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The Anti-Marriage Turn: Economic Precarity and Racialised Grievance in the Chinese Manosphere

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Abstract

In the context of a global resurgence in right wing movements, this paper investigates how economic precarity becomes reconfigured into gendered and racialised grievance within the Chinese manosphere. Whilst misogynistic discourse have historically championed the traditional family, a distinctly anti-marriage feeling has recently emerged amongst some Chinese men. Drawing on our data we frame this as reaction to a cost-of-living crisis and the erosion of men's superior wages in China's emerging neoliberal labour market.

We focus attention on social media reactions to a legal judgement emphasising the importance of sexual consent arising from the infamous Shanxi Datong rape case, in which a man was imprisoned for three years for raping his fiancé. Our analysis demonstrates how the Chinese manosphere reframed this judgment as *male* victimhood in the context of a bride price (*Caili*) having been paid. Interestingly anger was directed not only at women, but also at (weak) 'turtle' men who acquiesce to women's demands. We also identified a proprietorial nationalism in which Han Chinese women were constructed as difficult and choosy 'national assets' whilst women from the Global South were commodified as easy-to-please wives that respected lower-income Chinese men. By highlighting the interplay between financial anxiety, nationalism and racialised misogyny, this article reveals that the Chinese manosphere echoes both Western 'red

pill’ ideology and local traditions of gender and marriage that are increasingly strained by global neoliberal economic policies.

Keywords: anti-marriage, Chinese manosphere, ethno-nationalism, masculinity, racialised misogyny

Introduction

Since the 2010s, reactionary right-wing movements have gained traction across the world. These groups have rebranded themselves as defenders of moral order, positioning ‘gender ideology’ as a dangerous threat said to sexualise or mutilate children, destroy the (heterosexual) family, and create laws that privilege women at the expense of men. ‘Gender’, once a term of liberation, has become a symbol of moral decay, corruption, and left-wing extremism (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Historically, conservatives upheld marriage and ‘family values’ as the cornerstone of social stability. Yet in recent years, a striking reversal has emerged: a misogynistic, anti-marriage discourse is rising within right-wing male communities. No longer celebrating marriage as a marker of adulthood, privilege or responsibility, they now depict it as an institution designed to exploit men (Matthew, 2023).

The Chinese manosphere mirrors this in complex way. Marriage rates have declined for 11 consecutive years, with first-time marriages falling 41% between 2013 and 2019 (Yeung, 2022). Much of this decline stems not from ideological rejection, but from

material constraints – the inability to accumulate the assets traditionally required of a husband: a home, a car and a bride price. The long-standing patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988), in which men exchange family money for control of, and sexual access to a woman, is becoming increasingly untenable under a neoliberal economic system in which men's wages are falling and property prices and social inequality are rising rapidly.

At the same time, women's reflection on marriage is intensifying across the globe. Movements like South Korea's 4B campaign that advocates abstinence from marriage, dating, sexual relationships, and child-rearing have inspired a new form of feminist withdrawal from heterosexuality (Li & Gu, 2025). In China, the '6b4t' movement similarly rejects the emotional and social reproductive labour embedded in traditional marriage. For economically precarious men this rejection has triggered acute anxiety and resentment.

Resulting debates over marriage have grown increasingly fraught. Once, attention centred on 'leftover' men – men from low socio-economic groups on meagre incomes in rural locations who could not attract a wife, but now a growing group of men are rejecting marriage through a commentary of grievance against women in their own digital ecosystem – the 'manosphere'. No longer limited to feminist or leftist circles, rejection of marriage in the Chinese manosphere both echoes western 'red pill' ideology and circulates a distinctive local dynamic of sexual frustration and loss of masculine dignity caused by the inability to raise 'bride price' or equivalent resources. Although China has not yet produced high-profile anti-feminist figures like Andrew Tate, similar

narratives—‘marriage is a trap for men’ or ‘men are losers in the marriage market’—circulate widely across Chinese social media platforms.

A legal judgement emphasising the importance of sexual consent arising from the infamous Datong engagement rape case in Shanxi brought these tensions into sharp relief. During an engagement visit in 2023, a woman (Ms Wu) was assaulted by her fiancé (Mr Xi). Despite social pressure to remain silent, Ms Wu sought legal redress. In April 2025, the court sentenced Mr Xi to three-year in prison, sparking widespread debate among Chinese netizens. In May 2025, the Supreme People’s Court designated the ruling as a guiding precedent, recognising its broader social and legal significance, dividing public opinion and producing an outpouring of claims that the case proved that men, in fact, are victims of laws that prioritise women. By analysing the discussions of the case in the Chinese manosphere we to explore how economic precarity is reconfigured into gendered hatred. We asks:

- 1) How does the Chinese manosphere frame marriage, and how does this discourse converge with, or diverge from, the global online misogyny?
- 2) Do local inflections arise from traditional patriarchal norms, or a new phenomena arising from China’s changing economic and social conditions? What are the consequences of the manosphere for Chinese gender relations?

By investigating the intersections of class, nationalism, and masculinity in Chinese online spaces, this study demonstrates how digital misogyny functions not only as backlash, but as a symptom of unmet desires for status, recognition, and power in an age of profound uncertainty.

From ‘Pure Relationships’ to the Neo-Manosphere

The transition from pre-modern arranged marriage to modern ‘romantic love’ was once heralded as a liberation of intimacy. Anthony Giddens (1992) famously described the rise of the ‘pure relationship’ based on emotional compatibility and mutual satisfaction in ‘reflexive modernity’, consigning patriarchal marriage to the past. However, scholars have long noted that this freedom came with a heavy psychological price. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), for instance, argued that many people retain a deep need for the ontological security of the traditional marriage contract and family values, albeit at women’s expense. Love, they argue, has become an empty category, into which people pour their hopes, biographies and emotional lives, but as strict social norms evaporate and couples ‘legislate their own lives’, the risk of failure is high, producing considerable anxiety for lovers. On the one hand confluent love offers the possibility for democracy in personal life, on the other rests the potential for chaos. In this deregulated landscape, Eva Illouz (2013; 2021) characterises modern love as ‘choice’. However, she argues that the different institutions of modernity have evolved in tension with one another, meaning that marriage choices – based on making a good (financial) match – and love choices – characterised by abandonment, ‘chemistry’ and mutual fulfilment – often work in tension with each other, making partner choice extremely fraught, particularly when choice is individualised. Such marketisation of intimacy creates distinct winners and losers. While Giddens envisioned a democracy of emotion, the reality of digital dating – governed by algorithms and visual consumption – often

produces profound insecurity. Recent scholarship suggests this insecurity has given rise to a ‘neo-manosphere’ (Gerrand et al., 2025), a digital ecosystem that has evolved from seduction communities (Pick-Up Artists who seduce women for brief sexual liaisons with the promise of forever-love) into ‘Men Going Their Own Way’ (MGTOW) and ‘incel’ cultures. Gerrand et al. (2025) argue that this new phase is characterised by the ‘monetisation of insecurity’, in which influencers exploit male ‘failure’, economic precarity and loneliness, repackaging systemic issues as grievances against women.

In response, women are deserting digital dating sites and avoiding romantic encounter, making love, dating and marriage even more difficult, and, we argue, reshaping intimacy and even gender. Evidence shows that whilst women are becoming increasingly liberal, men are retrenching to more conservative values (Burn-Murdoch, 2024). Feminist withdrawal from heterosexual relationships and rising misogyny, antifeminist backlash, and gender-based resentment are becoming embedded in everyday practices of (non-)intimacy. Misogyny is also often deeply intertwined with far-right ecosystems both online and off, which frame feminist movements like #MeToo as conspiracies against men, and calls to reestablish patriarchal norms circulate widely in the manosphere (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023). Nicholas et al. (2024) show that domestic violence practitioners in Australia routinely encounter ‘masculinist’ logics mirroring these online frames amongst male perpetrators. These narratives mobilise disinformation to legitimate claims of ‘male victimhood’ at the hands of a ‘system’ that favours women, while idealising ‘traditional’ hierarchical gender orders.

The ‘Chinese Far-Right’ ? Localising Digital Populism and Han-Centrism

To understand the specific character of gendered resentment in China in later discussion, it is necessary here to clarify the relationship between the manosphere and the broader far right ecosystem. In Western scholarship, the manosphere functions as a ‘cultural gateway’ to the far right, sharing a foundational logic of social Darwinism and a hostility toward liberal multicultural values (Ging, 2019b). Gerrand et al. (2025) further note that the Western neo-manosphere is increasingly intertwined with white supremacist ideologies, where anxieties about The Great (demographic) Replacement fuel misogynistic rhetoric. Existing scholarship on Western manosphere, particularly on MGTOW, has illustrated how male anxiety is translated into a separatist and individual rejection of women, marriage, and reproductive participation (Wright, Trott & Jones, 2020). However, mapping this trajectory onto China is not straightforward and requires nuance, as its political spectrum operates differently from liberal democracies. In the Chinese context, the ‘left’ has referred to state socialism, Maoist values, and state authority. The ‘right’ was once used for those who supported free markets, individualism, and Western reform. As Zhang (2020) argues, the ‘Chinese far right’ should be understood as a discursive formation rather than a formal political force. Online nationalist communities have localised global right-wing populist rhetoric. They combine racial nationalism and realist authoritarianism with hostility toward liberalism, feminism and multiculturalism. Zhang calls this ‘right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics’, her study shows that far-right ideology can exist in the digital sphere

even without party politics. Unlike the Western far right which typically resists government authority, Chinese digital nationalists often position themselves as the state's moral defenders, though this loyalty can fracture into frustration when the state is perceived as too 'soft' on foreign powers.

Crucially, this provides fertile ground for the manosphere through intersecting narratives that reinforce patriarchal norms. While the Western far-right mobilises around white identity politics, the Chinese equivalent coalesces around Han-centrism, a belief in Han-purity that inevitably politicises reproduction, invoking Han women, not merely as citizens, but as biological vessels of national continuity amidst a deepening demographic crisis. This racial anxiety is intertwined with demands for an assertive geopolitical stance, prioritising 'wolf warrior' masculinity for national strength in the region over pacifism perceived feminine weakness (Hu & Guan, 2021). Undergirding these views is a narrative of civilisational superiority, which reframes Western liberalism and by extension, feminism and LGBTQ+ rights as 'decadent' threats to China's social order and efficiency (Huang, 2023). By invoking social Darwinism and civilisational hierarchies, this discourse idealises a return to a patriarchal order where men serve as 'warriors' for the state and protectors of women. Consequently, the Chinese manosphere is not just a collection of frustrated love seekers, it is additionally the gendered expression of a broader localised ethnocentrism (Zhang, 2020) responsible for policing women's bodies and choices.

The Political Economy of Resentment: *Caili* and the Crisis of Masculinity

The prominent logic of the Western manosphere – defined by the commodification of women and the perceived victimisation of men – resonates deeply in East Asia, yet it is articulated through the specific lens of China's rapid post-socialist modernisation. Eva Illouz (2013) argues that contemporary intimacy has been reshaped by market logics and consumer culture, creating a sexual marketplace of winners and losers. In the Chinese context, this commodification of intimacy is not merely metaphorical but takes a literal, monetary form in the practice of *Caili* (bride price).

Because marriage in China remains a universal prerequisite for having children and socially acceptable sex, paying *Caili* is often the essential entry ticket for men, particularly in rural areas. Although *Caili* is a traditional custom found in various Asian, Middle Eastern, and African societies, its function in China has shifted aggressively under market pressure. Unlike the Western model of individualised marriage, rural Chinese marriage operates as an intergenerational project, where the groom's parents often exhaust their life savings to provide him the resources to secure a bride, transforming marriage into a collective family burden. Despite criticism of its transactional nature, the cost of *Caili* has risen sharply, far outpacing the growth of per capita income and commonly exceeding 100,000 RMB (approx. 14,000 USD) in eastern coastal regions (Li & Li, 2021). High bride price is a form of material insurance for women in a legal system that often favours male property ownership while simultaneously acting as a barrier that excludes lower-status men from the marriage market. Research attributes this rapid inflation to structural imbalances: the

demographic squeeze caused by sex-selective abortion and son preference resulting in millions more men than women; the internal migration of rural women to cities, which intensifies competition among rural men for fewer potential partners; and a culture of competitive consumption driven by urbanisation (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012; Meng & Zhao, 2019). Consequently, *Caili* has transformed from a ritual gift into a debilitating economic burden that significantly reduces the financial well-being of rural households (Li & Li, 2021).

State responses have largely failed to alleviate this anxiety. Since 2019, state media has attempted to curb ‘excessive’ bride prices by framing them as outdated products of vanity and status competition, rather than addressing the root causes of gender imbalance. In 2023, a joint initiative by the Supreme People’s Court and other bodies sought to regulate these costs to boost marriage rates. However, almost impossible to regulate in practice, prices remain high, and Chinese men find themselves trapped between family bankruptcy and singlehood without an heir.

Importantly, this structural deadlock fuels the Chinese manosphere. The economic burden of *Caili* is frequently reframed in public discourse as evidence of women’s inherent materialism. Women who receive high bride prices are widely labelled by male netizens as *lao nü* (捞女, literally ‘gold-digging women’). As Tian et al. (2025) argue, this label constructs a binary narrative: the ‘infatuated man’ who is exploited and abandoned, versus the ‘manipulative, acquisitive woman’. This dynamic allows economically precarious men to rehabilitate their status; by performing the role of the victim who endures dehumanising labour to support a fiancée, they reclaim a sense of

morally idealised masculinity (Wu & Zhang, 2025). Thus, in China, the ‘war between the sexes’ is inextricably tied to the uneven modernisation, rural-urban divides, and income inequality that define the post-socialist era.

Materials and Method

Case selection

To empirically investigate anti-marriage narratives in the Chinese manosphere, this study analyse online discourse surrounding the Shanxi Datong Engagement Rape Case, specifically focusing on the period following the male defendant’s sentencing. This case was selected as a strategic research site because it serves as a flashpoint that evoke strong emotional response to issues concerning contemporary Chinese gender relations: the increasing economic burden of the ‘bride price’, the legal ambiguity surrounding sexual consent within intimate relationships, and the perceived judicial ‘discrimination’ against men.

Data collection

Our data collection strategy was based on a specific operationalisation of the ‘Chinese manosphere’ as a networked discursive formation rather than isolated instances of online misogyny (Ging, 2019; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Van Valkenburgh, 2021). We define the Chinese manosphere not as a fixed group with formal membership, but as a community bound by a shared discursive framework. Unlike random expressions of frustration, Chinese manosphere discourse is characterised by a high degree of

intertextuality and specific subcultural vernaculars—such as *lao nū* (gold-digger), used to stigmatise women’s economic agency. Through this discursive framework, individual anxieties surrounding the Datong case are organised through a collective lens of male victimhood. This standardisation of grievance serves as the primary criterion for our data selection.

Data collection was conducted from June 1 to June 30, 2025. Three distinct social media platforms, Weibo, Hupu and Rednote, were selected to present different discursive ecologies. Weibo, functioning as a public square similar to X (formerly Twitter), serves as the primary hub for breaking news. Given its role in information dissemination, we focused on original posts to capture high-visibility narratives. We tracked the hashtag created by state media, #Engagement Rape Case Second Trial Dismissed Appeal# (#订婚强奸案二审驳回上诉#), which garnered 5.7 billion views and 328,000 comments, making it the most engaged hashtag relating to this case. Using a systematic collection method based on popularity ranking, we extracted the top 50 pages of search results, yielding 485 valid posts. To capture the broader public reaction, we extended our observation to the comment sections of high-engagement content. Specifically, for the 12 viral posts that generated over 1,000 comments, we observed the top 100 comments in each thread. This stratified approach ensures that our analysis accounts for both the broadcasted narratives and their immediate mainstream public reception.

In contrast, Hupu is a male-dominated sports community (95.4% male user base)

identified by previous scholarship as a central space for manosphere discourse (Sun & Dai, 2024). Recognising the Hupu's core culture relies on community interaction rather than broadcast, we collected both posts and their associated comments using the keyword "Shanxi Datong Engagement Rape Case". This results a dataset of 97 posts and 22,423 comments. Finally, to provide a comparative baseline, we observed discussions on the female-dominated platform Rednote using the same keyword, gathering 286 top-ranked posts to contextualise the gendered divergence in interpreting the case.

Sampling strategy

Given that this study does not aim to present a generalised public opinion but rather to identify and deconstruct specific anti-feminist subcultures, we employed a purposive sampling strategy. Notably, while supportive and feminist narratives were noted to contextualise the broader discursive conflict and map general public sentiment, the primary coding strategy prioritised discourse that aligned with perpetrator-sympathetic and victim-blaming narratives. Consequently, the raw dataset was filtered based on distinct inclusion criteria to operationalise manosphere discourse. Specifically, we selected content that shows: 1) the presence of specific in-group vocabulary, e.g. *lao nū*; 2) an explicit stance of male victimhood or hostility toward women; 3) an ideological framework that links the individual legal case to the national demographic crisis.

Data analysis

To ensure methodological consistency across the large corpus, a unified two-step analysis was applied. First, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and discursive clusters. Initial coding revealed that key terms such as ‘blackmail’, ‘*xianren tiao*’¹, and ‘marriage fraud’ were central to the discussion. These keywords were categorised into four primary narrative strategies: (1) Denial of rape, mainly arguing that no semen was detected in the woman’s vagina; (2) Excusing the rape based on the claim that once bride price has been paid therefore the woman is expected to provide sex to her fiancé; (3) Rejection of marriage and reproduction, claiming men are deceived and disadvantaged through marriage; and (4) Anger at feminism and at court rulings as embodiments of state law.

Following this, a representative subset was selected for further textual analysis using Lazar’s (2007) Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). This method was chosen for its capacity to interpret how gender ideologies and hierarchies are maintained through discursive practices. In this phase, we contextualised the narratives within broader socio-political frameworks, such as the demographic crisis and legal reforms, and especially examined how Chinese manosphere discourse resonates with global far-right ideologies. The analysis focused on three ideological dimensions: Anger at women based on the belief that men are harmed in marriage; Anger at complicit men and the

¹ In Chinese popular discourse, it refers to a honey-trap-style sexual entrapment scheme in which a target is lured into a sexual or romantic encounter and subsequently blackmailed, extorted, or otherwise coerced.

state; and Racialised rejection of Chinese women in favour of more subservient women from lower-income countries.

Weaponising the Marriage Squeeze: From Economic Anxiety to Constructed Victimhood

Manosphere communities worldwide share a common characteristic: they hold the feminist movement responsible for a wide range of societal problems (Scotto di Carlo, 2023). Unsurprisingly, in our data posts most frequently blamed the woman for her own rape whilst exonerating her fiancé. For instance:

I stand with the man. They're already engaged, so having a sexual relationship is the unspoken social rule. This woman has broken that norm.

If she wanted to remain a virgin, fine, but why get engaged or married? Isn't this hypocritical? She wants the bride price, the house, and her name on the deed, but she won't let him touch her? Isn't this deceitful?

[Engagement] is akin to marriage. Sexual relations are part of life as a couple; if she doesn't accept this, why get engaged at all?

Engagement, then, is interpreted as a form of 'unspoken marriage'. Bride price, from this point of view grants men control over women's bodies and sexuality just as marriage is seen to. Within this framework women are commodified and reduced to property with a measurable exchange value. They regard Ms Wu's actions as both financial fraud and a violation of the marriage agreement. By framing women as

manipulative and dishonest, and a man being denied his conjugal right, this narrative aligns with key grievances in the manosphere (Smith et al., 2025).

Marriage, from this perspective, is portrayed as a financial trap set by women to exploit men. For example:

In the past, many men blindly followed societal expectations without questioning whether marriage and society were fair to them. When you really calculate and compare, you'll realise that getting married today offers the lowest return on investment for men. Not only does it leave men with nothing, but it also carries the risk of financial ruin or imprisonment.

And mirroring Red-Pill ideology:

This incident becoming public is a perfect opportunity for men to ... awaken more men to the reality: don't get married, don't get married, don't get married. It's simply not worth it for men.

Feminist critiques of marriage often expose how women's autonomy is lost and reproductive labour appropriated through marriage. These men frame marriage as a 'rip off' and married men as fools. Within this transactional logic, the exorbitant bride price is resented for failing to secure sexual and reproductive service. Consequently, the narrative constructs men as the primary 'victims' of the marriage institution. These shared affective resonances – of grievance and frustration – unite men against a common enemy and enable recruitment of new members. According to Reicher et al. (2008), establishing collective hate is a crucial step in extremist group engagement, achieved by establishing an out-group (exclusion) as a danger to the in-group (threat).

This phenomenon parallels observations of the Western manosphere. Laura Bates (2020) points out that incels see themselves as helpless victims in a world that's rigged against them. Once men identify as incels, many feel unable to leave the only group that makes them feel understood. This powerful sense of belonging creates a compelling, self-reinforcing cycle that is difficult to break.

The manosphere not only frames women as the enemy but also identifies complicities, such as the law. A recent study of Turkish misogyny on X highlights 'victims of alimony' generating organised hostility toward both women and the legal system (Demir & Tiryaki, 2025). Similar patterns can be observed in discussions of the Shanxi Datong case, where the law is framed as inadequate or biased against men. For instance:

Under the current rules, men have no protection. Women face no real costs or consequences for similar situations. There's no way to determine whether extortion is involved. Won't this lead to widespread imitation? Won't this cause many eligible men, especially ordinary men, to fear marriage and women? To be honest, I'm already starting to develop a fear of women.

[Labelling this as 'rape'] is a terrible precedent. It's a legal loophole. Marriage fraud is likely to become rampant in the future, and grassroots authorities may struggle to distinguish between truth and falsehood.

The legal 'unfairness' compounds a sense of group disadvantage and victimhood. By suggesting that state institutions have been permeated by feminist interests, this discourse aligns with the conspiratorial logic typical of the global far-right, which often delegitimises established laws as tools of a hostile elite.

To understand why this victimhood narrative resonates so powerfully, we must contextualise it within China's specific socio-economic transformations. While processes of modernisation and individualisation should lead, according to theorists of late modernity like Giddens, to greater relationship equality, the rapidly inflating bride price in China, has cemented the construction of women as objects to be exchanged. Whilst the phenomenon of 'leftover women' has been intensely scrutinised and stigmatised in popular culture and in state discourse framing women as 'too choosy', the issue of 'leftover men', by contrast the much bigger issue of 'leftover men' (*Guang gun* or 'bare branches') is treated with relative indifference, less problematic or even socially acceptable. The decades-long one-child policy, combined with persistent son preference has resulted in a demographic 'marriage squeeze'. Tens of millions more men than women find themselves in a hyper-competitive marriage market (Yang et al., 2017). Moreover, China's integration into the global neoliberal economy has generated immense wealth but also stark social stratification. A distinct class of men find themselves economically marginalised and unable to meet the escalating material demands of modern marriage. This dynamic has led to a re-commodification of marriage, directly challenging the notion that modern relationships are detached from economic imperatives (Wan, 2024).

While men are pressured to compete materially, the one-child policy inadvertently empowered single daughters, who received greater parental investment in their education, particularly in urban settings, than rural men, making them more selective in their choice of husband. While families may demand higher bride prices for these

educated women, women themselves are increasingly prioritising what they call ‘emotional value’ from men, and a ‘soulmate’ connection that transcends metrics based purely on material resources. This creates a fundamental mismatch between what men are conditioned to believe they must offer and what many modern Chinese women actually desire.

Men who lack ‘erotic’ or ‘sexual capital’ (Hakim, 2021) or the means to ‘provide’ for a home frame the marriage squeeze not as a complex socioeconomic issue, but as a zero-sum competition where Alpha men monopolise women, leaving none for the Betas². This anxiety about economic inequality is articulated through specific discourse, such as framing marriage as a transaction and reducing women to commodities, which are then transformed into attacks on ordinary women for their ambitions for hypergamy and onto feminists for challenging traditional gender roles. These narratives should not be understood merely as complaints about the bride price; rather, they must be examined within the discursive logic of the manosphere to identify their underlying intent to reinstate the patriarchal orders.

Patriarchal Consciousness-Raising: Policing the ‘Turtle Man’ in A Conspiracy of Grievance

Bates (2020) highlights a troubling pattern in which influential figures within the manosphere manipulate vulnerable men for their own financial and social gain. The self-proclaimed ‘leaders’ of these communities promise much, such as redemption,

² Within manosphere’s discourse, the terms ‘alpha men’ and ‘beta men’ are employed as binary metaphors for male social status and gender roles, distinguishing dominant and self-assertive men from those perceived as submissive or dependent, reflecting a social Darwinist hierarchy central to the manosphere worldview.

success, fulfilment of desire, but in reality, these figureheads are keen to monetise their followers and the conspiracies they circulate. The result is a system that thrives on turning what feels like a community into yet another extractivist hierarchy. While the Chinese manosphere shares this extractive logic, our analysis reveals that it reinforces hierarchy through a distinctive mechanism of internal policing: a pronounced hostility toward other men who are seen ‘soft’ or ‘too friendly’ to women.

On the Hupu site, the term 龟男 (*gui nan*, literally ‘turtle man’, a pun on ‘kneeling man’) has emerged as a derogatory neologism. It is typically used to describe men who display deference to women and lack of self-respect in romantic or social relationships. These men are branded traitors to their gender, embodying weakness and betraying male solidarity. This term frequently appeared in discussions surrounding the Shanxi Datong case. Its perpetrator was framed as a ‘turtle man’ for paying a substantial bride price. One highly upvoted comment read:

These men who pay bride prices are traitors. They should be severely punished to extinguish their intention to marry.

In the economic logic of the manosphere, the ‘turtle man’ is viewed as a ‘market disruptor’ who, by agreeing to pay high bride prices, undermines the collective male effort to lower the ‘cost’ of marriage.

Furthermore, men who supported the female victim were also labelled as ‘turtle men’. For instance:

All the men who support the woman in this case are 🍌🍌🍌.

Identity politics is too powerful. If you ‘punch your fist’ [a slang term meaning supporting feminism], you get the support of 50% of the population (women) + 25% of the population (turtle man). When 75% of the population supports you, you can just laugh your way to victory.

These discourses connect the term ‘turtle man’ to feminism, constructing a division of men into those who see the ‘truth’ of gender relations and fight for their version of justice, and ‘turtle men’ who are deluded and complicit in advancing feminist causes. Such binary categorisation means that men looking for help and support online must quickly pick a side and are pushed towards toxic masculinity to avoid being branded negatively as a turtle man.

The term ‘turtle man’ serves a dual function: pejoratively describing a category of ‘other’ men who live a fantasy, and warning ‘awakened’ men not to slide back into this (abject) category. This rhetoric cultivates a tense atmosphere of crisis, suggesting that these ‘awakened’ (red-pilled) men are under siege from external enemies (women and the legal system) and internal traitors (‘turtle men’). Creating an in-group/out-group dynamic is crucial to the manosphere, establishing a self-contained logic within an alternative knowledge system.

Members of the manosphere express a complex mix of sympathy and resentment towards the perpetrator in the Shanxi Datong case. When the appeal trial upheld the original verdict of rape, a slogan circulating on Hupu and Weibo demanded: ‘请先生赴死’ (‘Sir, please go to your death’). This phrase originates in Chinese classical novels where a hero martyrs himself for a noble cause. Some members of the Hupu community called for the man’s execution as a way to awaken society, particularly turtle men. Some

comments read:

I hope he's executed immediately, with no appeals allowed. Sacrificing one man to wake up the masses is worth it. Sir, please go to your death!!

Turtle men are disgusting and beyond saving. I suggest the death penalty for all of them.

The data collected is filled with violent language of this nature, where the phrase 'go to your death' is part of a carnival of collective condemnation. They viewed the trial of the perpetrator as a heroic sacrifice which reinforced the community's sense of superiority and affinity with historic masculine ideals of death or dishonour. This alliance in the manosphere, to defend men's rights, then, is happy to sacrifice men's lives to further its cause.

By using and circulating the term 'turtle man', the Chinese manosphere deliberately performs an internal policing mechanism. Through the denigration, humiliation, and symbolic 'execution' of so-called turtle men – in reality, men who are more successful in relationships than themselves – manosphere members generate emotional resonance that serves to exclude dissenting voices and secure political identification. This process mirrors the othering mechanisms typical of far-right populism, which justify, for instance, the killing of white protesters at Black Lives Matter demonstrations as race traitors or as 'dirty white' through the redefinition of identity boundaries, the construction of crisis and affective mobilisation (Frankenber, 1993; Wodak, 2015).

Notably, the Chinese manosphere's hostility is directed not only towards women but

also towards men perceived as gender traitors. Thus ‘turtle man’ should not be understood merely as an insult or a pejorative label, but as a politically charged subcultural jargon functioning within a broader device of ideological control. In the selected case, the Chinese manosphere operates to create new enemies beyond women and state law, thereby reinforcing internal cohesion and political loyalty to patriarchal ideology.

This enemy-making process is underpinned by a conspiratorial imagination about feminism – conceived as a powerful, hidden force manipulating society (Jameson, 1992). Consequently, the manosphere calls for a male ‘awakening’, in which refusing marriage becomes a form of resistance against feminism. Naomi Klein (2023) describes such conspiracies as a ‘mirror world’, where the language and tactics of left-wing critiques of power are mimicked and distorted by right-wing movements. Within this mirror world, patriarchal dominance is reframed as counter-cultural rebellion, and any compromise with women is redefined as a betrayal of the male collective. Crucially, this mirror world serves to deflect the real source of the squeeze. By directing male rage towards turtle men and a feminist conspiracy, the Chinese manosphere obscures the actual economic problems, such as neoliberal precarity and high living costs, that are squeezing these men’s livelihoods, and the gender ratio than means many men will never find a wife. These bara branches, highly stigmatised in Chinese culture, rejected by women, chose self-exclusion as way of saving face and avoiding symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1987) by claiming they never wanted to marry anyway and those that do are fools.

Reasserting Patriarchy through Global Exchange: The Fantasy of the Foreign Bride

Within the ideological framework of the Chinese manosphere, ‘turtle men’ are framed as losers who have surrendered to the ‘feminist system’, where men accept feminist exploitation by paying high bride prices. In contrast, those men who seek foreign brides are portrayed as launching an active counterattack, a form of ‘escaping the matrix’. Whilst men in the manosphere reject so-called ‘demanding’ Chinese women, they actively pursue transactional and controllable relationships. In their view, this is not evidence of failure to find a partner but a political act – a symbolic punishment of Chinese feminism and urban women.

Many Chinese men consider white women out of their league, yet imagine themselves as a ‘catch’ for women of colour (Farrer & Dale, 2013). Online discussions reveal a fantasy geography in which Southeast Asian women and other women of colour (specifically Black or Latina women) are imagined as ideal, traditional counterparts to liberated Chinese women:

Forget about dating women from our country. Go to Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, or Bangladesh. Women there will flock to you.

Brave men are already enjoying life in Vietnam, the Philippines, Cambodia, Bangladesh, and even Africa.

The right approach is this: if you’re short on cash, head to Southeast Asia. If you’re better off financially, go to Latin America.

It's very easy to date local women in Latin America. As long as you don't do drugs, drink excessively, commit domestic violence, cheat, or leave her with a 'farewell gift', you've already outperformed 80% of local men there.

Such discourse exposes the transactional, exploitative and racist attitudes underpinning the manosphere's global imaginaries. Racism plays a significant but often overlooked role in the ideological formation of the Chinese manosphere. These men engage in a kind of geographical arbitrage, using China's economic superiority over Southeast Asian and Latin American countries to 'purchase' the patriarchal dividends no longer accessible within the domestic marriage market. The description of women who 'flock' to Chinese men reflects a decontextualised fantasy that erases women's agency and collapses the complex realities of transnational marriages into commodified exchange. For economically marginalised Chinese men unable to secure a Han wife, securing a foreign bride represents an attempt at compensatory subordination of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Like the mediocre white men dating interesting and beautiful young women in Shanghai documented by James Farrar (2013), rejected men can make themselves desirable by shifting location, playing the 'sexual field' and moving from reject to 'catch'.

At the same time, the Chinese manosphere sustains a racialised double standards regarding gender and nationalism. Chinese women who date men from other ethnicities are considered 'race traitors'. For instance, in June 2025, a female university student in Dalian, China was expelled for having a sexual relationship with a Ukrainian man. The university publicly labelled her behaviour as 'damaging to national dignity', sparking

widespread feminist outrage. Chinese women are often imagined as collective property belonging to Chinese men whose honour must be guarded against ‘foreign intrusion’.

When women ‘marry out’, it is depicted as the loss of a national asset.

Conversely, discussions about foreign brides present transnational marriage as a nationalist achievement and a reclaiming of masculine pride. They justified human trafficking as an act of patriotism. As some posts claim:

In my hometown, there's a village that sells Vietnamese wives for 20,000 yuan [2,808USD] each. You look at the photos, and they ship them to you from Vietnam.

Vietnamese women are pro-China and virtuous, and many can speak Chinese now. They are definitely worth considering.

It is necessary to import Vietnamese brides to reduce social contradictions.

Actually, they might not run away after they get to China... In my hometown, there are two Burmese wives. Besides having dark skin, there's nothing bad about them. They each have two or three kids, and they go back to work right after the postpartum confinement period. They are exceptionally tough.

Here, human trafficking is reframed as ‘resource allocation’, where women’s reproductive capacities are treated as quantifiable national assets to resolve China’s ‘social problems’. These mail-order brides, particularly from Southeast Asia, are positioned as a cost-effective substitute for Chinese women, whose care labour has become too expensive. Their fertility is instrumentalised much like white colonial

constructions of African (slave) women's ability to birth in the morning, returning to work in the afternoon.

For these men, foreign brides from the Global South become outsourced reproductive labour (Hochschild, 2000), enlisted to 'reducing social contradictions' such as gender imbalance and declining birth rates. Nationalist ideology thus merges with utilitarian sexism: even though Southeast Asian women are radically stigmatised as 'dark skin', their supposed docility and fecundity make them functionally desirable. Therefore, when racism serves patriarchal functionality, it turns into a kind of instrumentalised racism.

The stark contrast between attitudes toward Chinese women 'marry out' and Chinese men 'marry foreign' presents the manosphere's underlying political logic. Like Western alt-right advocates of 'white sharia' who call for authoritarian gender control to reproduce a white ethno-state (Iturriaga et al., 2024), the Chinese manosphere discourse, as part of the global misogynist network, localises such logic into defensive nationalism. It seeks simultaneously to defend 'our women' from foreign men and to demonstrate Chinese male superiority by possessing submissive foreign women. The consumption of women's bodies across racial and geographical boundaries thus becomes a performance of racial and patriarchal power that is anchored in Han male centrality.

Objectification extends further to the men from lower-income countries who are depicted as violent, lazy or hypersexual. This dual discourse constructs foreign women as both pitiable victims of patriarchy and as tradable commodities for Chinese men's self-redemption. According to Kim (2025) this can be understood as 'inter-orientalism':

the reappropriation of Orientalist hierarchies by non-Western societies. The logic of commodification and exoticisation is not limited to cross-border exchanges, it creates a fractal pattern that turns inward. Domestic minority women are subjected to the same discourse. Online discussions suggest that if going abroad is too costly, Chinese men might instead look to domestic minorities:

Along the China-Myanmar and China-Vietnam borders in Yunnan and Guangxi, many Burmese and Vietnamese girls work in China. They're very willing to marry Chinese men. Also, local minority women in Yunnan, especially Dai women, are incredibly gentle, don't demand bride price, aren't difficult to get, and are frugal and family-oriented. Aren't they better than those so-called 'little fairy' girls in inland China?

China is in fact home to fifty-six officially recognised ethnic groups, and the living conditions of different regional and minority groups vary significantly. The above comments reflect a racialised and regionalised hierarchy, where ethnic minority women from border regions are fetishised for their supposed simplicity and obedience, contrasted against 'corrupted' Han women. This praise functions as disciplinary discourse: urban Han women can be replaced if they refuse submission. The manosphere's ideology reveals that the true pursuit is not race itself, but power, particularly the power to dominate, replace and own.

The fantasy of global (and domestic) exchange within the Chinese manosphere seeks to reconstitute patriarchal power amid economic precarity. Yet such fantasies do not resolve men's structural marginalisation, rather, they transform it into the objectification and commodification of others. Buying brides becomes a symbolic

consumption of power, that is, the fragile illusion of reasserting patriarchal sovereignty through global trade.

Conclusion

Right-wing movements across the globe have increasingly mirrored the language of the Left to attack the Left itself, such as framing feminism and so-called ‘gender ideology’ as a pernicious force responsible for the dissolution of heterosexual families, and framing legislation to protect women as victimising men. Disputes over reproduction, sexuality, family, the definition of gender, and identity are becoming a major source of political division and a primary arena for political negotiation. This study has explored a central paradox within contemporary right-wing cultures in the Chinese manosphere: whilst such movements have previously championed traditional marriage, the nuclear family, and traditional gender roles, they increasingly harbour anti-marriage sentiment. Feminist scholarship has long critiqued marriage as an institution harmful to and exploitative of women; this research, by contrast, turns its lens on misogynist discourse to understand why the manosphere now appropriates these critiques to portray marriage as an instrument of *male* victimhood.

Our analysis reveals that the Chinese manosphere functions as a mechanism for transferring economic anxiety into gendered grievance. Lower-income men who struggle to achieve upward mobility in the face of spiralling property prices and intense competition for wives – exacerbated by China’s male-biased sex ratio, driven in part by traditional son preference (Song et al., 2022) – reinterpret this economic marginality as

political persecution. In the Shanxi Datong case, by portraying women as extortionists who use marriage to extract maximum *Caili* while denying sexual access, aggrieved men construct a moral high ground from which to reaffirm male dignity. Mirroring left-wing discourse of being ‘woke’, the Chinese manosphere mobilises a version of ‘red pill’ ideology, imploring other men to recognise their own ‘exploitation’ and reject marriage.

Although both Western and Chinese manosphere frame marriage as a trap for men, the Chinese context is distinctly characterised by intense intra-male conflict. Unlike Western incel discourses, which blames ‘Chads’ for monopolising sexual access through a deterministic hierarchy of desirability, the Chinese manosphere directs its aggression inward toward the ‘turtle man’. By attacking men who comply with traditional marriage expectations, the manosphere attempts to form a male alliance aimed at suppressing the ‘market price’ of marriage. The outrage surrounding the Shanxi Datong case signifies the collapse of the old patriarchal bargain. It reveals a panic among men that their status as ‘agents of exchange’ (Rubin, 1975) is being usurped. Anti-marriage discourse thus expresses not a rejection of intimacy itself, but a refusal to define masculinity through economic provision.

When the domestic sexual-economic contract collapses, the foreign bride fantasy emerges as an imagined remedy. Confronted by loss of symbolic authority and low value within the domestic marriage market, many men turn to geographical arbitrage, increasing their relative sexual and economic capital by competing for women from the Global South or for ethnic minoritised women within China. What is being pursued is

not merely sexual access, but the restoration of sovereign masculinity through racialised economic power. In contrast to MGTOW movement's emphasis on male withdrawal, the Chinese manosphere illuminates how patriarchal hope is rebuilt – not by rejecting society, but by re-imagining control within it.

The Chinese manosphere thus constitutes part of a broader global misogynistic movement, while generating a 'glocal' toxic nationalism deeply shaped by Han-centric anxieties. Chinese women are policed as 'national assets' to be guarded against foreign men, while foreign women are commodified as 'resources' to be acquired for national stability. In Europe anti-migrant rhetoric has foregrounded 'protecting our women' from 'dangerous' outsiders, echoing the American myth of the Black rapist – even many arrested for anti-migrant protests in the UK had prior arrests for domestic violence. In China, a similar yet distinct double standard operates: Han women's bodies are perceived as being 'polluted' by foreign men, whilst Han men's seed is simply 'incubated' by foreign women. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) reminds us, the rhetoric of 'saving women' often serves to reassert them as possessions of a dominant group. This strategy, a form of femonationalism, defends a supposedly enlightened nation against outsiders, using equality as a weapon for exclusion.

Whether through justifying rape, 'protecting' national women, or appropriating foreign ones, the Chinese manosphere mobilises anxieties around gender and sexuality to define the nation and reinstate patriarchal supremacy. Such rhetoric not only legitimises online harassment and potential human trafficking, but also obscures the neoliberal class contradictions underlying male disempowerment. It offers what

might be called a false empowerment, allowing disaffected men to experience the illusion of power, while diverting attention away from the structural economic conditions that actually produce their precarity.

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