby promise happiness for women. This message is generated by dominant affective regimes of motherhood, which function via institutionalised rewards and punishments (e.g., coercive abortion), and cultural and moral recognition and violence (e.g., celebrating full-time 'supermoms', shaming 'leftover' women and career mothers), to sustain nationalist patriarchy. These measures are aimed to elicit 'docile female body' that prioritises maternal responsibilities and obeys the state's shifting family planning policies, while they simultaneously risk evoking 'resistant body' with alternative emotions.

Existing scholarships on Weibo feminism with affective perspectives mostly focus on feminist rage. They have delivered useful insights about how emotions may function in feminist activism to disrupt the status quo. Weibo feminists' anger is found to be expressed via satire, and challenges the party-state's misogynist public expressions, policies, and censorships, disrupting positive energy that it propagates (Yang, 2022; Wang & Ouyang, 2023; Chen & Gong, 2023). It also finds that feminists use offensive words to disparage individual men and women. For instance, men are labelled as 'baby men' to mock their being coddled by patriarchal society (Chen & Gong, 2023: 9), and married women can be ridiculed as 'married donkey' for voluntarily expending disproportionate energies on domestic tasks (Huang, 2023: .6; Li, 2020). In most cases, scholars either situate feminist aggressions within landscapes of feminist resistance (e.g., Chen & Gong, 2023; Yang, 2022), or criticise their neoliberal tendency in simplifying feminist agendas and contributing to polarisation (e.g., Huang, 2023; Tan, 2017: 183).

Both approaches are arguably insufficient. While the first seems to gloss over feminists' usage of disparaging expressions, the latter potentially exacerbates 'affective injustice' (Srinivasan, 2018: 127), rendering those already structurally oppressed in danger of further marginalisation for their perceived inappropriate ways of expressing rage. This makes an ethical lens particularly crucial, as it invites considerations regarding whether it is ethically sound to promote social justice in certain ways, and how to ethically formulate arguments for researchers. The other issue is that, by concentrating on feminist anger, other emotions seem to be neglected, especially those exposing her vulnerabilities, such as despair and pain. Akin to anger, these feelings can be politicised and collectivised towards social transformations (Gould et al., 2019: 107) and deserve academic attention. Additionally, as these studies privilege discursively registered emotions (e.g., Zhang, 2022; Yang, 2022; Yang & Hu, 2023),

women's corporeal bodies are often deemphasised, and feminist resistance seems to be more reliant on her language output rather than her bodily practices. As women's bodies are critical sites where multiple power often plays out, more emphasis on the corporeality can be analytically transformative and insightful.

This study aims to explore how individuals respond to hegemonic affective regimes of motherhood in the age of thriving feminism on Weibo by examining posts created under the hashtag #FacingBirthInjuries. Affective-ethical lens will be adopted with equal attention to the discursive and the corporeal, without dismissing their entanglement, in analysing various feelings in relation to power dynamics. This may promote better understanding of Weibo feminism, and obstacles that impede women from gaining full bodily control in neo/non-liberal China. Specifically, I will analyse what emotions are driving, circulating, or operating through discourses, what kinds of embodied subjects are constituting and constituted by language, and how acts of posting relate to hegemonic 'happiness scripts' concerning motherhood in neo/non-liberal context. Since examining discourses offer a pragmatic avenue to approach emotions and embodiment (Wetherell, 2012), these enquiries are encapsulated as the following research question:

> **RQ**: What kind of discourses circulate in the Weibo hashtag #FacingBirthInjuries and how do these relate to dominant affective regimes of motherhood in neo/non-liberal China?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

The data corpus this dissertation is based upon includes the doctor's videos created on January 18th and February 3rd, and the following posts created by other users within 12 hours. There are 3521 hashtag posts in total (1996 for the first one, 1525 for the second), whose word count varies from approximately five to more than 900 Chinese characters, and some include pictures and emojis. To narrow it down, I only collected the posts that are deemed as most popular, which is defined as receiving at least 25 likes, three 'repost', or 10 comments left by users other than the blogger. Being 'most popular' means their views are identified by most people or are most controversial. Content produced by media organisations was excluded, for my interest lies in individual users' negotiation with motherhood regimes. In the end, 242 posts are gathered, with 141 and 101 for each timeframe.

A Hybrid Approach to Discourse Analysis

To examine embodied emotions, this study draws upon Wetherell's (2012) affective-discursive perspective which regards affect as patterned flowing activities that can be approached through discourse analysis (DA) (Wetherell, 2012: 16). Affect here is conceptualised as human emotions and embodied meaning-making practices (Wetherell, 2012: 3, 20). This rejects the views that treat affect as non-representable or autonomous from culture and social structures (Massumi, 1996; Thrift, 2008; Sedgwick, 2003: 17-21), which prohibit pragmatic analysis or any meaningful attempt to politicise bodies and emotions (Wetherell, 2012: 20; Kanai, 2019: 15; Hemmings, 2005: 551). Following Wetherell (2012), I use emotions and affect interchangeably.

While Wetherell (2012) draws upon discursive psychology to examine affective-discursive activities, my discursive analytical tools are hybrid, informed by new materialism (Frost, 2011; Barad, 2006; Fox & Alldred, 2017), Foucauldian poststructuralism (Lundborg & Vaughan-Williams, 2015), and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (van Dijk, 1993). As said earlier, Foucault's poststructuralism is crucial in developing my thinking about how power works somatically by eliciting appropriate feelings or evoking alternative ones. However, when analysing social media posts, I found it more insightful to use it in conjunction with new materialism, since the latter gives more attention to corporeality and bodies' agential forces (Chadwick, 2018: 10). This integration also suits my goal to seek a balance between the corporeal/material and the cultural/discursive. CDA is drawn upon, because it attends to how social domination is reproduced or challenged via language/discourses (van Dijk, 1993: 249), aligning with my feminist intention to unpack how patterns identified are connected to inequality and oppressions.

This innovatively mixed method of doing DA forecloses new analytical possibilities for examining entanglements of body, language, and emotions, without losing critical sensitivity to hierarchies and power. When I tried to integrate them, contradictions inevitably emerged. For instance, as new materialists target poststructuralist anthropocentric underpinnings, they risk putting affect and materiality outside of social (Alldred & Fox, 2017: 1166; Ganz, 2023: 2-3; Barad, 2006), which contradicts Wetherell's (2012) affective-discursive perspective. Polarised debate also arises from the perceived sharp epistemological and ontological bifurcations between the 'cultural/linguistic' turn, represented by poststructuralism, and the 'material/affective turn', represented by new materialism (e.g., Wetherell, 2012: 3; Hemmings, 2005). Nevertheless, I argue that theoretical boundaries need to

be challenged when researchers read 'diffractively'. The following will explain some prominent features of my mixed approach and how it can be applied to my analysis.

Assemblage-discourse-language, power-resistance, diffractions

Assemblage constitutes primary focus of analysis (Fox & Alldred, 2017). Assemblage is understood as 'emergent and relational networks' consisting of heterogeneous elements, such as human bodies, institutions, technologies and language (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Chadwick, 2018: 11-12). 'Intra-action' displaces 'interaction' and becomes a key concept here, as it implies entities only materialise when they act upon one another (Kleinman & Barad, 2012: 77). Assemblages are always in the process of 'becoming' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988: 263). Postings under the hashtag are regarded as affective-discursive practices/entanglements/assemblages. They are embodied, fleshy, social-material performances, composed of a series of heterogeneous interconnected entities, including human bodies (e.g., hashtag participants with different personal contexts), Weibo affordances (e.g., algorithms, hashtag), and ideas (e.g., biomedical knowledge, nationalism, neo/non-liberalism).

Notions of assemblage bear resemblance to Foucauldian discourse, which is similarly equivocal and polyvalent (Sawicki, 1999: 197). It involves a 'complex group of relations' of material-discursive elements (Lundborg & Vaughan-Williams, 2015: 19), including institutions, practices, and disciplinary knowledge (McLaren, 2012: 90). Discourse in this article encompasses twofold meanings: language/text (linguistic and visual forms) and Foucauldian discourse. Scrutinising the former paves the way for understanding the latter. The term 'discourse' is used in this article in an intendedly ambiguous manner, so as to represent intertwining relationships of language and other social-material entities.

Language is further defined as embodied practices. In Kristeva's (1984, 1986) theorisation, language is deemed as a signifying embodied process 'operated in, through, and on fleshy bodies' (Chadwick, 2018: 16, emphasis mine). Emerging from human bodies' intra-actions with other entities, emotions motivate individuals' participation in hashtag postings, and further are converted into sensual and embodied texts entailing material/corporeal consequences. To examine texts/language thus involves attending to emotional expressions, their performative enactments, and embodied subjectivities that both constitute and are constituted by texts (Mazzei, 2014: 744-745).

Power and resistance in new materialism are seen as both sides of affective-discursive flows emerging through micro-political intra-actions between different assembled relations (Patton, 2000: 52; Fox & Alldred, 2017: 179). Power/resistance are fluctuating and transient phenomena, thus demanding continuous replication of activities to be sustained (Fox & Alldred, 2017: 179). This fits Foucault's understanding of power as decentralised, shifting and unstable relations (Sawicki, 1999: 198), and resistance as perpetual which renders hegemony precarious (Bordo, 1999: 254). In analysis, I will demonstrate how power/resistance is manifested via intra-actions amongst different assemblages, and how alternative affective regimes might be emerging attendant with contestations in relation to existing inequality.

Diffraction is another useful new materialist tool. Originally referring to a phenomenon when waves combine, bend and spread out in encountering obstacles, it is used by Barad (2006: 72) as a metaphor for an analytical approach that attends to 'patterns of differences that make a difference'. This encourages to pay attention to connected disruptive voices and their impacts. Additionally, departing from intertextuality meaning reading between texts, reading diffractively requires reading data against other texts, artifacts, and even materialities in research process including theories and researchers' embodied engagement (Ganz, 2023: 10; Taguchi, 2012; Fox & Alldred, 2023: 96). It also resonates with 'post-coding analysis' (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014), meaning instead of thinking through coding, researchers are invited to 'plug in' multiple theories while reading data and making new connectives (Mazzei, 2014: 743).

Diffractive reading and post-coding DA in practice

As diffractive methodologies involve researchers' 'interference'/'diffraction' with data (Fox & Alldred, 2023: 96), I present my interventions according to two stages. The first is coding (see appendix A). Coding is primarily aimed to organise data rather than explain. The initial coding is close to raw data, which is conducted in Chinese so as to be more accurate (e.g., 'ceqie' [episiotomy], 'zunyan' [dignity], 'youchang youchou de ba' [long and ugly scar]). This is followed by theoretical coding in English, such as 'medicalised pain' and 'embodied pain'. In this process, data are read against theories and literature, such as feminist bioethics, new materialism and Foucauldian thought. I also wrote comments about any disjuncture against dominant patterns of 'pain' I found, including both radical departures and nuanced ones that simultaneously assert pain and disturb it. Five prominent discourses/assemblages are ultimately identified.

In the second stage, DA is conducted to examine each assemblage and their entangled effects (see appendix B). Representative extracts are selected based upon their perceived capacities of addressing the research question. My discourse analysis links textual dimensions to wider social-material contexts. Specifically, I focus on visceral terms, rhetorical devices, and emojis, and relate them to other social-material entities, such as government's policies, biomedical authorities, Weibo's mechanisms, and dominant affective regimes of motherhood. Connected to previous diffractive reading, my interpretation here is also based upon diverse theories and literature. In addressing the research question, I attend to performative enactments of discourses and focus on: (1) what feelings emerge during intra-actions amongst different entities within discourses/assemblages (2) what kinds of bodies/subjectivity are constituting or constituted by discourses/assemblages, and (3) how intra-action of different discourses/assemblages relate to dominant motherhood regimes.

Ethics, Reflexivity, and Limitations

During data collection, posts created by users who cannot be identified as over 18 by their profiles and historical content are excluded, and only publicly available posts are gathered. Since the research topic is sensitive, several anonymising procedures inspired by Wang's (2021) work are employed. They include (1) translating original Chinese language into English, (2) avoiding putting entire posts, paraphrasing extracts, and quoting terms/emojis/sentences only necessary, and (3) removing identifiable information. Although the doctor is considered a prominent influencer, he is still subjugated to the state's surveillance and therefore anonymised. In the next chapter, all the extracts presented are paraphrased, except terms/emojis/sentences in quotation marks. They are numbered in a format of 'x(y)'. 'X' stands for the 1st or 2nd time frame, and 'y' represents the number assigned to original posts in my dataset. In appendices, my initial coding and several posts in original language and translated versions were previously included following the course requirement, given they would only be seen by me and markers. Here, since the article would be widely accessible, I only include my discourse analysis notes of an extract from the doctor's first video for anonymity.

Apart from what is analysed, the whole research process also resembles an assemblage, involving research questions, theories, methodologies, analysis, and human observers (Fox & Alldred, 2017). Any constituent element is affected by my personal contexts, a middle-class female who was brought up in a traditional Chinese family, receives her academic training in a Western institution, and is empathetic towards feminist movement. My choice to adopt affective and gender lens is entangled

with my personal experience of once suffering from depression and eating disorders. My encounter with data and theories is accompanied with my anger, pain, and hope, which contribute to the article. These feelings arguably are necessary, since feminism itself is saturated with emotions in response to social injustice (Ahmed, 2017: 21).

Like most qualitative research, my approach might be criticised as incapable of generalisation, or lacking reliability and validity. However, just as what Gill (2000: 19) argues, DA does not seek for universal patterns, and is always designed in specific contexts. Concerning the latter critique, several themes proposed by Potter (1996: 138-139) are helpful to assess qualitative research here. The first is deviant case analysis, which echoes my diffractive reading that attends to patterns of differences. The second concerns participants' understanding, which is achieved by my comparing comments following each post against my own understanding. The third is coherence. In building my analysis, earlier works on related fields are considered. The last is readers' evaluation. Although original posts cannot be provided, paraphrased version of some extracts are presented to allow audiences' judgement.

Lastly, I am aware that gender identities shown on users' profiles might be faked, but I still determine to label them as 'men'/'women' based on that. Gender arguably can be understood as performative (Butler, 1996: 112), which is constituted via repetitive (speech) acts, rather than essential beings.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Five performative discourses/assemblages/affective-discursive activities are identified, including establishing, affirming, challenging, defending, and pushing for the visibility ethical regimes of pain. The '-ing' forms are used to emphasise the status of power/resistance being 'in process'. Two broader categories are further employed to capture their entangled relationships and represent disruptive voices where power/resistance is implicated. These discourses/assemblages collaboratively constitute maternal bodies in pain and formulate an emergent resistance against dominant affective regimes of motherhood.

Establishing and Affirming Ethical Regimes of Pain

The first two discourses/assemblages are establishing and affirming ethical regimes of pain, where the doctor and women are most prominent figures respectively. Pain is medicalised and embodied in both assemblages albeit with different manifestations.

Assemblage 1: Doctor—Corporeal engagement, biomedical expertise—Establishing

Arguably, ethics of regimes of pain established by the doctor are manifested through 'truthfulness' involving sincerity and accuracy (Williams, 2002). Sincerity means 'morally commendable', while accuracy concerns 'care in acquiring correct information' (Williams, 2002: 45). In the doctor's case, the former is demonstrated through justifications he provides for discussing birth injuries and his corporeal engagement in women's experiences, while the latter is achieved via safeguarding his biomedical authority. This echoes existing literature that indicates Chinese medical influencers attend to audiences' emotional needs and display medical expertise to elicit trust (Zhao & Mao, 2021; Liu & Zou, 2023; Wu, et al., 2018).

When introducing why discussing perineal laceration, the doctor mentions a follower's messages. She suffers from third-degree perineal tears, and is not cured after three surgeries. The doctor says he feels 'sad', and thus hopes to discuss this injury. He also says he met lots of patients suffering from third degree tears, which had extended to the external anal sphincter and sometimes led to urinary or anal incontinence, yet they mostly kept silent about their discomfort and did not go to the hospital until feeling unbearably painful. Most of them gave birth in the past and had poor access to hygiene and proper treatment, according to the doctor. Their reticence of pain might be understood in the context of Confucianism. As Confucianist mores associate birth sequelae with shame, women are reluctant to openly discuss them (Lyu et al., 2020; Fang et al., 2022; Liu & Zou, 2023: 1), which also prevented them from seeking treatment promptly.

In the opening sequences of the second video, the doctor directly identifies the aim of 'facing birth injuries' is to break social taboo, and he further addresses women's psychological afflictions brought by social reticence. He shares a story about a woman who hoped to reduce stretch marks but was fearful about letting her families know that she visited a doctor. Whenever she spoke of her anxiety, her families would respond the marks were indexes of her becoming a 'glorious' mother, which she felt like were muffling her mouth, according to the doctor. 'Anxiety' and 'pain' do exist, even if they

are glossed over through being labelled as 'glorious', he says. Here, contradictions implicated in dominant motherhood regimes can be interpreted—a desired 'girlish' and impeccable body (Liu & Wang, 2022) versus an imagined transcendent and selfless mother (Zou & Wallis, 2022). Postpartum bodies seem to be caught in a dilemma, where she is motivated to reduce stretch marks, but is required to be silent about her anxiety due to potential failure.

In these instances, the doctor seems to display an empathetic corporeal engagement with women. A series of emotional terms (e.g., 'very sad', 'anxiety', 'pain') expresses his empathy and recognition of their childbirth pain. Women are thus not merely treated as objects of biomedical authority or as bodies purely for reproduction, as is found in existing scholarships (Fricker, 2007: 129; Liu & Zou, 2023: 8; Wang, 2021), but they are 'felt' as subjects with emotions and needs.

Another crucial reason offered by the doctor is to allow women to make informed choices. Near the end of the first video, the doctor says, he does not aim to evoke fear, but intends to help those determined to give birth take measures to prevent severe injuries, and allow those who are still ambivalent to receive more complete information before deciding. Childbirth is thus framed as a personal choice, and its pain seems to be construed as not completely inevitable, since women can opt out of it by not birthing. Arguably, this precisely accounts for the controversies his video evokes, as it destabilises mandatory motherhood regimes that see childbirth as women's destiny (Ho, 2022: 1812; To, 2015: 1).

Apart from showing empathy, the doctor also authenticates pain through biomedical expertise. In addition to using medical jargons (e.g., 'episiotomy', 'external anal sphincter') and referring to his clinical experiences, he also maintains his biomedical authority through citing empirical research. Since his first video was criticised as taking a small-probability event as an example, he begins using statistics published in recent studies to substantiate his claim that stretch marks are common in the following clip. Metaphors, laymen languages, and visual images are also employed to make biomedical science accessible. For instance, to explain how perineal laceration occurs, he uses a model to identify the location of perineum and uses a metaphor: it is like a large person tries to pass through a very small door. These illustrative elements render medicalised pain intelligible and more easily felt.

Arguably, more rebellions elements are involved in the original hashtag #FacingBirthInjuries than #SeeingBirthInjuries, which may partially account for his changing it. First, there is a moral imperative and urgency in the word of 'facing', as it seems to imply a critique about social reluctance to see/discuss. Additionally, it demands individuals' corporeal engagement, as if exhorting them to expose the surface of skin to childbirth pain. Tuana (2006: 1) conceptualises women's health movement across America in the 1970s and 1980s as resistance that 'identify(ies), critique(s), and transform(s)' ignorance of women's bodies. While Tuana (2006) focuses on the epistemic level, resistance mobilised by the doctor here is simultaneously epistemic and emotional, for it not only challenges collective unknowingness of birth injuries, but also liberates them from embarrassment, and enjoins society to not only see but also to 'feel' childbirth pain.

The doctors' posts are thus establishing alternative affective regimes concerning childbirth pain based upon biomedical authority and a sense of sincerity, reversing the mainstream moral order of happiness. The pain is further affirmed by numerous women who recount their own birth stories.

Assemblage 2: Women—Embodied experience—Affirming

Ethics of uttering pain, for women, can be understood through Foucault's thought concerning self-care. For Foucault, ethics, understood as 'the conscious practice of freedom', is revolved around the principle of 'taking care of yourself', and entails knowing oneself and equipping oneself with 'truths' that are often rendered valid or invalid through a series of procedures (Becker et al., 2000/1984: 285, 297). The women's postings are considered as ethical, since in authenticating or embodying the 'truth' of childbirth pain, they consciously resist against 'happiness' scripts of motherhood and further employ the knowledge/'truth' to assert her reproductive autonomy. Injuries and pain that women speak often extend beyond the ones mentioned by the doctor, and exist throughout pregnancy, labouring, and postpartum period.

Discredited bodies and medicalised pain

Albeit intensely felt, pain expressed by maternal bodies is susceptible to being discredited. Before the doctor's posts went viral, women's discussions about birth injuries have already existed in various Chinese social media platforms, including Xiaohongshu and Weibo, yet they had never stirred similarly heated debate or received equal attention. Such phenomena might be understood in a context where being a woman suffers from epistemically disadvantaged positions, as women tend to

be constructed as 'suggestible, gullible, or vengeful' (Tuana, 2006: 13). This links to Fricker's (2007: 1) concept of testimonial injustice, which occurs when someone's sayings are assigned less credibility out of hearers' prejudice based on her identity. Given women are susceptible to 'being wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower' (Fricker, 2007: 20), she can only rely on outside authority, specifically biomedicine here, to verify ontological existence of pain and to make it 'truthful'.

> Extract 1(3): I have been doing 'Kegels breathing' for a month, 'only to get 1 finger diastasis recti and a normal pelvic floor' …

> Extract 1(33): I have 'congestion' after birth, even the nurse felt pity for me. Even now, 'spinal cord injuries;' still exist.

In extracts 1(3) and 1(33), biomedical authority is conformed with and referred to, as she follows Kegels breathing to minimise birth risks, or cites the nurse's feeling to make her pain more persuasive. These connotate uneven distribution of credibility between women's bodily experience and biomedical science. At the same time, biomedical knowledge also seems to offer them hermeneutical resources (Fricker, 2007: 148) to make sense of and articulate her embodied experience, as she uses medical terms (e.g., 'diastasis recti', 'congestion', 'spinal cord injuries') to emphasise her suffering.

Fleshy bodies and embodied pain

Their language in unfolding childbirth stories, apart from biomedically informed, is also sensuous and fleshy.

> Extract 1(3): Since I took some medicine to prevent miscarriage, the placenta could not be expelled after delivery. The doctor had to put half of the arm inside uterus to remove it. "I will never forget the feeling that the doctor swept with the hand back and forth".

The visceral texture of the underlined sentence conveys feelings of sickness and discomfort, and constitutes a horrifying experience of manual removal of placenta. Documenting these excruciating moments is akin to doing a memory work. Women's bodies are her memories, and she shares her memories by 'put(ting) a(her) body into words' (Ahmed, 2017: 23). In this process, through her bodily practices, women capture the pain that is often deemed as ephemeral, either belonging to the past, or occurring only in the moment. This is sharply distinguished from happiness, which tends to be postponed as 'a social promise' (Ahmed, 2010: 32). In documenting pain, they resist against dominant happiness scripts of motherhood which render pain easily dismissed or forgotten.

Unattended bodies and childbirth pain

Crucially, in many cases, pain is not only physically induced by childbirth itself, but also exacerbated by structural inequality. Unequal distribution of medical resources, minimal attention paid to women's needs, and other patriarchal norms all play a role in shaping maternal bodies in suffering.

> Extract 1(37): 'Really undignified' when lying on the operating table. 'Like livestock' being gazed at by bystanders, 'naked, with shit, urine, and fart'.

In Extract1(37), birthing bodies are constituted as humiliated and mortified. Her sexual privacy is severely violated, and she seems to see herself in excessive disgust (e.g., with excreta and being seen like an animal). As childbirth is highly hospitalised in contemporary China, home deliveries are forbidden by local authorities, yet well-protected privacy is not accessible in most state-owned hospitals (Raven et al., 2015; Harvey & Buckley, 2009: 60). Some literature also indicates that to protect privacy of other labouring women in the same delivery ward, her family members can be not allowed in, leaving her in destress and without emotional support (Wang, 2017: 5). In both cases, women's needs are largely unattended to in the current 'modern' way of birthing.

> Extract 2(68): Stop setting so strict standards for c-section!!! The baby was estimated to be four kilograms. I wanted a c-section, the doctor rejected. It wasn't until the virginal delivery endangered my and my child's life that I got c-section!!! What do you want? Hope women to suffer more?

Implicated with insufficient attention paid to women's emotional needs are dismissal of her right to choose delivery methods. In Extract 2(68), she uses her own experience to urge to grant women freedom to choose c-section. As virginal delivery is widely seen as conducive to birthing a healthy baby (Zhang, 2020: 5), caesarean section is restricted by the state in recent years, primarily through imposing penalties on hospitals that exceed the predetermined caesarean rate (Hao, 2017; State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Consequently, most hospitals reject women's demand for c-section for non-medical reasons.

Indeed, the state's restrictions of c-section is to some extent understandable, given hospitals prefer c-section to generate more revenue after market reforms (Cheung & Pan, 2020). Nevertheless, women also voluntarily seek for caesarean delivery for fearing childbirth pain, as existing pain-relief are

neither adequate nor deemed as effective (Wu et al., 2020: 606; Wang, 2017). As the state enforces the policy to improve quality of national populace, women's feelings and needs receive little considerations. In this regard, emotional terms (e.g., 'suffer') and rhetorical devices (e.g., three exclamation marks and rhetorical questions in the end) used above not only utter women's pain, but also seem to express her rage, for her pain is rendered negligible in the current medical practices.

Exhausted bodies and child-rearing pain

Affliction of maternal bodies is further exacerbated by child-rearing. In numerous cases, women complain about domestic labour, her lack of sleep and leisure time. Their language constitutes exhausted maternal bodies under the backdrop where fathers' corporeal presence is extremely lacking:

> Extract 1(127): I virtually rear my child on my own, doing household chores, taking the child to hospital. Childbirth and child-rearing do no good to women's psychological and physical well-being.

Extract 1(127) sharply contrasts against hegemonic feeling rules that having a child promises happiness by claiming the complete opposite. A sense of despair seems to be registered by the absolute tone indicated by the underlying sentence.

> Extract 1(72): People tend to 'morally blackmail' and think it's natural for you to make sacrifices for the child… The society is much more tolerant to men.

Pain can be further interpreted from Extract 1(72) as induced by the notions of 'selfless motherhood' which naturalise mothers' sacrifices for the child. The author is primarily referring to her in-law and other acquaintances who express their pity for her incapability of breastfeeding her child. One impact of one-child policy is that the child receives more attention, care and love from their parents and grandparents, which is described by Yan (2016: 245) as an emergent 'descending familism'. Such intergenerational intimacy however seems to unfairly entail more intensive demands from mothers than their partners in devoting care. If unable to achieve, she is more easily criticised, which the author denounces as 'moral blackmail' and invites her defiance.

'Selfish' bodies in defiance

> Extract 1(72): I don't want my daughter to give birth in future…Hope every girl to be happy without being restrained by moral concepts… There is nothing wrong to be 'selfish'. It's most important to be happy when you live.

Given the physiologically and structurally induced pain on maternal bodies, women often advocate for being more selfish and express their reluctance to birth again or to let her daughter birth in future, exemplified by Extract 1(72). In this regard, childbirth and child-rearing pain, along with impotence of addressing these issues, serve as justifications for her reproductive autonomy, because it is her own body or health that is at stake, and because it is mothers who undertake primary responsibilities for what might occur to her child (Petchesky, 1998: 188; Purdy, 2006: 287). By denaturalising what has been felt as natural through rendering it exceedingly painful, speaking pain unsettles essentialist femininity enshrined in dominant motherhood regimes which links women's biological functions to her needs, capacities, and responsibilities and makes her 'born to be mothers' (Evans, 2002: 339).

As argued in the theoretical chapter, happiness promised for women in neo/non-liberal China is centred around nationalist patriarchy, which demands women to marry and become a 'glorious mother'. To defy happiness thus means to withdraw sympathy (Ahmed, 2010: 78) or become selfish, for it may upset the state and her families. However, notions of happiness are reconfigured into something intimately linked to women's personal interests in Extract 1(72). An alternative moral/ethical order seems to be emerging, where happiness is extricated from nationalism/filiality and associated with women's self-care.

Diffractions: Challenging, defending, and pushing for the visibility

Voices that shape regimes of pain, at the same time, are far from congruous. Instead, they are continually contradicting one another, leaving ethics of uttering pain unsettled and requiring continuous effort to be defended. These embodied voices exemplify 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2014), which involve multiple assemblages/discourses, are saturated with various emotions, and are all connected through the hashtag. They are continuously renegotiating political boundaries that prescribe neo/non-liberal subjectivity, exemplifying a resistance 'in process'.

Notably, some postings created by women who have given birth involve sensibilities that seemingly deviate from pain. These include descriptions of feeling 'worthwhile' when seeing the child (Extract 2(96)), echoing selfless motherhood notions. Nonetheless, the predominant proportion of their

content still emphasises labouring pain, departing from dominant motherhood regimes which render pain invisible. The most radical condemnation of regimes of pain is marked by virtually complete ignorance of it. There are a few female users denouncing that birth injuries do not exist. Their posts nevertheless mostly had been deleted when I began data collection. The remaining most popular ones are created by users identified as male.

Assemblage 3: Men—Patriarchal nationalist rhetorics—Anti-nationalist bodies that reject childbirth—Challenging

What is worth mentioning is that it is still women who predominantly participate in discussing birth injuries. Men's criticism, albeit influential, only occupy a minority. To a large extent, their posts personify dominant motherhood regimes enforced at micro-level in everyday encounter. They mobilise nationalist rhetorics to defend common interests of patriarchy and nationalism. Such linguistic resources are named as 'patriarchal nationalist rhetorics' in this article, primarily achieved via expressing concerns about national welfare and the need to undertake social responsibilities. Chastising resistant bodies as anti-national, these rhetorics work to delegitimise women's utterance of pain and hope for bodily control.

> Extract 1(104): Recent hot searching topics repeatedly frighten women and indoctrinate anti-marriage and anti-childbirth thought. Propaganda on such a massive scale must consume enormous resources. Who is playing a trick?

Activism aimed to assert women's interest in China is vulnerable to being associated with Western imperialism. In Extract 1(104), uttering pain is conceived as maliciously intended to cause anxiety about marriage and childbirth. The last sentence seems to imply that this hashtag may be endorsed by foreign founding. In 2017, Chinese authorities warned that 'hostile Western forces' are employing Western feminism to interfere in China's affairs (Song, 2017; Fincher, 2018: 163), and Weibo feminism is often criticised as anti-national, given feminism's Western-rooted features and its perceived potential to destabilise the status quo and endanger social harmony (Huang, 2022: 9; Huang, 2016). Ethics of women's reproductive autonomy is unjustified by ethics of nationalism here.

> Extract 2(100): Pregnancy and childbirth are normal physiological process and critical to women's wellness. Labouring helps reproductive organs to rest and avoid unnecessary illnesses, such as ovarian cancer and breast cancer… Studies also found that breastfeeding helps women live longer.

To reroute the alternative regimes that contradict nationalist patriarchy, both epistemic and emotional turns are demanded. In Extract 2(100), biomedical science is once again adopted to deny the significance and severity of childbirth pain and to restore 'positive energy' by propagating their benefits. He also draws upon biomedical terms and outside sources to make his statement persuasive, akin to the doctor, yet he differentiates from the doctor in not recognising or even including women's embodied experiences. This indicates ramifications involved in subjugating women's experience to biomedical expertise, as the latter is easily oriented towards hegemonic purposes.

> Extract 2(52): Women have been responsible for giving birth and rearing children since ancient times. Now some women are sacred of it. Is it functional degradation or a sign of selfishness? Everyone should undertake social responsibilities.

As mentioned in previous chapters, Confucianist mores are revived in neo/non-liberal China to retrench normative gender order. They are also entangled with patriarchal nationalist rhetorics to urge women to take social responsibilities by birthing. In Extract 2(52), linking women's social role to her biological traits, the author shames women who reject childbirth for being incapable (e.g., functional degradation) and selfish, constituting 'an anti-national body'. Such essentialist notions of femininity justify restriction of women to domesticity and male domination in public life. Gender hierarchy consequently can be retrenched, since public domains are seen as superior to domesticity (Gao & Li, 2021: 257), and they also assume institutionalised power, for instance, through legislations, to shape the way we live.

In patriarchal nationalist rhetorics, maternal pain is trivialised, naturalised, or completely denied. The concept of male ignorance is relevant here. Drawing from Mills' (2007) work on white ignorance, O'Neill (2022) theorises male ignorance as patterns of not-knowing both stemming from and operating to preserve male entitlements and privilege. It involves 'not needing to know' and 'needing not to know' in Medina's (2013, p.34, cited in O'Neill, 2022: 499) terms. Men's lack of participation in postings signals they *do not need to know*, because childbirth does little harm to his bodies. In contrast, the predominant posts are created by women, because childbirth and child-rearing seem to be most repressive for them in current social order: they not only cause intense pain, but also restrict her mobility, obstruct her career and lead her to take more disproportionately demanding domestic tasks (Gao & Li, 2021).

Nevertheless, when the topic is elevated to her reproductive autonomy, there could be a price if he continues not speaking. When he posts, quite frequently, he continues ignoring the pain spoken by plentiful women, which exemplifies a *need not to know*. This is largely because recognising women's pain can cause pain to men himself. Seeing women's pain may invite his self-reflection regarding his complicity in inequality, which entails painful consequences of losing his entitlements. To deny women's pain, or to deny its significance compared to his own, is to deny his responsibilities and a need for radical transformation (Schwalbe, 1992: 44), such as undertaking more household chores, participating in child-rearing, and striving for equal employment opportunities and payment between different gender identities. Since patriarchy is never 'politically correct', albeit continuously sustained by the state, nationalism seems to offer a useful exculpatory device for him to shed and retrench his privileges.

Assemblage 4: Women — Derogation and satire — Defending

Male ignorance further elicits overwhelming criticisms from plentiful women. They often employ derogatory terms and satire to express anger and to defend regimes of pain.

> Extract 1(149): Creatures without a womb shut up. Learning risks of childbirth is women's right. Find a place to bury yourself. 'Eating, shitting, without a brain'.
>
> Extract 2(74): Haha, some male blogger seems to know a lot. You are firstly not a woman, secondly not a professional, 'why keep barking here like a dog' ?

In these contexts, male ignorance and his 'expertise' are mocked, and his authority of speaking is denied, primarily based upon his lacking embodied experience and not being biomedical professionals. Interestingly, his 'motivated ignorance' that ideologically functions to retrench privileges (O'Neill, 2022: 502) is displaced by an ineptitude at knowing which becomes the target of insulting. This perhaps is most explicitly shown by "without a brain" in Extract 1(149) and paralleling male's speech to dogs' barking in Extract 2(74). Such derogations function to discourage the men from speaking.

Indeed, it is problematic to shame someone or forbid him from engaging in public discussions due to having substantially different opinions. This contradicts media morality/ethics in Silverstone's (2006) conception centred around unconditional hospitality, meaning 'an obligation to listen and hear' (136) and to 'welcome the other in one's space, with or without any expectation of reciprocity' (139).

Silverstone (2006: 142) asserts Internet cannot offer a space of hospitality due to the absence of 'a meaningful host' responsible for welcoming. However, in the case of hashtag activism, every participant, in principle, shares a symbolic 'space' within hashtag discussions and can undertake responsibilities for the welcome.

What forbids unconditional hospitality here, arguably, more crucially, lies in the difficulties of listening. When not-listening works as defensive mechanisms to preserve certain interests, it can be severely difficult to realise obligations of hearing for different parties. Specifically, men's ignorant speech, a form of not-listening, entails insidious consequences of preventing women from gaining bodily control for his own privilege. In this vein, some women's usage of offensive terms, although ethically problematic, seems to be her reactionary expressions of anger that maternal pain is not heard, and that her bodily autonomy is not respected.

> Extract 1(94): 'Male friends', if you consider science communication is playing tricks, evoking conflicts, leading to decline fertility rate, and causing no one to succeed the throne in your family. ' '. There is 'the simplest solution'—working hard to break scientific barriers and achieve the goal that men give birth! … 'Fight on! '

Women's anger is also frequently configured into a satirical exhortation that men should give birth himself aided by technological advances, as epitomised above. This bears certain resemblance to some early radical feminists' thinking in Anglo-America. As reproductive capabilities were seen as sources of women's oppression, relying on technologies to liberate women from childbirth was sometimes suggested (Firestone, 1970). Nevertheless, while Firestone (1970) proposes artificial reproduction occurring outside human bodies, numerous Weibo posts advocate men's bodies should procreate.

Arguably, this can be explained by sensibilities of retaliation, given childbirth pain is exceedingly ignored by some men. The author refers to a series of patriarchal nationalist rhetorics men typically draw upon (e.g., playing tricks), and uses satire (e.g., succeed the throne, an emoji featuring a dog with tongue out) to mock his fear of losing entitlements. She also puts forward a 'simplest solution' ended with three hopeful faces holding flowers, serving as another irony. The impossibility of achieving such techno-utopianism resembles the very unlikelihood for women to earn men's empathy. Instead of an act to suggest, putting forward such resolutions is more akin to an expression of impotence and anger, and a hope to let men suffer. Exhorting men to birth with satire also seems

to indicate rejecting giving birth herself, and her indifference to procreation's significance for humanity or the nation, which is similar to 'a selfish body' constituted in assemblage 2. These echo growing individualisation in post-reform eras, where individuals increasingly focus on self-interests rather than collectivist ethics (Yan, 2003: 226; 2009: xxxi-xxxii), especially when collectivism is disproportionately oppressive for certain groups.

Assemblage 5: Women—(Intra-actions with) platform-state—Pushing for the visibility

Apart from directly targeting individual men (and women), individualised subjects in neo/non-liberal China also straightforwardly challenge the platform and the state which are seen as enforcing structural ignorance. Such ignorance similarly constitutes a form of male ignorance that stems from and retrenches nationalist patriarchy albeit with more disciplinary power.

> Extract 1(21): So ridiculous🤔🤔🤔 Posts under science communication can be censored??????? Why???? It's so ridiculous that #ReducingEducationTimeToPromoteChildbirth can be propagated. What are women treated like????

Although mechanisms beneath Hot Searching remains largely nebulous to ordinary users, lots of women seem to identify Weibo's complicity in censoring maternal pain. In Extract 1(21), there seems to be despair and anger, displayed through emojis, multiple question marks, and an ending rhetorical question. Such posts resemble 'algorithmic gossip', meaning 'communally and socially informed knowledge about algorithms and algorithmic visibility' (Bishop, 2019: 2590). The algorithmic gossip implied here seems to be that Weibo's algorithms are designed to impose censorship on women's utterance of pain, while granting visibility to childbirth propagandas, thus reducing women to reproductive tools. Such knowledge dissemination can be subversive in challenging power asymmetry between users and the platform-state (Bishop, 2019).

> Extract 2(41) : It will just evoke 'rebellion' if 'Guo Jia' continuously encourages birth without solving problems, like reducing birth injuries and establishing lactation rooms.

The state's complicity in sponsoring certain tags to promote childbirth also seems to be identified in Extract 2(41). Sensibilities of affective dissonance (Hemmings, 2012) are articulated here, arising from a discrepancy between propaganda and social realities where concrete effective measures to benefit women are missing. This feeling of unhappiness induces 'rebellion', exemplified by her critiques

against the state and her usage of two different Chinese characters ('Guo Jia (郭嘉)') to refer to the 'state', which perhaps is meant to avoid censorship upon the 'negative energy' she disseminates. 'Rebellion' also seems to be implied at a societal level, manifested by women's bodily defiance by rejecting childbirth.

Arguably, such 'rebellion' is never meant to subvert the party-state. Rather, Chinese feminists are mostly with a hope to rely on it to achieve a better society of equality and justice that she desires (Chang et al., 2018: 336-337; Zou & Wallis, 2022: 18). In Extract 2(41), it can be interpreted that if effective policies were enforced to safeguard women's interests, social 'rebellion' might be appeased. In this vein, political boundaries that reinscribe neo/non-liberal subjectivities are indeed occasionally blurred and contested with various degree, but the party-state's legitimacy in governing is still respected. These ambiguities illustrate feminist resistance as always 'in process'.

Extract 1(71): Why cannot this topic achieve Hot Searching? Up, up, up!

Amongst these posts, one striking phenomenon is women's collaborative effort in pushing the hashtag to reach Hot Searching against the perceived censorship. Lots of these texts are short but demonstrate an eagerness to let more people see. In Extract 1(71), questioning the platform's role in repressing pain, she seems to display a shared responsibility of making a contribution to enhancing its visibility, as well as a hope that despite the platform's censorship, the tag can still reach Hot Searching through combined 'small effort'. A sense of solidarity seems to be articulated here oriented to common objectives of augmenting the hashtag's visibility. The solidarity is nonetheless 'impatient', since it emphasises on immediacy and rapid circulation instead of deep contextualisation (Nikunen, 2019: 154).

Examining popular feminism in Anglo-America, Banet-Weiser (2018a) warns about its susceptibility to economics of visibility, in departure from politics of visibility. The former means visibility itself becomes an end, bereft of structural groundings, while the latter is understood as a political struggle and a demand to be recognised in mainstream culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018a: 22-23). Fraser (2017: 24) further problematises disproportionate significance attached to visibility, as she points out politics of recognition (concerning status differentiation) may supplant rather than enrich politics of egalitarian redistribution (concerning economic structure) in neoliberal Anglo-American context.

Arguably, it might be better to approach visibility Weibo feminists try to achieve here through 'both/and' rather than 'either/or' logics, for these goals' complicated intersections. Visibility itself seems to become the sole end for posts like Extract 1(71), yet they are attendant with by-products of advancing feminist agendas illustrated by other hashtag posts, for instance, of recognising childbirth pain to defend her reproductive autonomy (see assembly 2). Such struggles for recognition are also entangled with struggles for redistributive justice, since political measures, including protecting women from employment discrimination and relieving her from disproportionate unpaid domestic tasks, are largely reliant on a recognition, a recognition that inequality exacerbates maternal pain and contributes to her reluctance to give birth. Enhancing visibility seems to mean greater chances that her voices can be heard and attended to horizontally (e.g., by women and men) and vertically (e.g., by the state from afar), so that social changes can occur.

Although the platform plays a perhaps repressive role in feminist struggle for visibility, it is simultaneously precisely its affordances, for instance, hashtag, that seem to materialise the solidary energies. Those myriad emotions, including pain, anger, despair and hope, are connected via the hashtag. They are amplified via intra-action amongst various entities, and collaboratively developing a narrative centred around pain in becoming a mother in neo/non-liberal China. These energies are actualised by the hashtag postings, and their solidary forces are materialised by the tag's appearance on Hot Searching. Indeed, emotions are ephemeral, affective publics are transient (Papacharissi, 2016: 117), and a single tag is vulnerable to being replaced by other topics on Hot Searching. Nevertheless, countless hashtags keep emerging, which are advancing feminist agendas of equality. The constituted maternal bodies in pain, thus, might be better conceptualised in a broader landscape of feminist resistance, that is always emergent, and whose shape is continuously shifting without being finalised.

CONCLUSION

By analysing posts under Weibo hashtag #FacingBirthInjuries, this study identifies five entangled discourses/assemblages centred around ethical regimes of pain, including establishing, affirming, challenging, defending, and pushing for the visibility. I argue maternal bodies in pain are being asserted, questioned, and defended during intra-actions of these discourses/assemblages, which serve as an emergent resistance against dominant affective regimes of motherhood in neo/non-liberal China. The resistance is liminal and in process, manifested by the doctor's change of the hashtag name,

continuous contestations, ambiguities of political boundaries that are in negotiation yet always existent, and the ephemerality of the hashtag's appearance in Hot Searching. The neo/non-liberal subjects, who are constituting these discourses/assemblages, also seem to be in the process of formation, with different levels of affinity with or alienation from the party-state's agendas, under the surveillance of the state from afar. The bifurcation between docility and resistance also seems to be dissolved, as agency is always existent in different entities' intra-actions.

This article reveals several insights which entail both academic and socio-political contributions. First, Weibo feminism can be far more politically progressive than what is sometimes conceived. It may serve as a 'correction' (Banet-Weiser, 2018b: 154) against state-sponsored postfeminism encoded in hegemonic motherhood regimes by establishing an alternative moral/ethical order of pain and exposing structural issues that contribute to such feelings. Additionally, biomedicine plays multifaced and contradictory roles. It contributes to liberating women's health issues from shameful feelings, helps women articulate and authenticate her childbirth pain to assert her reproductive autonomy, yet it is also susceptible to serving hegemonic purposes. This further reveals several obstacles that impede Chinese women's endeavour for bodily autonomy, including inferior status of her embodied experience, and intended unknowingness of her sufferings for common interests of patriarchy and nationalism. The perceived marriage and childbirth phobia in contemporary China, thus, should be situated in structural inequality that afflicts woman bodies. To alleviate her fear needs to redress oppressions that induce pain rather than blame those who identify painful realities.

With an affective-ethical lens, this article also contributes to affect studies and media morality in general. It reveals how body and language, emotions and discourse can be intertwined, how power can be operated via feelings, and how resistance can be mobilised through collectivisation of various emotions, not only anger, but also pain, impotence and despair. This complements existing empirical studies with affective lens that mostly focus on political potential of rage while overlooking other feelings, or privileging discursive dimensions of emotions while downplaying their embodiment. Furthermore, incorporating affect with media ethics/morality, I have identified emotions' dual roles in fostering social justice and heightening polarisation. This study also demonstrates how ethics may vary in different media contexts, and frequently, they can be ideologically manipulated, for instance, to serve nationalist patriarchy. Not-listening or motivated ignorance render unconditional hospitality envisaged by Silverstone (2006) so difficult to achieve.

Adopting a hybrid analytical frame in discourse analysis, this study also forecloses new analytical possibilities by showing how elements in new materialism and poststructuralism can be integrated and inform humanities and social sciences research. Poststructuralism yields insights into social-material dimensions of power and how certain knowledge is rendered truthful through institutional practices, which can be combined with new materialism that gives more weight to micro-political intra-actions and bodies' formative potential. Their integration may further augment the entanglement of the material and the discursive, radically departing from dualisms that we are so habituated to dwelling in, without compromising critical sensitivity to power and social inequality. Exclusive emphasis on the divergences of these two perspectives, which seems to be prevalent in current scholarships, may obscure their compatibilities. The latter can be explored more in future, which may generate more open-ended interpretations and unexpected insights.

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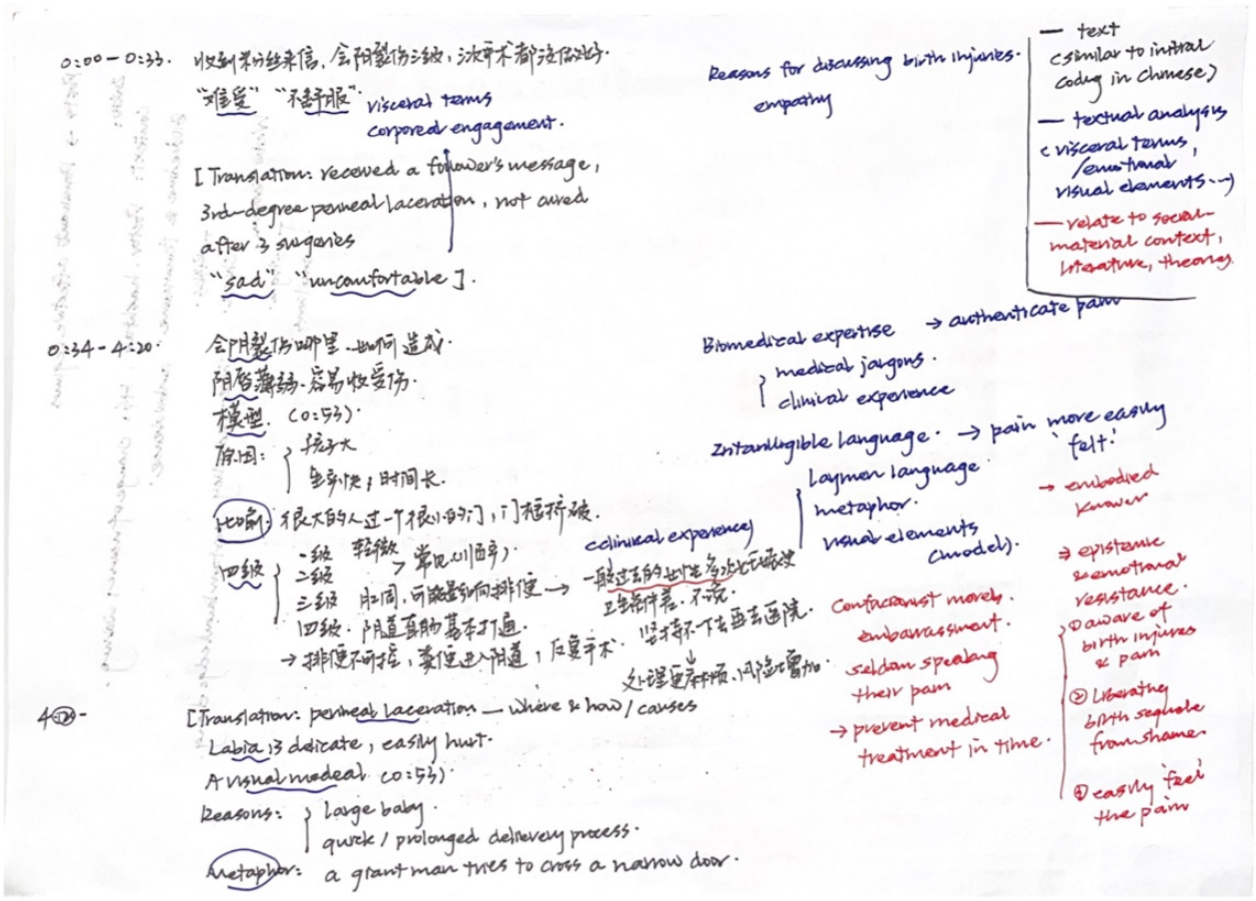
APPENDICE

Appendix A: CODING *(abridged from publishment)*

Appendix B: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

An extract of the doctor's first video on perineal laceration (with translation)