Feminists as 'Foreign Forces': Ideological Configuration of Nationalism and Feminism Among Chinese Internet Users

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Abstract

Gender issues are becoming the most contentious in contemporary Chinese public opinion, yet how they reshape ideological cleavages among citizens has received little scholarly attention. Feminists are often stigmatized as 'Foreign forces, a Western-exported threat to national security' from the nationalist perspective on Chinese social media these days. This study investigates the ideological linkage between nationalism and feminism among Chinese Internet users, exploring whether support for nationalist views predicts opposition to feminist movements. By collecting a novel dataset of Weibo posts during 2025, this study employs supervised and unsupervised machine learning techniques to code the ideological orientations of these posts and to examine their latent configurations. Findings reveal that among Chinese users, those who support nationalism are more likely to oppose feminism. Further, more extreme pro-nationalist stances are positively correlated with more radical anti-feminist sentiments. The posts can be categorized into inclusionary and exclusionary nationalism, with the latter constituting the majority and accounting for anti-feminist attitudes. This ideological configuration is more prevalent among males and those more occupied with work. This article provides big-data-driven empirical evidence to understand the emerging intersection between gender politics and digital nationalism. Methodologically, it utilizes computational text analytics on social media data to uncover latent ideological configurations, addressing the biases inherent in traditional

survey-based approaches to researching political ideologies.

I. Research Question

Our research question is 'Are Chinese Internet users who support nationalism more likely to oppose feminism?'.

Recently, on the Chinese Internet, more and more various social incidents are framed within gender politics by public opinion, and trigger heated controversies, such as the Tangshan assault case in 2022, the Datong Betrothal Rape Case in 2025. Figure 1 shows typical examples of trendy posts on Chinses social media, and they present a radical perceptual dichotomy between feminists and anti-feminists. On one side, the proactive feminists focus on women's disempowerment and predicament, criticize patriarchy, advocate women's liberation, also, hate the 'quality of Chinese men' implicitly or explicitly compared with the Western. On the other side, the rising anti-feminists deny their so-called privileges, stress masculine crisis, and express misogynist sentiments. Especially, and most interestingly, they widely consider feminism as a malevolent Western-exported schema designed to undermine Chinese societal stability, in other words, they tend to stigmatize feminism from a nationalist view.

Both of feminists and anti-feminists bring Western-Chinese dualist world-view into discussion, thus shows a polarized scenario at the intersection of gender politics and digital nationalism. So, we want to examine this phenomenon in a general and systematic way, is there any inherent ideological link or configuration between nationalism and feminism? We conduct a prediction task.

Figure 1. Weibo posts of feminists and anti-feminists

Figure 2. Weibo posts on stigmatizing feminism from nationalist view

II. Why This Question Important

From the perspective of academia, political ideology is always a fundamental topic of comparative political studies, as it determines people's policy preferences and social behaviors (Carmines & D'Amico 2015). However, feminism is merely mentioned in the multiple ideological dimensions of existing literature. As political ideology is highly contextual, it's valuable to explore this new trend of the coalescence between pro-nationalism and anti-feminism.

From the perspective of public, the increasingly polarized ideological cleavages and dualist public opinion on social issues such as gender, or nation, have impacted our daily life deeply. It's necessary of us to figure out their pattern, then deal with that.

III. How People Study It Traditionally

Classical Research on Political Ideology

The first strain of relevant literature is the classical research on political ideology. Political ideology research examines how individual's political ideas or attitudes are interconnected, configured, or bounded together (Converse 1964; Ellis & Stimson 2009, 2012). Specifically, the most prevalent measurement of political ideology is the left–right, or liberal–conservative spectrum across multiple dimensions, including economic, social, etc (Evans et al. 1996; Federico & Sidanius 2002; Feldman 2003).

Survey data is dominate, including nationally representative samples (e.g., Mazumder 2018), like the classical American National Elections Study (ANES) data, the online opt-in zuobiao survey, also known as the Chinese Political Compass (中国政治坐标系) and cross-national samples (e.g., Malka et al. 2017).

For methods, research commonly employ regression analyses, and examine bivariate correlation coefficients between two dimensions of socio-political attitudes (e.g., Malka et al. 2017; Godefroidt, 2022). Notably, there are factor analysis techniques good at categorizing or clustering different dimensions of ideological items and calculating the correlations among them to examine the configuration and constraints of political ideology (e.g., Beattie et al. 2022; Pan & Xu 2018; Wu 2013). Principal component analysis (PCA) is a dimension reduction procedure that converts multiple possibly correlated variables into linearly uncorrelated composite variables called principal components (PCs), thus can be used to examine the extent to which different dimensions of ideology are organized and how predictive the most salient latent dimensions. In contrast to PCA, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) recovers factors that maximize the shared portion of the variance instead of total variance. And, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) allows researchers to test whether their understanding of the relationship between a construct of latent traits (factors) and observed measurements is consistent with the data.

Besides, to address scholars' pre assumptions about what public belief systems should look like, there is also some relatively marginalized scholarship using qualitative methods with in-depth interviews (e.g. Lane 1962; Chong 1993).

Emerging Literature on Digital Nationalism and Feminism

The second strain of relevant literature is the recently emerging literature on digital nationalism and feminism. They focus on the intricate interplay and nexus of digital nationalism and gender politics, within the context of Chinese social media realm. It's found that the Chinese digital nationalism is male-dominated, and coalesced with misogyny (e.g. Peng ,2022; Tian and Ge, 2024).

They predominantly adopt the methods of qualitative case studies and ethnographies, as they select one or several social incidents on feminism or nationalism, and conduct critical discourse analysis to interpret the relevant texts, contested processes, and power dynamic of these texts. The data are mainly collected from social media content, for instance, Tik Tok, Weibo, Zhihu, etc (e.g., Fang and Repnikova, 2018; Huang, 2023).

IV. The Limitations of Traditional Studies

Classical Research on Political Ideology

The limitations of traditional surveys lie in sampling bias, response bias, and measurement error (Berinsky 2017).

First, sampling bias, especially severe in online opt-in surveys relied on voluntary participation (Huang et al. 2019). Second, response bias, social desirability bias is particularly severe in these political sensitive surveys, as respondents often present themselves in a manner that aligns with social norms and political considerations (Pan & Xu 2018). Third, measurement error, Zaller (1992) found that ideological positions of respondents influenced by the wording and order of survey questions, as ambivalent individuals easily being pushed one way or the other based on what viewpoints the survey has most immediately brought to mind. Carter et al. (2024)'s experiment also proved that different questioning ways lead to different results of political attitudes. And, there is often a mismatch between the level of specificity in the ideologies that we would like people to report and in the ideologies they actually possess.

Emerging Literature on Digital Nationalism and Feminism

In terms of case studies and ethnographies, they were frequently criticized as non-generalizable to the wider population due to their small, nonrandom, and nonrepresentative samples.

V. Our Study and Contribution

For our study, we employ computational methods, including supervised machine learning to conduct text analysis on Weibo corpus to examine users' ideological configuration of nationalism and feminism. We firstly use regression model to examine the bivariate correlation between nationalism and feminism attitudes. Then, in addition to nationalism as independent variable, we further add more covariates from users' information we collected to predict their feminism attitudes, with regression model.

Our research contributes to existing research mainly in two methodological ways. first, compared to traditional surveys, the data we used has the advantage of non-reactive, which can address selection bias. And, text analysis of people's daily opinions on specific social issues is a more valid measurement than context-free, self-reported ideological stances.

Second, compared to qualitative studies, the data we used has the advantage of big. The combination of manual coding and supervised machine learning enable us to draw generalizable empirical findings and conduct a big-data-driven research. In summary, we use a more solid computational method to answer a new question that received little scholarly attention.

VI. Methodology

How we collect the data

This study utilizes Weibo as the data source, focusing on the following two aspects: First, as one of the largest online discussion platforms in China, Weibo provides a substantial amount of data for our research. Second, compared with other platforms, Weibo offers more open access, which means that this study can leverage existing crawler code (available at https://github.com/dataabc/weibo-search.git) to collect the

required data. This study initially employs keywords to search for Weibo posts related to nationalism and feminism. The feminist keyword library developed in this study includes both fundamental feminist terms (e.g., patriarchy) and online slangs (e.g., Tianli 田力). After continuously iterating and refining, the keyword dictionaries are finalized as follows. The aim of this study is to capture a broader spectrum of Weibo posts, encompassing both formal discussions and informal debates, thereby maximizing the crawling scope and enhancing the representativeness of the data.

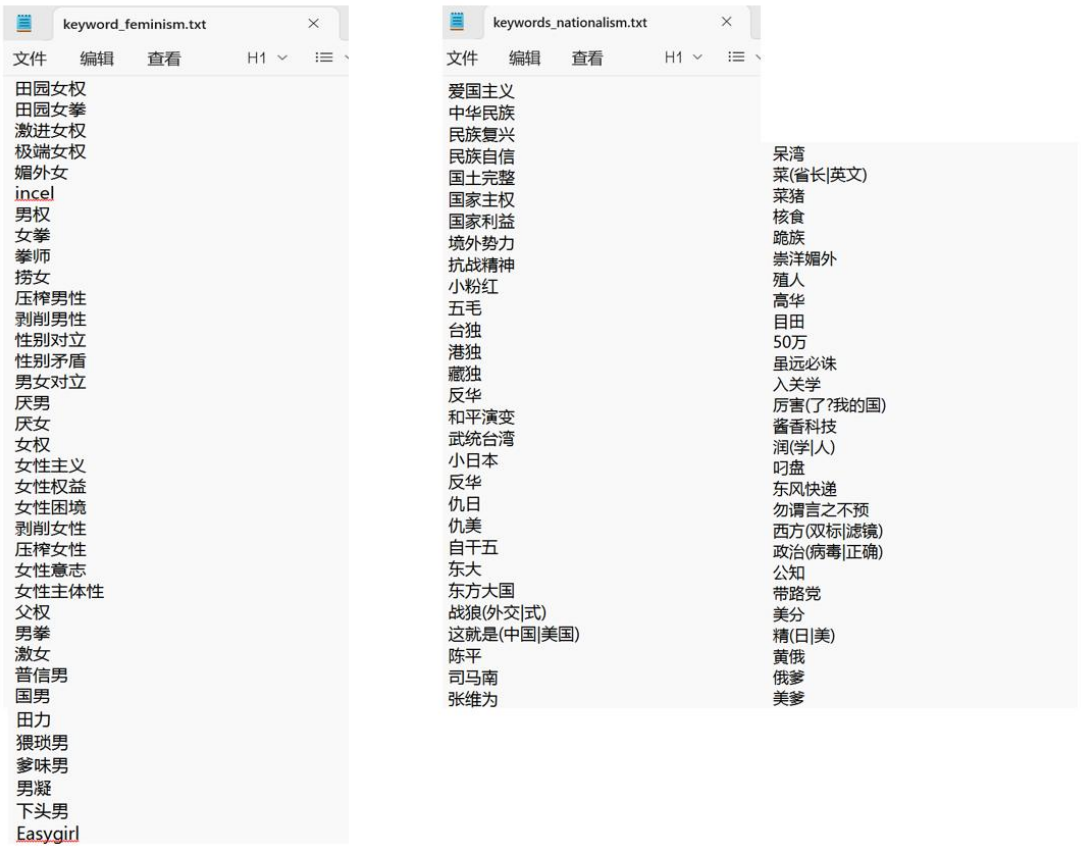


Figure 3. Dictionaries of Feminism and Nationalism

This study collected certain-period data from March 19 to April 19, 2025. This period was selected because two significant events related to nationalism and feminism occurred during this period: the Trade War and the Datong Engagement Case. This choice facilitates the identification of users who have expressed opinions on both nationalism and feminism, thereby enhancing the ability to find the relationship of their political stances on both sides and address the research questions effectively.

After acquiring the relevant tweets on nationalism and feminism, we initially

compared the user IDs from both datasets to identify a common list of IDs. Users on this list are those who have expressed opinions on both nationalism and feminism (a total of 2817 users), forming the basis of our research units. Subsequent analyses will focus on their stances on nationalism and feminism, as well as the relationship between these positions. Following the identification of the common list, we searched for their tweets under the topics of nationalism and feminism and filtered them accordingly. This resulted in two independent databases: one containing tweets related to nationalism (a total of 8,258) and the other containing tweets related to feminism (a total of 8,081). A portion of these databases was selected for manual coding, comprising 1,239 tweets on nationalism and 1,213 tweets on feminism.

These tweets were encoded based on their nationalist and feminist political positions. The encoding logic is as follows: 1 indicates explicit support for nationalism or feminism; -1 indicates explicit opposition to nationalism or feminism; and 0 signifies a neutral stance or factual statements. This manually encoded dataset served as the training set for a support vector machine (SVM), enabling the trained SVM model to predict and encode the remaining portions of the two databases that were not manually coded. The rationale for selecting the SVM as the supervised machine learning model lies in its suitability for text classification tasks. After training, the SVM demonstrated an 80% prediction accuracy rate for the political stance of tweets under the topic of feminism and a 77% prediction accuracy rate for tweets under the topic of nationalism.

Subsequently, we employed the trained support vector machine to predict the political stance of the remaining unencoded tweets related to nationalism (a total of 7,019) and feminism (a total of 6,868). After labeling the political stances of all nationalist and feminist tweets, we assessed the political orientations of the users who posted these tweets using two distinct methods. The first method involves treating each user as a unit and summing the encoded values of the political stances of their respective nationalist and feminist tweets. If the sum exceeds 0, the user is classified as generally pro-nationalist or pro-feminist. Conversely, if the sum is less than 0, the user is identified as anti-nationalist or anti-feminist, while a sum of 0 indicates a neutral stance. For instance, if a user posts five tweets about nationalism with encoded political stances

of 1, 1, 0, 1, and -1, and the sum is greater than 0, this user is determined to be pro-nationalist generally. The second method involves summing the encoded values of the political stances of the nationalist and feminist tweets separately to measure the extremity of the user's stance. For example, if a user posts five tweets about feminism with encoded political stances of -1, -1, 0, -1, and -1, resulting in a sum of -4, it suggests that the user consistently posted at least four anti-feminist tweets between March 19th and April 20th. Thus, their level of extremism against feminism can be recorded as -4. This allows us to further conclude that this user is more radically anti-feminist compared to those who posted four tweets supporting feminism and three anti-feminist tweets. From this, we derive two dimensions of a user's political stance related to nationalism and feminism: their overall orientation and the extremity of the political position.

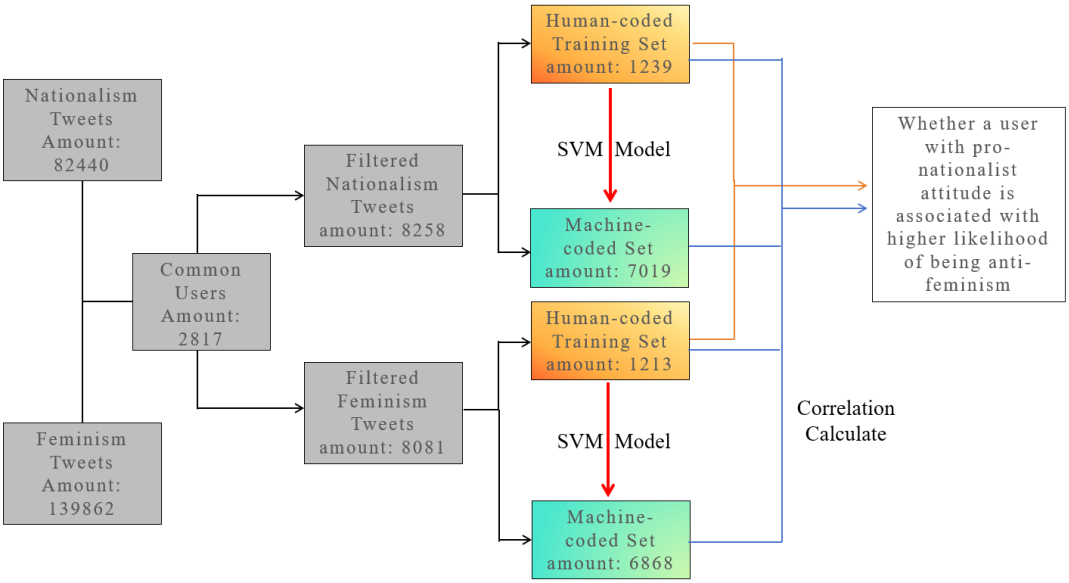
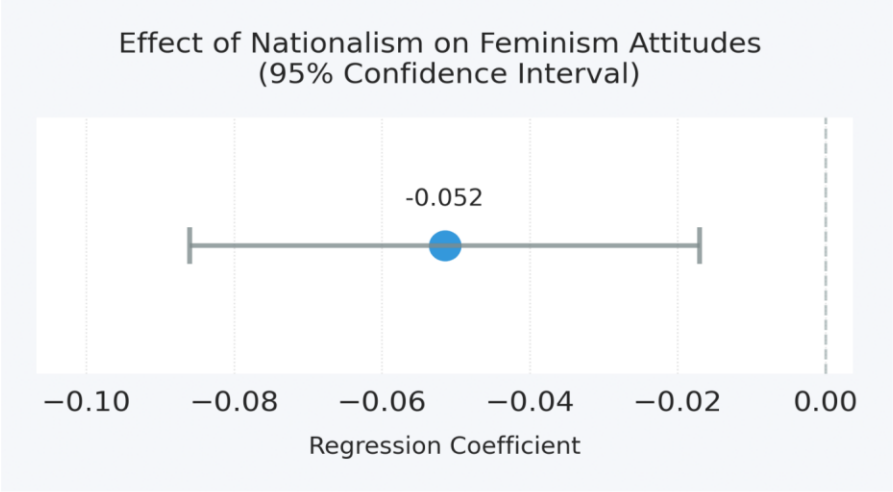


Figure 4. Data Processing

VII. Main Results

Afterward, by considering the same user as a unit of analysis, we initially computed the regression coefficients between their overall nationalist and feminist orientations. In this study, the overall political stance of users regarding nationalism and feminism was standardized. Subsequently, using a linear regression model, we calculated the regression coefficient of the feminist stance relative to the nationalist stance as -0.052. This indicates that a one standard deviation (SD) increase in the

nationalist stance is associated with a 0.052 SD decrease in the feminist stance. In other words, users who lean more toward supporting nationalism are more likely to oppose feminism. Furthermore, we estimated the regression coefficient between the extremity of nationalist and feminist positions. First, the extremity of both nationalist and feminist political stances were standardized. A linear regression model was then employed to calculate the regression coefficient of the extreme degree of feminist positions relative to the extreme degree of nationalist positions as -0.03. This suggests that a one SD increase in the extremity of the nationalist stance corresponds to a 0.03 SD increase in the extremity of the anti-feminist stance. Thus, it can be inferred that users who post more pro-nationalist tweets within a given month are also more likely to post more anti-feminist tweets. A deeper interpretation might be that individuals who support nationalism in a more radical manner are also more likely to oppose feminism in a similarly radical fashion. Figure 3 presents the correlation coefficients and 95% confidence intervals derived from two regression analyses. It is evident that the results are statistically significant.



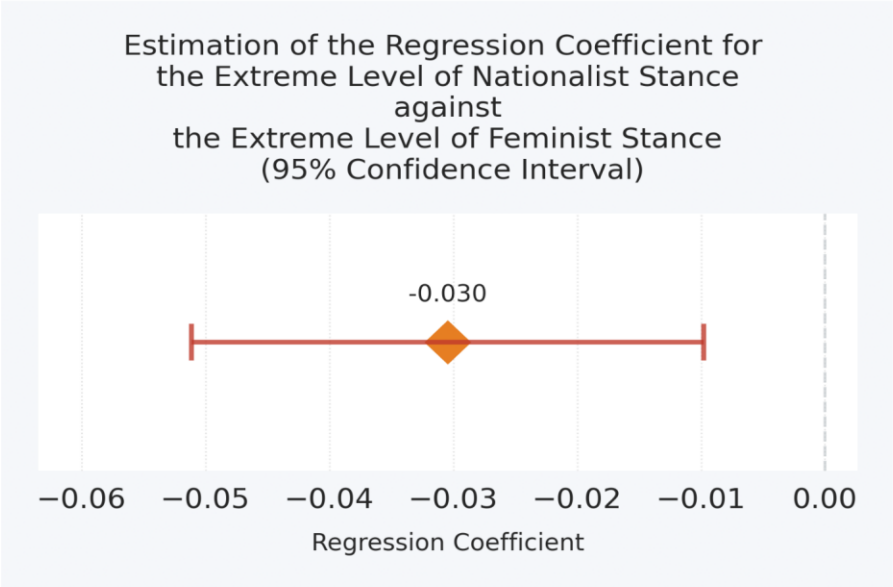


Figure 5. The Regression Results

Subsequently, this research delved deeper into the respective relationships between the extremity of nationalist and feminist political stances and the personal information characteristics of users. In this study, 815 common users were selected. A new code (https://github.com/dataabc/weibo - crawler.git) was employed to extract more personal information of these users. This information included the number of Weibo posts, the number of followers, the number of followings, the Weibo level, the membership level, gender, authentication type, and registration time. This newly - obtained data was then integrated with the previously acquired information, such as the number of likes, comments, reposts, the posting tool used, and the IP address, so as to

construct a comprehensive user profile.

A series of data preprocessing steps were carried out. Based on the IP address, two new variables were recoded: ip_region (Hong Kong and Macao: 7; East China: 6; Central China: 5; North China: 4; Southwest China: 3; Northeast China: 2; Northwest China: 1; Overseas: 99) and id_foreign (Overseas: 1; Domestic: 0). Regarding the authentication type, a new variable, authenticate_type, was generated through recoding: (-1: Unauthenticated; 0: Ordinary user; 1: Government official account; 2: Official account of a technology firm; 3: Official account of a newspaper; 4: Official account of a school; 5: Blogger in the entertainment domain; 6: Blogger in the knowledge domain, including military bloggers, history bloggers, etc.; 7: Official account of a new media company). The brand of the posting tool was used to recode and generate a new variable, foreign_phone (1: Using a foreign - branded mobile phone; 0: Using a domestic - branded mobile phone). Moreover, based on the time of Weibo posts, a new variable, job, was created to gauge the user's work status (1: No Weibo posts were made during working hours from 8 to 16, suggesting employment and a fulfilling work schedule; 0: Weibo posts were made during working hours, indicating unemployment or an unproductive work situation).

Subsequently, these variables were incorporated as covariates in the regression analysis, and a multi-variate regression model was established. This model was designed to separately explore the impact of the orientation and extremity of users' nationalist political stances on the orientation and extremity of their feminist political stances, taking into account the inclusion of these covariates.

The results, as presented in Tables 1 and 2, are consistent with those of the prior single-variable regression analysis. Specifically, Table 1 indicates that a one standard deviation (SD) increase in the likelihood of adopting a nationalist orientation is significantly associated with a 0.1 SD increase in the likelihood of adopting an anti-feminist orientation. Interestingly, being male is significantly associated with a 0.3 SD increase in the likelihood of adopting an anti-feminist orientation, suggesting that men are more prone to expressing anti-feminist views on Weibo. Additionally, being a blogger specializing in knowledge-related content is significantly associated with a 0.3

SD increase in the likelihood of adopting an anti-feminist orientation, indicating that such bloggers are also more likely to express anti-feminist stances on Weibo.

Variable	Coefficient	Significance
male	-0.296881005	***
Pro-nationalism orientation	-0.106901778	**
Knowledge domain blogger	-0.294497396	*

Note: all covariant variables of user has been controlled; only display significant results

Table 1. The Effect of Nationalism Orientation on Feminism Orientation

As shown in Table 2, a one SD increase in the extremity of holding a nationalist stance is significantly associated with a 0.04 SD increase in the extremity of holding an anti-feminist stance, which aligns with previous findings. Furthermore, being male is significantly associated with a 0.3 SD increase in the extremity of holding an anti-feminist stance, reinforcing the observation that men are more likely to adopt radical anti-feminist positions on Weibo. Notably, individuals who are employed or fully engaged in work tend to exhibit more extreme anti-feminist attitudes, potentially linked to traditional masculinity norms. This phenomenon may be explained by the increased pressure faced by men in the workplace, coupled with the perceived rise in women's status, leading to more pronounced anti-feminist behaviors.

Variable	Coefficient	Significance
male	-0.305834683	***
job	-0.179581723	*
Pro-nationalism extremity	-0.040555466	*

Note: all covariant variables of user has been controlled; only display significant results

Table 2. The Effect of Nationalism Extremity on Feminism Extremity

This study also conducted content analysis on these posts. By using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model, three meaningful topics of nationalist posts can be found. According to classic theory, they can be classified as exclusionary nationalism and inclusionary nationalism. In the data, exclusionary nationalists are in the mainstream (98.7%), which is consistent with previous studies suggesting exclusivity is the main characteristics of nationalism ideology.

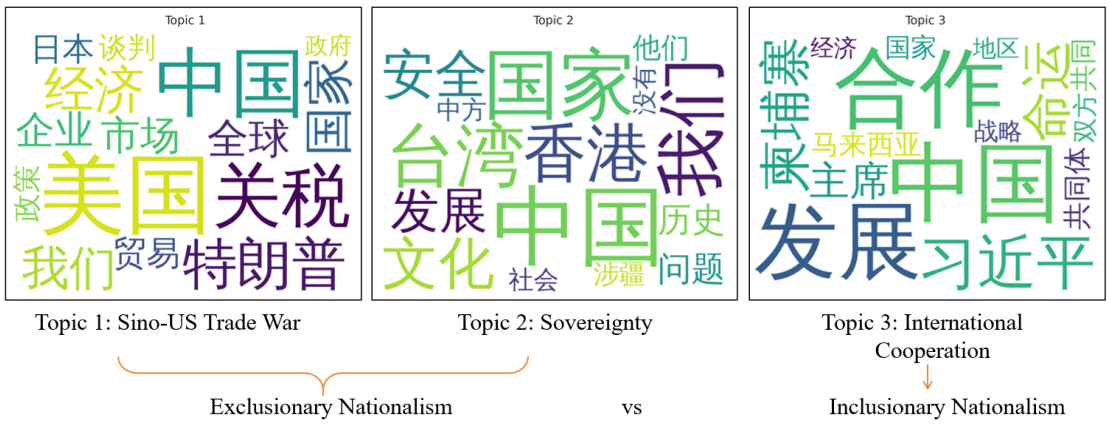


Figure 6. The LDA Results

Then, the correlations between these two distinct types of nationalism and feminist attitudes were examined.

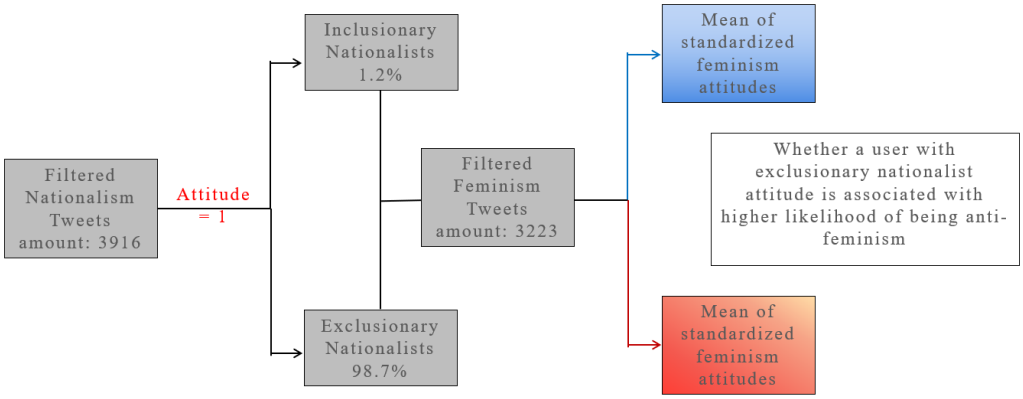
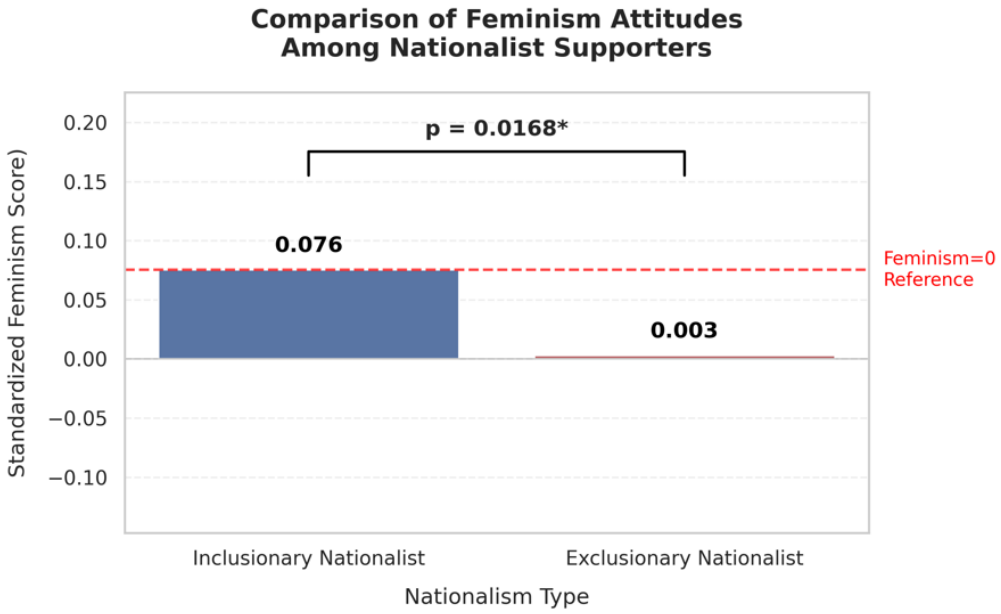


Figure 6. Data Processing

After standardized, neutral feminism value (0) is standardized to 0.075. Mean of the standardized feminist attitude of the inclusionary nationalists is 0.076, slightly pro-feminism. Mean of the standardized feminist attitude of the exclusionary nationalists is 0.003, significantly anti-feminism. Group difference is statistically significant. Thus, it can be found that exclusionary nationalists were more likely to be anti-feminism.



VIII. Summary and Limitations

To summarize, the response to the research question in this paper is as follows: Chinese Internet users who support nationalism are more likely to oppose feminism. Furthermore, the conclusion of this study comprises two key aspects: First, users who generally endorse nationalism are more inclined to oppose feminism. Second, users who strongly support nationalism are also more likely to strongly oppose feminism. This relationship remains statistically significant even after incorporating multiple user information variables. Meanwhile, the study found that exclusionary nationalists were more likely to be anti-feminism. Previous ethnographic studies have pointed out that men often weaponize nationalist discourse to stigmatize feminists (Liu, 2024). This study contributes a further big-data-driven inference: The exclusivity inherent in nationalism ideology might be the key reason that leads nationalists to oppose feminists. Additionally, this study elucidates the connection between users' gender, authentication type, employment status, and their feminist political stance.

This research has two primary limitations. First, the accuracy of machine prediction cannot reach 100%, which implies potential flaws in the validity of its application for coding political stances. Misclassification issues may arise, thereby

undermining both the internal and external validity of this study. Second, given the presence of online censorship, the proportion of users tweeting against nationalism is relatively small. This could lead to sample imbalance, thus threatening the representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, an alternative explanation—users' actual economic status—may warrant consideration. The study reveals that users with more fulfilling jobs tend to exhibit stronger anti-feminist attitudes. There might be a latent influence of economic level underlying this phenomenon. For instance, users who work long hours but receive low salaries may be more opposed to feminism. However, due to the incomplete nature of Weibo data, this study is unable to delve deeper into this issue. This aspect merits further exploration in future research.

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