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A Critical Discourse Analysis of Weibo Discourse on the "Su Min Controversy"

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Abstract

This study adopts Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the public discourse surrounding the "Su Min controversy" on the Chinese social media platform Weibo in August 2025. The controversy arose from a middle-aged Chinese woman's personal choice to leave her marriage and family, which ignited a fierce ideological confrontation between traditional patriarchal values and modern feminist discourse. Through systematic analysis of Weibo posts, comments, and multimodal elements, the study identifies two opposing discursive strategies: (1) a moral-ethical disciplinary strategy that employs de-individualizing naming, appeals to the tradition of sacrifice, and engages in selective intertextuality to defend traditional family order; and (2) a rights-and-liberation counter-strategy that re-individualizes Su Min's experience, invokes the modern discourse of individual rights, and constructs an identity of sisterhood to legitimize her departure. The findings reveal the resilience of patriarchal discourse in contemporary Chinese society, the polarization of public debate driven by social media logics, and the instrumentalization of personal experience by commercial interests. This study contributes to understanding how digital media both enables marginalized voices and intensifies discursive polarization in gender-related public deliberation.

Keywords

Critical discourse analysis; Gender discourse; Weibo; Su Min controversy; Patriarchal ideology; Social media polarization

1. Introduction

At the end of 2020, after years of marital pressure, Su Min chose to drive away from home alone. This "departure" event has since drawn sustained attention on platforms such as Weibo, sparking ongoing debates around topics like "women's self-liberation" and "marriage and family responsibilities." In August 2025, Su Min became involved in promoting the film The Little Demon of Langlang Mountain, igniting a new storm of public opinion. Her assertion that "Pig Mama can leave Langlang Mountain too"—drawing on her own experience of breaking free from

family constraints and embarking on a self-drive journey—called on women to pursue self-worth. Some viewers interpreted this statement as "encouraging women to abandon their husbands and children," especially given the stark contrast with the film's premise in which Pig Mama must care for her paralyzed husband. This backlash propelled the "women's departure" issue to a new peak of controversy.

This study takes Su Min's 2020 self-drive escape from her family and the subsequent film promotion controversy as its research objects. Using the critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework developed by Norman Fairclough, combined with multimodal analysis methods, it examines relevant media discourse on the Weibo platform. The study aims to provide reference points for understanding the patterns of public debate on gender issues in the digital age, to help both the public and the media identify power biases in gender discourse, to mitigate polarization in issue discussions, and to promote rationality and inclusiveness in public discourse on gender topics.

Accordingly, the central research question is: In the "Su Min controversy" of August 2025, how did public discourse on Weibo employ specific linguistic strategies and discursive practices to construct, maintain, or challenge role norms and gender stereotypes concerning middle-aged Chinese women as "virtuous wives and good mothers"? What power relations and ideological conflicts underlie these discourses?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Critical Discourse Analysis: Discourse, Power, and Ideology

The study of media discourse centrally explores how discourse, as a form of social practice, produces, reproduces, and challenges relations of social power (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) theory posits that discourse can be understood as a social practice that shapes people's perception of the world and sustains power and oppression relations within society (Xu & Tan, 2020). Power is intimately linked to discourse; it is realized not merely through coercive means but more commonly through the gradual permeation of discourse, whereby certain ideas become "naturalized" and "common-sensical," thereby achieving ideological hegemony (van Dijk, 2001). Ideology is defined as "shared beliefs of particular groups that serve to construct and sustain unequal power relations" (Fairclough, 2003). On gender issues, patriarchal ideology, through discursive practices, establishes the social division of labor based on biological sex and behavioral norms as an unquestionable natural order—a carefully constructed pattern of male dominance and female subordination that affects every individual raised in a patriarchal family (Gan, 2021).

2.2. Gender, Patriarchy, and the "Virtuous Wife and Good Mother" Ideal

In Chinese culture, the ideal of the "virtuous wife and good mother" has long been deployed as a means of disciplining women. It requires women to situate the

realization of self-worth within the framework of the family, prioritizing the husband's career success and children's healthy growth, and emphasizing the virtues of dedication, sacrifice, and obedience (Ding, 2009). Although women's social status has improved considerably alongside modernization—from the founding of the People's Republic to the pre–Reform and Opening-up period, the Chinese women's liberation movement became known worldwide through the narrative of "women hold up half the sky" (Zhao, 2025)—traditional values still exert a powerful influence in the domestic sphere. When Su Min's "departure" and her statement that "Pig Mama can leave Langlang Mountain too" emerged, they challenged this ideology.

In patriarchal societies, discursive power is often controlled by men and used to constrain and suppress women (Butler, 1990). As a new form of communication medium, online media possess decentralizing and anonymizing properties. On the one hand, they create opportunities for marginalized groups to make their voices heard, potentially advancing "female empowerment"; on the other hand, they also provide fertile ground for the rapid spread and proliferation of misogynistic speech, enabling gender-based linguistic violence under patriarchal ideology to operate with impunity (Sun, 2023).

2.3. Social Media and Gender Discourse in Contemporary China

As a key intermediary for ideological transmission and cultural reproduction, traditional media shaped public perception of social events through agenda-setting and framing (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the era of social media, discourse generation and dissemination have become increasingly complex. Platforms like Xiaohongshu and Weibo grant ordinary users a degree of discursive power previously unavailable, creating a "bottom-up" public opinion ecology (KhosraviNik, 2017). This does not mean, however, that power has completely dissipated. Algorithmic recommendations, the guidance of opinion leaders, and group polarization effects can all amplify certain discourses disproportionately, giving rise to new centers of discursive power (Peng, 2020a).

Research on gender discourse on Chinese social media shows that cyberspace can serve as an empowering arena for the dissemination of feminist thought and the construction of communities, as well as a hotbed for the resurgence of misogynistic speech and traditional gender norms (Chang, Ren, & Yang, 2018). Middle-aged women in particular tend to be portrayed in media representations in stereotypical and marginalized ways: some are dismissed as "aunties" or "damas" who have lost their sexual appeal, while others are rigidly tied to the domestic sphere (Feldshuh, 2018). Su Min broke this stereotypical mold, presenting to the public the image of a middle-aged woman actively pursuing self-actualization, thereby sparking a debate centered on middle-aged women.

3. Research Method

3.1. Theoretical Framework and Data Collection

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, using Norman Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis as its core theoretical framework. This framework provides a comprehensive analytical pathway that systematically links micro-level linguistic choices—the text; meso-level discursive interaction practices—discursive practice; and macro-level social power structures and ideologies—sociocultural practice. This integration is crucial for decoding the ideological struggles underlying the sociocultural phenomenon of the "Su Min controversy."

Sina Weibo was selected as the data source for this study for the following reasons: Weibo serves as a major arena for public opinion in contemporary China, with notable agenda-setting and social mobilization capabilities, making it an appropriate window for observing mainstream social attitudes and ideological conflicts. The "Su Min controversy" was initiated, spread, and escalated primarily on the Weibo platform, where relevant texts, interactive episodes, and emotional expressions are most concentrated and intense. Weibo's openness brings together diverse discursive actors—official media, opinion leaders, and ordinary netizens—thereby providing this study with a rich, multi-layered sample of the discourse ecology.

This study treats textual information as its core corpus, including original posts, comments, and repost comments. Ideological confrontations are largely accomplished through linguistic practices such as argumentation, narrative, and value judgments, and text is the most direct and clear carrier of these practices (Fairclough, 2001). Concurrently, this study also attends to the supplementary role of visual and multimodal elements, such as film promotion posters attached to posts, solo photographs of Su Min, emoji memes created by netizens, and the frequent use of emojis in comments. These non-textual elements do not exist independently but serve as important discursive resources that reinforce textual stances and guide affective responses, and they are incorporated into the scope of analysis.

3.2. Analytical Tools: Naming, Predication, and Argumentation

Corpus collection was set from August 11 to August 25, 2025. This period fully encompasses the phase from the initial triggering of the controversy, through the gradual fermentation of the topic, to the peak of public opinion. The controversy began on August 11 when Su Min spoke at a film offline event, after which public sentiment rapidly escalated. On August 15, Su Min responded to the controversy via video, and subsequent discussions continued. This timeframe captures the evolving stages of discursive struggle.

This study comprehensively employs a set of CDA analytical tools to ensure that the analytical process is both rigorous and systematic. The rationale for these tools lies in their capacity to transform abstract ideologies into concrete linguistic features amenable to analysis.

Naming strategies: Naming is not merely labeling; it is the first step in shaping the identity of social actors. Analyzing whether Su Min is referred to as "Auntie Su"—which conveys familiarity and acknowledges her subjectivity—or as "that woman"—which creates distance and objectifies her—reveals the power relations and emotional distance that discourse producers seek to construct.

Predication strategies: Predication is a key element in attributing properties and behavioral significance to actors. Whether Su Min's actions are described as "self-liberation" or "abandoning her family" directly reflects the moral evaluation system employed by the text.

Argumentation and topoi: Argumentation strategy analysis reveals how discourse makes its claims appear "logical," while examining the underlying topoi—the commonsensical premises upon which arguments depend. Examples include "responsibility trumps all else" and "everyone has the right to pursue happiness." Tracing these topoi uncovers the deeper cultural values and ideologies sustaining the discourse, moving the analysis beyond the surface level of the text into the realm of cultural unconsciousness.

3.3. Intertextuality and Methodological Integration

Intertextuality and discursive alliances: No discourse exists in isolation. Analyzing how a text cites traditional proverbs, legal provisions, or theories—thereby linking its own perspective to a broader, more authoritative discursive tradition—reveals how discursive alliances are formed and persuasive power is strengthened.

By integrating the above methods and tools, this study aims to conduct a deep, multi-layered critical examination of Weibo discourse on the "Su Min controversy," revealing the complex interplay among language, power, and ideology.

4. Analysis

Through a systematic discourse analysis of the selected media text corpus, this study finds that discursive conflicts on Weibo are not chaotic, undirected vitriol but rather an ideological battlefield waged through two highly ordered, mutually opposed sets of discursive strategies.

4.1. Discursive Defensive War: Moral-Ethical Discipline

The core objective of this strategy is to narrow and reframe Su Min's personal choice from a complex social issue into a matter of individual moral failing, thereby mobilizing public opinion to defend the stability of traditional family order.

First, using "de-individualizing" naming to establish moral judgment. In opponents' texts, Su Min's individuality is systematically stripped away. She is rarely addressed by name but labeled with negative social-role designations: "a daughter-in-law," "a mother," escalating to "a woman who abandoned her husband and child," "an irresponsible mother." This referential strategy diverts attention from the specific

hardships of her decades-long marriage and subjects her to an abstract "role norm." Once categorized as "an unqualified mother," moral judgment acquires natural legitimacy. One comment read: "No matter what she went through in the first half of her life, it cannot be an excuse for abandoning her family responsibilities. As a wife and mother, choosing to leave when her husband needs care is in itself a moral dereliction of duty." The text reduces a complex personal decision to a black-and-white moral assessment.

Second, drawing on the tradition of "sacrifice and devotion" in argumentation. The logic is rooted in traditional Chinese culture where "dedication" and "sacrifice" are regarded as women's highest virtues. The text invokes motifs such as "supporting the husband and raising the children", "working tirelessly without complaint" , and "perseverance" , naturalizing self-sacrifice as duty. One comment stated: "Which of our grandmothers' generation didn't suffer more than she did? Who didn't sacrifice for the family their whole life? Why, when it comes to her, does it become 'pursuing selfhood'? It's selfishness." This constructs a binary opposition between "past" virtues and "present" selfishness, evoking nostalgic collective memory and transforming criticism of Su Min into a lament over the erosion of traditional values.

Third, employing "selective intertextuality" through the film plot to reinforce the negative image. Opponents exploit the film The Little Demon of Langlang Mountain — where Pig Mama must care for her paralyzed husband — forcibly conflating fiction with Su Min's real choices. They deliberately ignore that her husband is in good health, deploying the rhetorical question "Is her husband paralyzed in bed too?" to imply her behavior is far worse. This cross-text grafting amplifies her stereotype as "cold and heartless." One comment read: "Su Min used the film to reinforce her 'departure' persona. Mainstream society hardly embraces abandoning one's husband and children. Yet she blurts out: 'Why doesn't Pig Mama leave?' Too absurd!" By reducing her departure to a "value of abandoning husband and children," this discourse reinforces her image as a "bad woman" defying the "virtuous wife and good mother" ideal.

4.2. Discursive Counterattack: Rights and Liberation

In direct opposition to the disciplinary discourse, supporters' strategy seeks to "de-criminalize" Su Min's actions and elevate them into a women's liberation movement against systematic oppression.

First, restoring rational context through a "re-individualizing" narrative. Supporters bring public attention back to Su Min's specific life trajectory, citing her accounts of "laboring like a beast of burden in her marriage," "experiencing AA-system economic exploitation," and "enduring long-term verbal abuse." One blogger wrote: "Auntie Su Min raised three younger brothers, raised her daughter, looked after twin grandsons to kindergarten — only then did she leave. Apart from no longer serving her ex-husband, what traditional woman's work hasn't she done? She said

'Pig Mama can leave Langlang Mountain too' — what's wrong with that?" By supplementing the "first half of life" narrative that disciplinary discourse omitted, supporters provide solid grounds for the justice and inevitability of her actions.

Second, launching a counterattack using modern "individual rights" discourse. This challenges the traditional premise of "collective interests above individual interests." One blogger noted: "There are profit-driven male-chauvinist big Vs who pay lip service to women's rights while hollowing them out, turning legitimate rights into a 'fashion accessory' exclusive to elite young women." This contrasts "modern citizen" with "feudal patriarch," categorizing support for Su Min as "modern and progressive" and opposition as "backward and feudal" — a maneuver that secures moral and civilizational high ground.

Third, constructing "sisterhood" identity to universalize the issue. Supporters use the first-person plural "we": "Every one of us women could become Su Min." A highly liked comment stated: "A film that says anyone can pursue the true scripture — including a mother — going out to seek the true scripture of life. Auntie didn't say anything wrong. Those who think mothers should forever stay at home are the ones who are wrong." This transforms Su Min's case from an isolated incident into a shared symbol for all women constrained within families, building a powerful discursive alliance with social-mobilization significance.

4.3. The Battle of Two Ideologies: Summary and Implications

These two competing discourse strategies reveal a deep ideological cleavage in contemporary Chinese society. On one side, the moral-ethical disciplinary strategy draws on de-individualizing naming, traditional sacrifice narratives, and selective intertextuality to police gender boundaries and defend the patriarchal family order. On the other side, the rights-and-liberation counter-strategy employs re-individualizing narratives, modern individual rights discourse, and sisterhood identity construction to challenge that order and legitimize female autonomy. Both sides deploy sophisticated discursive tools — naming, predication, argumentation, and intertextuality — to construct moral legitimacy while dismantling the opposing framework. The intensity and orderliness of this discursive battlefield suggest that the "Su Min controversy" is not merely about one woman's choices but represents a broader ongoing negotiation over gender roles, family ethics, and the tension between tradition and modernity in China's rapidly transforming social landscape.

5. Discussion

5.1. Resilience and Fragility of Patriarchal Discourse

This discursive conflict powerfully reveals a key contradictory dynamic within contemporary Chinese social power structures: the considerable resilience of traditional patriarchal discourse and the deepening fissures it is displaying. The widespread diffusion and enormous influence of disciplinary discourse indicates

that male-centered family values emphasizing female sacrifice remain an integral part of social consciousness. This ideology exists not only in men's discourse but has also been internalized by a significant number of women, becoming a commonsensical repertoire that operates "unnoticed in normal times." When this order is challenged, its defensive mechanisms rapidly activate, employing moral stigmatization to discursively sanction "deviants." Progress toward gender equality in the realm of ideas—especially in private life—still encounters substantial resistance.

The resilience of liberation discourse and the enormous energy of public opinion it has mobilized demonstrate that this traditional hegemony is not monolithic. The cohort of younger women who have completed higher education, in particular, can already skillfully deploy feminist theory and modern rights discourse as intellectual weapons to systematically deconstruct and critique traditional norms. Su Min's story has activated long-suppressed collective experiences among women and fostered a powerful online community of resistance. This "intra-discursive confrontation" is itself an ongoing process of power negotiation, and its outcome will profoundly influence how Chinese society defines women's roles and family relationships in the future.

5.2. Polarization and the Erosion of Rational Public Dialogue

In the current stage of this debate, we rarely see constructive dialogue that attempts to understand opposing positions or seeks a middle ground. Complex issues—such as how to build a social support system that shares family eldercare and childcare responsibilities while affirming women's self-worth—are reduced to simple declarations of "support/oppose Su Min." This polarization tendency, driven by both technology and human nature, poses a serious threat to the rational, inclusive public sphere that a healthy society requires. When the public square is fragmented into countless isolated and hostile "echo chambers," the building of social consensus becomes exceedingly difficult.

5.3. Media Ethics and the Instrumentalization of Personal Experience

The trigger for this incident—a commercial film promotion campaign—offers an opportunity to reflect on media ethics. The film's marketing team seized on the "topicality" and "controversy" surrounding Su Min, using her as a "tether" to attract traffic. While this strategy may be commercially successful, it is ethically questionable.

This amounts to the instrumentalization of an individual's life experience. It reduces Su Min's complex history of personal struggle to a consumable, stereotyped commercial symbol, obscuring the deeper structural social issues behind it. This "controversy marketing" trades on intensified social conflict for commercial gain; its practitioners anticipate—and even welcome—the eruption of public opinion,

because conflict itself represents traffic and visibility. When capital logic permeates the public sphere, treating serious social issues as commodities to be packaged and sensationalized, we must be alert to the overall decline in the quality of public discourse and the erosion of media social responsibility. This calls for a renewed examination of the ethical boundaries that should govern commercial entities' participation in public-issue discussions in an era dominated by traffic metrics.

6. Conclusion

6.1. The Prism of Modernization: Old versus New Values

This study provides a critical analysis of Weibo discourse on the "Su Min controversy" and concludes that this seemingly incidental online opinion event is, in fact, a prism reflecting the clash between old and new values in the process of China's social modernization. The core of the debate is not whether Su Min's personal words and actions are right or wrong, but rather the contest between two opposing ideologies: the "responsibility-sacrifice" ethics anchored in traditional patriarchal order and the modern "rights-self" discourse—a struggle for discursive hegemony.

6.2. Discursive Strategies and Their Social Implications

The analysis reveals how both sides deploy a series of discursive strategies—naming, predication, argumentation, and intertextuality—to construct their respective moral legitimacy and dismantle the opposing system. The outcome of this discursive confrontation will not only affect how Su Min as an individual is evaluated but will also profoundly shape society's collective imagination of the "ideal woman" and the "modern family."

6.3. The Dual Role of Digital Media and the Unfinished Departure

This online debate highlights the dual role of digital media in the transformation of contemporary Chinese society: on the one hand, it opens up unprecedented channels of expression for marginalized female subjectivities; on the other hand, due to its inherent commercial logic and technological characteristics, it intensifies the polarization and antagonism of public discourse, eroding the foundations of rational dialogue. Su Min's "departure" has not yet concluded in the geographical sense, but the "discursive departure" she has ignited—a debate concerning Chinese women's status in the family and society—has only just begun.

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