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Platformised Justice and the Cultural Politics of Consent: Digital Vigilantism in Chinese Sex-Crime Disputes

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how digital media shape the cultural politics of sexual consent and harassment in contemporary China. It examines two high-profile cases, the 2023 Datong engagement-rape judgment and the 2023–2025 Wuhan University sexual harassment lawsuit, to show how cultural expectations surrounding intimacy and marriage, evidentiary disputes and platform logics reshape popular understandings of justice and the authority of courts. Drawing on a mixed-methods content analysis of commentary on Zhihu and Xiaohongshu, the study traces how cultural expectations around intimacy were reframed as entitlement to sex, how judicial caution was translated into accusations of zero-cost claims and how complex forensic disputes were compressed into viral binaries of innocence or guilt. Remarkably, both Zhihu and Xiaohongshu, platforms often characterised as having different gendered user cultures, displayed strikingly similar discursive patterns, suggesting misogynistic narratives circulated across platform boundaries despite differences in user culture. The analysis highlights how media infrastructures displace punitive authority from legal institutions to digital publics, where practices of doxxing, blacklisting and reputational shaming operate as digital vigilantism. Overall, the article situates Chinese sex-crime debates within wider discussions of crime, media and culture, demonstrating how platformised justice reinforces misogynistic narratives while also enabling feminist legal consciousness.

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Feminist criminology; institutional deviance; digital vigilantism; platformised justice; sexual consent and harassment; Chinese digital publics

Introduction

Recently, the adjudication of sexual consent and harassment in China has become a site of intense contestation, not only within courtrooms but also across digital publics where law, morality and gendered power intersect (Chen 2023; Qin et al. 2024; Xiong and Risti-vojević 2021; Zhou, Wang, and Zimmer 2022). This dynamic reflects broader global patterns in which allegations of sexual violence travel beyond formal procedures into networked arenas of judgement (Salter 2012). Although the past century witnessed major shifts in women's legal status—from the dismantling of Confucian patriarchal

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norms to statutory protections in marriage and labour law, the boundaries of sexual autonomy remain unsettled (He 2018; Hershatter 2007). The introduction of Article 1010 of the 2021 Civil Code, alongside incremental reforms to rape law under the Criminal Law, signals an evolving legal framework attentive to personality rights and bodily integrity (Xiong, Xia, and Yu 2025). Yet doctrinal developments are mediated by enduring cultural scripts such as betrothal gifts and engagement (Hershatter 2007), and by platform logics that amplify and polarise legal narratives (Qin et al. 2024; Yalcinoz-Ucan and Eslen-Ziya 2024). Consequently, questions of consent, evidentiary credibility and judicial legitimacy increasingly become objects of collective cultural negotiation.

This volatility reflects deeper tensions between law, culture and media. At the doctrinal level, Chinese law continues to rely on the ambiguous notion of against the woman's will, resisting the global shift toward affirmative consent standards (Yin 2023). As Xiong, Xia, and Yu (2025) note, Article 1010 substitutes the 'against-the-will' test for express refusal and allows courts to infer harassment from a victim's lack of approval or acceptance (p. 223). Reliance on this ambiguous standard sustains doctrinal uncertainty and often places a greater burden on women to demonstrate explicit rejection for their experiences to be recognised as harassment (Xiong, Xia, and Yu 2025).

At the cultural level, patriarchal practices continue to conflate economic exchange with sexual entitlement, rendering engagement and bride price as proxies for conjugal obligation. [Bride price (彩礼) denotes a customary transfer of wealth from the groom's to the bride's family preceding marriage. Although locally variable in scale and symbolism, it occupies an ambiguous legal position in China—socially recognised yet lacking enforceable contractual standing under civil law.] Historical cases such as the Huang-Lu elopement illustrate how Confucian authority often overrode women's pursuit of autonomy (He 2018), while long-term patriarchal bargains reveal the persistence of gendered practices despite legal reform (Hershatter 2007). In this context, betrothal gifts function as cultural scripts that naturalise men's entitlement to women's labour and sexuality, framing women's sexual rights as contingent on familial order rather than individual autonomy. Consequently, female complainants may be recast in online discourse as disruptors of social order.

Existing scholarship largely follows three separate tracks: doctrinal analyses of rape and harassment law (Xiong, Xia, and Yu 2025; Yin 2023), sociological studies of betrothal gifts and marriage exchange (Hershatter 2007; Li 2016), and media research on digital feminist activism (Liao and Luqiu 2022; Shao and He 2024). Few studies integrate these perspectives to explain how legal ambiguity, patriarchal norms and platform affordances jointly shape the authority of judicial decisions. Addressing this gap, this article examines two emblematic cases, the 2023 Datong engagement-rape trial and the 2023–2025 Wuhan University sexual-harassment lawsuit. Through a comparative case study using mixed-methods content analysis and discourse-sensitive interpretation of online commentary, it analyses how customary marriage scripts, evidentiary disputes and digital affordances generate competing imaginaries of injustice: betrothal gifts as sexual entitlement, rape as arbitrary criminalisation and harassment claims as 'zero-cost accusations'. Theoretically, the study extends feminist criminology by revisiting the 'evil woman' trope (恶女, è nǚ) and the thesis of double deviance, whereby women are punished both for legal infractions and for violating gender norms (Heidensohn 1968; Silvestri and Crowther-Dowey 2016). Integrating feminist criminology with legal consciousness (Gallagher 2006;

Michelson 2019) and digital vigilantism (Trottier 2017; Wang and Whyke 2025), the article shows how Chinese digital publics reinterpret judicial decisions in sex-crime disputes and redistribute punitive authority from courts to crowds.

Literature Review

Classical patriarchal norms rooted in Confucian hierarchy organised women's subordination through doctrines such as the three obediences and gendered virtue ethics, embedding female dependency within family and kinship (Ruskola 2002; Zeng 2021). Twentieth-century reform projects, from the 1950 Marriage Law to the socialist state's mobilisation of women into public life, formally rejected feudal patriarchy and articulated gender equality as a developmental imperative (Liu 2021). Yet empirical studies document persistent structural inequalities in employment, wages and domestic labour (Li 2016), alongside the endurance of son preference and intimate violence across the reform era (Cao 2022; Li 2023). Courts have also been shown to prioritise administrative efficiency and 'stability maintenance' over personal autonomy in family disputes, including divorce and domestic violence, thereby weakening rights-based protection (He 2021; Michelson 2019).

Against this backdrop, Chinese law on sexual offences remains fragmented and contested. Criminal adjudication of rape continues to rely on the notion of 'against the woman's will' under Criminal Law Article 236 rather than adopting an affirmative-consent standard (Yin 2023). In practice, proof is assembled through multiple forms of corroboration, including victim testimony, injuries, biological traces, recordings and the timeliness of reporting, while courts vary in the evidentiary weight assigned to apology letters, CCTV movements, mixed DNA or STR typing and police non-prosecution records (Chen and Lu 2022; Xiong, Xia, and Yu 2025). Many complainants struggle to meet these high evidentiary thresholds in intimate and private contexts. At the same time, evidentiary gaps are often interpreted by defendants and wider publics as signs of false or unproven accusations, producing a double bind in which victims feel their harm is unrecognised while accused men claim unjust targeting. In highly visible disputes, formal legal procedures are therefore frequently recoded within online publics as inadequate or partial.

Feminist Activism, #MeToo and Platform Containment

Debates over gender discrimination and sexual violence have been highly visible for years; the #MeToo stories that began circulating on Weibo in 2018 were initially hailed as a feminist breakthrough, even as they were soon constrained by platform governance and state signalling (Yin and Xie 2024). Between 2011 and 2018, the share of political and social topics on Weibo's annual trending lists reportedly fell from 75% to 23%, while entertainment topics rose from 20% to 48% (Jia and Han 2020). The regulation of feminist and gender-political discussions on Weibo has moved in tandem with tighter control of feminist activism and with concerns that gender debates might fuel 'antagonism', which is deemed destabilising (Liao 2020; Yin 2022). Tan (2017) captures this tactical struggle as 'digital masquerading', describing how Chinese feminists use media practices to evade censorship while reshaping public debate. Research on Chinese digital feminism shows that feminist organisations often operate in online environments marked by intense

misogynistic hostility. Based on ethnographic research on the feminist collective Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV), Han (2018) documents how activists on Chinese social media routinely encounter abusive commentary, including direct insults against women and accusations that feminism represents social disorder. Such hostility reflects what describe as 'toxic masculinity', a gendered identity that perceives feminist claims as threats to male status and authority.

Because Twitter (X) and other foreign platforms are blocked, Chinese feminists turned to Weibo, using strategies such as #米兔 (pronounced mǐ tù), a homophonic adaptation of the English hashtag #MeToo, along with playful language, to evade filters. Even so, many accounts were removed, shadow-banned or taken down after mass reports. Scholars describe the result as 'spectral' or 'ghostly' feminist subjectivities, in which activists, despite repeated suspensions or 'account bombing', remain precariously visible across shifting online and offline spaces (Liao and Luqiu 2022; Shao and He 2024). Han's (2018) analysis shows that feminist groups often respond to online attacks indirectly, ignoring abusive comments while relying on supportive followers to counter hostile narratives or reframe feminist arguments through explanatory posts, a strategy that increases visibility but also heightens exposure to harassment and platform intervention. This platformed containment did not extinguish the underlying claims, but displaced them into more volatile arenas, where legality, morality and identity politics collide.

Digital Vigilantism and the Weaponisation of Visibility

The migration of unresolved disputes from courtroom to platform aligns with the global rise of digital vigilantism (DV), defined as the crowd-sourced denunciation and punishment of alleged wrongdoers through the weaponisation of visibility (Schneider and Trottier 2012; Trottier 2020). For instance, in 2018 a CCTV intern accused Zhu Jun, a prominent host, of sexual harassment. Although the court dismissed the claim for insufficient evidence, the case triggered intense online condemnation that damaged Zhu's reputation and career. In 2023, multiple women similarly accused a well-known screenwriter of sexual harassment, generating millions of interactions despite the absence of judicial adjudication (Wang and Whyke 2025). DV typically combines user-driven surveillance, doxxing, labelling and pile-ons to shame targets, pressure employers or institutions and extract apologies or sanctions (Trottier 2017; Wang and Whyke 2025). While overlapping with cyberbullying, DV frames itself as justice-seeking and often mobilises moralised narratives that intersect with nationalism, sexism or xenophobia (Marwick 2018; Reiner 2001). In China, DV is closely linked to the practice of human flesh search and a collectivist tradition of 'crowdsourced justice', whereby users aggregate personal data to enforce communal norms (Chang and Leung 2015; Cheong and Gong 2010). Distinct socio-cultural dynamics shape China's DV practices. Unlike Western contexts where sting-style interventions such as 'scam baiting' are more prominent (Zingerle), Chinese DV more often mobilises large-scale collective participation to sanction alleged wrongdoing (Chang and Poon 2017; Chia 2020). This 'crowdsourced justice' draws on collectivist traditions, Confucian moral codes and longstanding cultures of shame and communal accountability (Chia 2019; Huang 2023). China's network governance regime further intensifies these dynamics through real-name registration and the display of users' IP locations,

rendering online identities more traceable and geographically legible. Such affordances blur the boundary between virtual and offline worlds, allowing digital punishment to extend beyond symbolic condemnation to the targeting of identifiable individuals. Together, these dynamics produce a culturally specific form of mediated regulation that fuses community-based governance traditions with contemporary platform infrastructures.

Nonetheless, Trottier (2017) and Galleguillos (2022) argue that platform governance, algorithmic amplification, upvote economies and selective censorship intensify polarisation, producing narratives of ‘male victimisation’ and ‘zero-cost accusation’. Qin et al. (2024) likewise show that feminist interventions in Chinese digital publics often encounter backlash. As they note, ‘Chinese digital feminist expressions encountered backlashes from normative criminal and governmental framing of the incident.’ Platform algorithms that privilege popular or sensationalist content amplify polarised narratives while marginalising feminist perspectives. These dynamics extend beyond online debate to shape broader perceptions of justice and legality. As digital publics interpret and recode judicial decisions, some men articulate a collective sense of insecurity, framing themselves as vulnerable to arbitrary criminalisation and institutional betrayal (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Female complainants, in turn, are rapidly recast from symbols of courage into ‘evil women’ or systemic threats that allegedly justify vigilantism. Sexual consent disputes therefore become struggles not only over individual liability but also over institutional trust (Gallagher 2006), the resilience of patriarchal bargains and the authority to define truth within a digitised public sphere.

Feminist Contestations and Evidentiary Politics in Digital Publics

Feminist actors have harnessed networked publicity to expose misogyny and institutional indifference, yet the same infrastructures enable anti-feminist mobilisation and coordinated harassment (Jane 2016). The Chinese #MeToo cycle illustrates both trajectories: creative evasion of filters and forms of ‘hybrid activism’ on the one hand, and the platformisation of misogyny through doxxing, moral panics over ‘false accusations’ and calls for extra-legal punishment on the other. Research on platform governance shows how state–market entanglements – such as blue-V government accounts and patriotic Key Opinion Leaders – shape agendas that marginalise feminist frames as ‘extremist’ or ‘inciting gender antagonism’, thereby legitimising punitive crowd practices while sexist speech remains comparatively under-moderated (Han and Liu 2024). Within this ecology, not only narratives of harm and culpability circulate; evidentiary questions themselves are drawn into public contestation and simplified. Debates over *dubio pro reo* (benefit of the doubt), the probative value of STR/DNA evidence, the presence of recordings and the interpretation of complainant or defendant statements become focal points of online judgement. As a result, when women publicly allege sexual harassment or assault, discussion often centres disproportionately on evidentiary minutiae, subjecting complainants to heightened scepticism rather than solidarity. These technical issues are frequently remediatised into binary memes such as ‘铁案’ (unassailable injustice) versus ‘铁证’ (irrefutable guilt), intensifying legal cynicism and prompting crowd enforcement that often exposes the perceived weaker party to severe online retribution. In this sense, DV functions as a translation mechanism that converts complex forensic and

procedural law into emotionally legible verdicts, reallocating the authority to judge from courts to digital publics.

Conceptual Framework

Feminist criminology identifies a pattern in which women are sanctioned not only for alleged wrongdoing but also for breaching norms of ideal femininity: chastity, deference and softness. Originally introduced by Heidensohn (1968) and later developed by Smart (2013), the 'evil-woman' or 'double-deviance' effect describes how departures from gender propriety attract moral censure and intensify legal or social penalties. Subsequent works show that women are judged most harshly when their conduct is constructed as sexually assertive or aggressive (Steffensmeier, Ulmer, and Kramer 1998).

In the Chinese context, Confucian scripts of *sancong* have historically defined legitimate womanhood through obedience and restraint. With state feminism and digital mobilisation, a counter-figure emerged: the 'evil woman', redefined positively as a woman who resists coercion and speaks out about harm. Platformised publics, however, have repathologised this figure; the feminist speech is reframed as aggression and duplicity (Banet-Weiser 2018). In high-salience disputes over consent and harassment, this reframing converts claimants into punishable evil women. In Datong's case, the complainant's refusal of sex within an engagement is cast as betrayal of a bride-price 'contract', marking her as extractive and deceitful; in Wuhan, a failed civil suit is recoded as proof of malicious fabrication and institutional threat, justifying doxxing, blacklisting and calls for degree revocation. Thus, women who initially appear as laudable, rights-bearing 'evil women', defying patriarchal scripts by publicly narrating harm, are reconstituted under contemporary gender politics and platform logics as pejorative 'evil women' who are portrayed as deserving exemplary punishment.

Methodology

Data Collection

This study adopts a comparative case study design and employs mixed-methods content analysis of social media commentary. Through inductive qualitative coding, the analysis identifies recurring narrative themes in online discussions, while descriptive quantification examines their distribution across platforms. The study investigates how sexual issues are narrated and contested in Chinese digital publics through two landmark events: the Datong engagement-rape trial and the Wuhan University sexual-harassment lawsuit. These cases were selected because they foreground comparable socio-legal tensions while unfolding in different institutional and procedural settings. Emerging between 2023 and 2025 as highly salient controversies, both involve disputes over women's sexual rights, evidentiary standards and the legitimacy of judicial authority. In each case, questions of proof and adjudication became focal points of intense online debate, generating moral judgements and demands for accountability. At the same time, the cases differ in context and outcome. One concerns an intimate relationship dispute adjudicated through the criminal process, resulting in a rape conviction upheld on appeal. The other involves a campus incident pursued through civil litigation and university disciplinary governance,

culminating in dismissal for insufficient evidence. Despite these differences, online commentary across both cases displayed strikingly similar discursive patterns, including narratives of ‘zero-cost accusation,’ scepticism toward evidentiary procedures, distrust of courts and the judicial system, stigmatisation of women as a group and calls for extra-legal or crowd-based sanctions. Placing the two cases in dialogue therefore allows us to examine how platform logics and evidentiary contestation shape moralised interpretations of justice and why discursive convergence emerges across distinct socio-legal contexts.

Data were drawn from Zhihu and Xiaohongshu during the periods immediately following the first- and second-instance judgments of the Datong case (May 2023–April 2025) and throughout the proceedings of the Wuhan University case (2023–2025). Using purposive sampling, we retrieved approximately 2000 posts and comments, selecting the most-visible (top-ranked or most-upvoted) items to capture dominant narratives, while also incorporating a smaller subset of lower-engagement posts to include marginal or dissenting voices. To ensure breadth and reduce confirmation bias, searches used multiple keywords and hashtags associated with each case (e.g. ‘Datong engagement case,’ ‘bride price,’ ‘Wuhan University harassment’), and we included posts containing substantive commentary rather than emojis or single-word replies. Following Yang and Peng’s (2022) rationale that engagement metrics indicate public salience and influence, this strategy captured the peak discursive moments when public attention was highest. The corpus was supplemented with concurrent state and commercial media reports (e.g. Xinhua News, 2023, 2025) to contextualise online discussions within broader information flows.

Data Analysis

All retrieved materials were imported into NVivo 12 for qualitative coding. The analysis followed an inductive, multi-stage process inspired by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis and Corbin and Strauss’s (1990) grounded theory procedures. First, open coding identified recurring ideas and narrative patterns related to evidentiary sufficiency, moral deviance, and justice perceptions. Second, axial coding refined and grouped these codes according to conditions, context, strategies, and consequences, enabling the emergence of higher-order subthemes. Selective coding subsequently integrated these clusters into three overarching analytic categories that reflect patterns diverging from prior scholarship emphasising strong platform-based divergence. Following Fairclough’s (2003) understanding of discourse as social practice, the analysis attends not only to the thematic content of comments but also to how commenters position themselves within the debate and with what effects. In interpreting the coded material, particular attention was paid to the discursive roles through which participants framed their interventions, such as presenting themselves as defenders of procedural justice, representatives of male vulnerability, or critics of feminism. Examining these positions helps illuminate how online commentary reframes women’s allegations, questions judicial authority, and legitimises forms of crowd-based sanctioning in digital publics. In contrast to existing research that typically finds Zhihu and Xiaohongshu producing markedly different moral publics, the present dataset shows that across both platforms negative, accusatory, and gender-hostile narratives overwhelmingly dominated discussion of the Datong and

Wuhan cases. The first category captures the widespread proliferation of ‘zero-cost accusation’ and male-precarity narratives, which framed women’s allegations as inherently risky, manipulative, or systemically privileged. The second centres on a pervasive evidentiary skepticism that frequently bled into broader distrust of judicial institutions, appearing with notable intensity on both platforms. The third category highlights the cross-platform circulation of gendered hostility and digital vigilantism, expressed through punitive-deficit narratives and the stigmatisation of complainants and of women as a group. Although Xiaohongshu users were comparatively more likely to articulate support for the complainant or to emphasise the protection of women’s sexual rights, these countervailing voices did not eclipse the broader dominance of negative sentiment (see [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#)).

As the study addresses sexual misconduct allegations, online misogyny, and legal controversy, particular attention was paid to researcher positionality and reflexivity. The three authors come from different disciplinary backgrounds, including law, cultural studies, and media and communication research, which informed the project by integrating socio-legal analysis with perspectives on gender discourse and platform communication. All authors are relatively young scholars familiar with contemporary Chinese digital culture, providing contextual understanding of the language, norms, and dynamics shaping online discussions of gender and law. Differences in gender and disciplinary training occasionally produced divergent readings of emotionally charged or misogynistic comments. These differences were addressed through regular team discussions in which coding decisions were revisited and analytic categories refined. When disagreements persisted, interpretations were compared against the broader corpus of comments and resolved through collective deliberation among the research team. Analytic memos were also maintained during coding to document emerging interpretations and potential biases. Together, these practices supported a reflexive and collaborative interpretation of the data.

Case Analysis

The Datong Engagement Rape Case

On 1 May 2023, in Datong, Shanxi Province, a young couple became engaged through a marriage agency. The groom’s family delivered a betrothal gift of 100,000 yuan, along with a ring, and further promised to add the bride’s name to the property deed after marriage. The following day, the couple visited the groom’s marital home. Despite the woman’s prior explicit refusal of premarital sexual relations, the man forced intercourse

Table 1. The datong engagement rape case.

Themes	Zhihu (n = 500)	Xiaohongshu (n = 500)	Total (n = 1000)
Transforming financial and marital exchanges into claims of sexual entitlement	69 (13.8%)	25 (5%)	94 (9.4%)
A profound sense of male anxiety	121 (24.2%)	66 (13.2%)	187 (18.7%)
Questioning evidentiary standards and procedures	95 (19%)	159 (31.8%)	254 (25.4%)
Questioning the legitimacy of the judicial system	69 (13.8%)	77 (15.4%)	146 (14.6%)
Stigmatisation of the victim and the broader female group	56 (11.2%)	39 (7.8%)	95 (9.5%)
Support for women’s sexual rights claims	90 (18%)	144 (28.8%)	234 (23.4%)

Table 2. The Wuhan University sexual harassment lawsuit.

Themes	Zhihu (n = 500)	Xiaohongshu (n = 500)	Total (n = 1000)
The ‘zero-cost accusation’ imaginary	188 (37.6%)	206 (41.2%)	394 (39.4%)
Punitive deficit narratives (comprehensive digital vigilantism against the complainant)	178 (35.6%)	77 (15.4%)	255 (25.5%)
Invoking similar cases to imply judicial indulgence toward false female allegations	27 (5.4%)	16 (3.2%)	43 (4.3%)
Stigmatisation of feminist ideas and discourse	33 (6.6%)	13 (2.6%)	46 (4.6%)
Stigmatisation of the victim and the broader female group	63 (12.6%)	21 (4.2%)	84 (8.4%)
Support for the female complainant	11 (2.2%)	167 (33.4%)	178 (17.8%)

upon her. During the assault, she displayed visible resistance, including pulling curtains, struggling and attempting to flee downstairs to call for help, but was forcibly dragged back indoors. Police investigation confirmed physical injuries on the woman’s arms and wrists, identified mixed DNA, including the man’s semen on the bedsheet, and retrieved surveillance footage from the building elevator showing physical altercations. In December 2023, the Yanggao County People’s Court convicted the man of rape under Article 236 of the *Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China* and sentenced him to 3 years’ imprisonment. He appealed (Xinhua 2023), but in April 2025, the Datong Intermediate People’s Court upheld both the criminal conviction and a parallel civil judgment rejecting his claim for restitution of the betrothal gift (Xinhua 2025).

Under Article 236, rape is defined as ‘forcibly having sexual relations with a woman by means of violence, coercion, or other methods’, with the central element being conduct ‘against the woman’s will’. Unlike jurisdictions that have explicitly codified an affirmative consent standard, Chinese law still exhibits ambiguity in defining consent. In judicial practice, the hidden and intimate nature of sexual violence, combined with the stigma survivors face, contributes to both low reporting and conviction rates. Convictions generally require a combination of evidentiary sources: the victim’s testimony (often scrutinised for credibility); physical evidence, such as DNA traces or torn clothing; witness statements or corroborative recordings; signs of physical resistance or injury; and the timeliness and consistency of reporting. Courts emphasise the need for *mutually corroborative evidence*, as single sources rarely suffice for conviction.

The case attracted widespread public debate not only because of the criminal charge itself but also because of its entanglement with traditional marriage customs, particularly the betrothal gift and the symbolic significance of engagement rituals (including jewellery, such as gold rings, necklaces and bracelets). In many communities, engagement is construed as a quasi-contractual stage towards marriage, carrying implicit expectations of conjugal intimacy. A betrothal gift, in this cultural logic, is sometimes misperceived as a transactional entitlement to sexual access. In the Datong case, the defendant and his family invoked the payment of the betrothal gift and the engagement status as a justification for sexual relations. More significantly, online discourse revealed pervasive rhetoric, such as ‘having accepted the betrothal gift, she should fulfil her duty’ or ‘engagement equals consent’. Such views expose persistent patriarchal attitudes that conflate women’s bodies with customary transactions, transforming financial and marital exchanges into claims of sexual entitlement. In its appellate ruling and subsequent press briefing, however, the court explicitly clarified that engagement does not amount to sexual consent and that the betrothal gift cannot be equated with ‘sexual rights’.

The majority of high-voted comments revealed a profound sense of male anxiety, expressed through themes of legal mistrust, existential insecurity and the reinterpretation of marriage customs as sexual entitlement. Commenters frequently positioned themselves as vulnerable legal subjects confronting a system perceived to favour women. One widely endorsed comment with nearly 3,000 upvotes declared that ‘this case forces men to reconsider their survival status in this country’, framing the judgment not as an individual adjudication but as evidence of systemic hostility towards men. Similarly, another comment with over 2,800 upvotes redefined the notion of a ‘铁案’ (unassailable injustice), arguing that in practice it meant: ‘If I say you are guilty, you are guilty; law is only a façade’.

Such statements did not merely express dissatisfaction with the verdict but reframed the court itself as unreliable, thereby legitimising the intervention of the online public as an alternative moral authority. This distrust was further reinforced through repeated challenges to the evidentiary process. For instance, some questioned whether the forensic record substantiated rape, arguing that ‘there was no substantive evidence; no STR typing was detected from the woman’s genital swabs, only semen stains found on the man’s own bedsheets. Which man’s bed does not have semen stains? The principle of *in dubio pro reo* simply does not exist in rape cases’. Within this narrative, evidentiary ambiguity was interpreted not as a feature of complex criminal adjudication but as proof that rape law had been weaponised against men, reinforcing a broader discourse of legal cynicism.

The theme of legal cynicism was reinforced by claims that the case would ‘destroy the credibility of the entire judicial system’ (3,070 upvotes) and by expressions of personal fear, such as one user announcing he would ‘leave the city because even such trivial matters can result in imprisonment’ (2,979 upvotes). Commenters adopted the stance of civic watchdogs, presenting themselves as defenders of legal rationality against what they perceived as arbitrary judicial power. Others employed hyperbolic metaphors, comparing the case’s impact to the notorious ‘Peng Yu incident’¹ yet insisting that the Datong case was ‘far worse’ because it attacked the last line of defence – criminal law itself (2,500 upvotes). Collectively, these narratives constructed a moral crisis in which men were portrayed as vulnerable legal subjects exposed to arbitrary punishment. Within such a narrative environment, denunciation of the complainant and calls for public condemnation appeared not as harassment but as legitimate forms of civic action. Commenters invoked culturally familiar marriage scripts to legitimise claims of male sexual entitlement, thereby normalising patriarchal interpretations of consent. High-voted comments explicitly linked the payment of 100,000 RMB to the legitimacy of sexual access: ‘She took your 100,000 yuan and sent you to prison; this was the woman you wanted to marry’ (3,437 upvotes). Another commenter claimed that the case signalled ‘仙人跳’ (honey trap) had now been legalised (1,866 upvotes), casting the complainant not as a victim but as a predatory manipulator exploiting legal ambiguity for financial gain. These interpretations conflate economic exchange with sexual rights, revealing the resilience of patriarchal marriage scripts in shaping public understandings of consent.

Nonetheless, the discourse was not monolithic. Although relatively few in number, some comments articulated an alternative discursive position grounded in women’s sexual autonomy and rights-based interpretations of consent. The single most upvoted

comment in the sample (4,314 upvotes) directly rejected the ‘male victimisation’ narrative, stating, ‘The woman clearly said no, the surveillance showed her being dragged, and the man admitted he forced her; why are so many people adopting the rapist’s perspective?’ This intervention highlights that a significant portion of the online public embraced a rights-based framework, insisting that violation of will alone is sufficient to constitute rape. Other comments with over 1,500 upvotes reinforced this view, emphasising human rights and the irreducibility of women’s sexual autonomy. One such comment asked rhetorically, ‘Do you think the world exists for you, and women have no will of their own? Respecting human rights is not optional’. There was also a critical strand that shifted blame towards the male defendant, accusing him of ‘fraudulent courtship’ and misleading the complainant about housing arrangements (2,519 upvotes).

What unites both clusters is a profound struggle over the interpretation of evidence. Supporters of the defendant highlighted forensic gaps, such as ‘no STR DNA detected in vaginal swabs’, to question judicial integrity (2,500 upvotes). Critics, in contrast, underscored other pieces of evidence: surveillance footage of dragging, recorded phone calls admitting coercion and physical bruises. This discursive battle reflects the difficulty of translating the multi-layered evidentiary standards of criminal law into a digital environment prone to simplification and emotional amplification. In online spaces, the complexities of evidence collapse into binary frames: either ‘铁案’ (unassailable injustice) or ‘强奸铁证’ (irrefutable proof of guilt). Such binary framing facilitates digital vigilantism because it transforms legal uncertainty into moral certainty, making collective punishment appear both necessary and justified. The circulation of such polarised interpretations demonstrates how legal ambiguity is appropriated by competing publics. On one side, ambiguity is read as evidence of male vulnerability and systemic corruption; on the other side, it is mobilised to underscore the necessity of respecting consent regardless of cultural expectations. The result is a digitally mediated delegitimisation of judicial authority, as interpretive authority over ‘what counts as rape’ migrates from the courtroom to the crowd-sourced judgements of the online public. In this sense, online participants do not merely comment on legal outcomes but actively construct competing discursive regimes of justice within the digital public sphere.

Notably, the conviction was affirmed on appeal, and the judgment explicitly separated engagement and bride-price customs from sexual consent. Yet, in platform commentary, the existence of a formal decision did not stabilise legitimacy. Instead, misogynistic publics recoded the court’s evidentiary reasoning as gendered betrayal: selective focus on perceived forensic ‘gaps’ (e.g. the probative status of STR results) was mobilised to claim that the benefit-of-the-doubt principle had been suspended ‘in rape cases,’ while the upheld conviction was narrativised as proof that courts were either arbitrary or captured by feminist politics. In this reframing, legality became less important than a platform-mediated moral economy of male precarity, enabling crowd punishment to persist despite a definitive judicial outcome. In this case, unlike the #MeToo period, when large numbers of women who disclosed their experiences were valorised as courageous survivors, the complainant was cast as a doubly deviant ‘evil woman’: She violated patriarchal expectations of feminine compliance and simultaneously destabilised the normative economy of marriage (Fincher 2018; Heidensohn 1968). Within this ecology, male users translated their insecurity and sense of offence into anger directed at the complainant, enacting forms of DV that punished her through coordinated denunciation, doxxing

and reputational attacks. In this way, the stigmatisation of the ‘evil woman’ was not only symbolic but also materially enforced through networked sanctions, amplifying gender antagonism and deepening cynicism towards the judicial system.

The Wuhan University Sexual Harassment Lawsuit

In July 2023, a graduate student at Wuhan University, Yang Jingyuan, alleged that she had experienced sexual harassment in the campus library. She reported that a male student, Xiao, sitting beside her, engaged in ‘through-the-clothing genital friction’ under the desk. Yang covertly recorded several videos, compelled Xiao on the spot to write an apology note and subsequently reported the incident to the university. In October 2023, she published an open account on WeChat titled ‘Encountering Sexual Harassment in Wuhan University Library’, which quickly attracted wide public attention. The university responded by issuing Xiao a disciplinary demerit, a decision widely interpreted in the early stages of online discussion as tacit institutional recognition of sexual harassment. Yang was initially celebrated as a symbol of the ‘new generation of women who dare to resist’.

Nevertheless, as the incident circulated more widely, Xiao’s personal information was quickly *doxxed*: photographs, family details and other identifying data were disseminated online, subjecting him and his family to severe cyberbullying. According to his mother’s later statements, Xiao suffered from a chronic skin condition, and his actions on the day in question were a form of scratching rather than harassment. The online abuse had devastating consequences for his family: his grandfather collapsed from anger after reading vitriolic online comments and later died, while his maternal grandfather also collapsed and fell into a vegetative state. The Xiao family suffered profound damage in terms of reputation, education and personal well-being.

In 2024, Yang formally sued Xiao in court, demanding a public apology and damages for emotional distress. At trial, Yang submitted five video clips, a confrontation recording and the apology letter. Xiao’s defence provided medical records, treatment documentation, chat transcripts and surveillance footage from the library. The court found that the library was a public space with no verbal exchange between the parties; the videos showed hand movements lacking regularity, which were thus subject to a plausible alternative explanation; and the apology letter, drafted under duress, had limited evidentiary value. The court concluded that the evidence was insufficient to establish sexual harassment and, in July 2025, dismissed all of Yang’s claims.

Following her defeat, Yang published a series of statements online, including references to having passed the national bar exam and preparing to pursue doctoral studies, while also hinting at further complaints against Xiao. These remarks triggered a second wave of public backlash. Whereas Yang had once been valorised as a courageous whistleblower, she was now reframed as a ‘malicious woman’: condemned as having fabricated allegations and castigated for her perceived arrogance in the aftermath of legal defeat. The outrage was more intense and punitive than in the Datong rape case, extending beyond legal evaluation into wholesale moral judgement and academic retaliation. Public discourse ceased to centre on the evidentiary questions of the trial, shifting instead towards Yang’s character assassination and reputational demolition.

By August 2025, online users had organised a large-scale scrutiny of Yang’s master’s thesis, accusing her of academic misconduct. Under this pressure, Wuhan University

initiated an investigation. According to the China National Knowledge Infrastructure database, downloads of her thesis surpassed 300,000, making it the most accessed thesis nationwide.

A distinctive feature of this second wave of discourse was the emergence of the 'zero-cost accusation' imaginary. Numerous comments with thousands of endorsements emphasised that while Yang lost the lawsuit, her material and symbolic costs were minimal – 'at most, 50 yuan in litigation fees, yet she still proceeds to doctoral study' – whereas the accused endured PTSD, reputational devastation and catastrophic family losses. Such comparisons, crystallised in comments with 4,539 upvotes, reframed the court's evidentiary caution not as due process but as proof of systemic indulgence towards women. The perceived asymmetry of consequences transformed legal procedure into moral injustice, thereby legitimising the intervention of online publics as agents of corrective punishment. The implication was that women could weaponise accusations with impunity, thereby inverting the conventional victim–perpetrator relationship.

This perception triggered what might be called a punitive deficit narrative. Commenters frequently positioned themselves as collective moral arbiters, claiming the authority to determine what level of punishment would restore social justice. High-voted interventions repeatedly lamented that 'this is not her loss; it is our collective loss' (1,026 upvotes) or that 'social death is far from enough; she must be stripped of her degree, her future and her institutional standing' (5,357 upvotes). One widely endorsed response even boasted of preparing web crawlers to monitor her prospective applications, promising to inform employers and universities immediately (2,918 upvotes). Commenters did not merely express opinion but enacted a form of participatory justice, positioning themselves as agents responsible for correcting perceived institutional failure.

What intensified this punitive imagination was the perception of Yang as a future legal professional. Commenters constructed Yang not simply as an individual wrongdoer but as a symbolic threat to institutional authority. Comments with nearly 5,000 upvotes stressed the terror of 'a morally corrupt law student and Party member entering judicial authority', projecting her individual case into a dystopian vision of systemic collapse. Others linked the incident to high-profile precedents, such as the Zhu Jun case, insisting that 'for 7 years, society has tolerated false accusations without correction, and the indulgence has reached the incomprehensible' (14,000 upvotes). Still, others demanded 'heavy penalties for false accusations' (7,700 upvotes) and celebrated the necessity of 'expanding the movement'² (11,000 upvotes). In these discourses, individual grievance was scaled up into a collective moral campaign, transforming the case into a rallying point for broader punitive mobilisation.

At the same time, a smaller but notable strand of commentary identified the deeper structural issue as societal polarisation. With nearly 2,000 upvotes, one comment observed that Yang may be condemned in one camp but celebrated as a hero in another, revealing that moral evaluations no longer depend on evidence but on factional allegiance. This diagnosis reflects a perception that organised feminist forces are intensifying gender antagonism and turning legal disputes into proxy battles of competing value systems, where evidence and judicial reasoning are eclipsed by identity politics. Within this framing, commenters positioned themselves as defenders of social order against what they perceived as coordinated feminist mobilisation.

The Wuhan case illustrates how the ‘evil woman’ discourse shifted from individual morality to institutional security. What amplified these dynamics was the temporal sequencing of the two cases. Datong had already unsettled public trust by linking bridewealth to sexual entitlement; Wuhan was read as cumulative confirmation that law indulged women while exposing men to precarity. This sense of systemic bias legitimised extra-legal retaliation, as digital publics claimed the authority to enforce punishment in cases where courts were seen to have failed. DV thus became the key mechanism through which gender conflict was enacted: Men translated anxiety and grievance into coordinated harassment, while women who spoke out were re-coded as existential threats to both social order and institutional stability. In this ecology, the notion of ‘zero-cost accusation’ functioned as a cultural weapon, converting evidentiary ambiguity into moral certainty, mobilising patriarchal solidarity and intensifying the punitive power of the crowd.

Discussion

This discussion brings together the case findings to illustrate how patriarchal customs, evidentiary ambiguity, and platform logics intersect in shaping public understandings of sexual consent. Central to this analysis is the evolving figure of the ‘evil woman,’ which captures the ambivalent shift from feminist empowerment to public stigmatisation. To visualise this trajectory, Figure 1 presents a model that synthesises these dynamics and situates them within the broader context of platformised justice.

This module illustrates the trajectory through which women move from being framed as ‘feminist evil women,’ those who break from submissive womanhood to confront patriarchal order to becoming stigmatised as ‘real evil women.’ The diffusion of #MeToo in China, though short-lived in formal visibility, was nonetheless pivotal: It emboldened survivors of sexual harassment and assault to speak out in digital publics, enacting what we might call the positive, feminist ‘evil woman,’ a figure who dares to confront patriarchal order through testimony and exposure (Fincher 2018; Heidensohn 1968; Silvestri and Crowther-Dowey 2016).

Nonetheless, as our model suggests, this empowerment follows an ambivalent trajectory. The Datong rape judgment and the Wuhan University harassment lawsuit illustrate how public debate rapidly shifted from affirming women’s courage to questioning the legitimacy of their claims. In Datong, the elasticity of the betrothal gift contract enabled the translation of sexual refusal into betrayal of kinship finance, reinforcing patriarchal marital scripts that conflate economic exchange with sexual entitlement

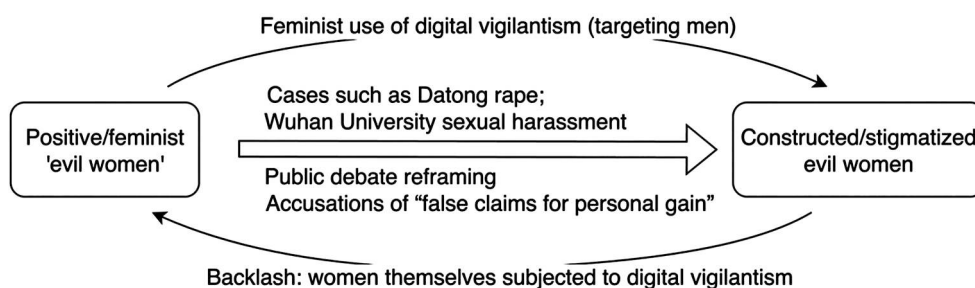


Figure 1. From subversive to stigmatised: a model of the ‘evil woman’ in China’s digital publics.

(Hershatter 2007). Online commentary reframed the complainant's resistance as fraudulent extraction, rendering her doubly deviant by violating both feminine compliance and the normative economy of marriage (Heidensohn 1968). In Wuhan, the judicial finding of 'insufficient evidence' was widely recoded as 'zero-cost accusation', portraying the complainant as manipulative rather than victimised (Xiong and Ristivojević 2021). This shift is mediated by the double-edged role of digital vigilantism (DV). While DV may serve as a tool for pursuing justice where doctrinal ambiguity and evidentiary caution create impunity (Trottier 2020), it can also function as a mechanism of patriarchal backlash through doxxing, reputational attacks and surveillance (Chang and Poon 2017; Huang 2023). As evidentiary reasoning is compressed into emotionally legible narratives, interpretive authority increasingly migrates from courts to digital crowds (Gallagher 2006; Qin et al. 2024).

The two cases invite reconsideration of how Chinese courts are positioned in relation to misogynistic discourse in digital publics. In both instances courts issued clear rulings rather than remaining absent from the dispute. In the Datong case, the trial and appellate decisions resisted a dominant online narrative that translated engagement and bride-price customs into claims of sexual entitlement. By affirming the rape conviction and separating betrothal practices from the legal standard of consent, the court rejected the cultural script that financial exchange legitimises sexual access. In the Wuhan University case, the dismissal of the harassment claim for insufficient evidence was widely interpreted online as protecting the rights of the accused male student. Yet neither ruling resolved the controversy in digital publics. Instead, both generated renewed waves of misogynistic discourse that redirected attention from factual disputes to broader struggles over the meaning and authority of law. Judicial reasoning was thus translated into symbolic narratives of institutional bias and systemic unfairness. The result is a cumulative legitimisation crisis. Male users, experiencing heightened insecurity, increasingly interpreted feminist allegations as opportunistic attacks enabled by judicial leniency, giving rise to what Han and Liu (2024) refer to as the instrumentalisation of legality to control gender boundaries. This patriarchal punitivism (Huang 2023) not only delegitimises complainants as 'opportunists' or 'disruptors of social order' but also fosters widespread legal cynicism, the belief that law is biased and manipulable (Chen 2023; Gallagher 2006).

Conclusion

This article develops a China-specific account of how gender, law and platform power interact to shape the adjudication and public life of sexual consent and harassment. The contributions are threefold. Theoretically, we extend the 'evil woman' and double-deviance theses into the realm of platformised legality, showing how complainants are recast not only as moral deviants but also as institutional threats to legal order. Empirically, by pairing the Datong engagement-rape judgment and the Wuhan University harassment lawsuit, we demonstrate how customary marriage scripts and evidentiary disputes travel across criminal and civil domains, reshaping public understandings of consent and proof. Practically, the analysis shows how doctrinal ambiguity, evidentiary thresholds and platform affordances combine to shift authority from courts to crowds, generating risks of digital vigilantism while also opening space for feminist counter-speech.

These findings also indicate directions for further research and highlight the study's limitations. Because the analysis focuses on highly visible platforms and widely circulated commentary, quieter deliberative spaces, cross-platform dynamics and long-tail discussions remain outside its scope. Ethnographic research with moderators, legal communicators and feminist organisers could illuminate how evidentiary narratives are curated or contested in real time, while comparative studies of jurisdictions adopting affirmative-consent or discrimination-based harassment frameworks may clarify how doctrinal design shapes online reactions. Nevertheless, the findings illuminate how patriarchal scripts, legal ambiguity and platform affordances interact in shaping digitally mediated justice while underscoring the need for doctrinal clarity and safeguards against digital vigilantism.

Notes

1. The 'Peng Yu incident' refers to a 2006 Nanjing case, in which a man who aided a fallen elderly woman was held liable by the court, prompting nationwide fear of helping strangers and long-lasting doubts about judicial fairness and social trust in China.
2. 'Expanding the movement' refers to calls for broadening punitive action against alleged false accusations and intensifying crackdowns on feminist activism.

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There are no human participants in this article, and informed consent is not required.

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