Yu, A., & Zhu, I. (2025). Negotiating Girl Power in Contemporary China: Feminist Possibilities and Contradictions. *Critical Debates in Humanities, Science and Global Justice*, *6*(1), 58–67.

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Negotiating Girl Power in Contemporary China: Feminist Possibilities and Contradictions

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Keywords: feminist theory, power, gender

Critical Debates in Humanities, Science and Global Justice

Vol. 6, Issue 1, 2026

In recent years, the term girl power (女孩力量) has become increasingly prominent in Chinese discourse, yet its meanings remain insufficiently theorized within the country's unique sociocultural landscape. This article offers a qualitative literature synthesis to explore how girl power is being conceptualized, articulated, and negotiated in contemporary China. Drawing on 29 qualitative studies published between 2005 and 2024, we use a meta-ethnographic approach to identify five overarching themes: Gender Norms & Power Structures, Identity & Self-Determination, Media Female Imagery, Body Aesthetic Politics, and Social Consumption Narratives. Our analysis reveals that girl power in China is neither a straightforward import of Western feminist ideals nor a passing pop-cultural trend. Rather, it reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, digital expression and state control, empowerment and commodification. While some narratives challenge patriarchal norms and enable self-expression, others risk reinscribing inequality through market-driven "pseudo-feminist" frameworks. We argue that girl power in China functions as both a site of agency and a mechanism of social regulation, complicating linear understandings of feminist progress. This study contributes to feminist theory by situating girl power within China's hybrid sociopolitical landscape and offers a conceptual baseline for future empirical and theoretical inquiry.

Introduction

The concept of "girl power" (nǚhái lìliàng 女孩力量) has gained attention in contemporary China, permeating various aspects of popular culture, social media discourse, and academic discussions (Liao, 2024; Q. Wu et al., 2023). Despite its increasing prominence, there remains limited understanding of what this term truly signifies in the Chinese context. The notion of girl power has evolved from Western feminist movements in the English-speaking context but has taken on distinct characteristics as it intersects with China's unique historical, political, and cultural landscape (A. X. Wu & Dong, 2019). This research aims to unpack the multifaceted meanings and manifestations of girl power in contemporary China, examining how it both reflects and influences shifting gender dynamics through a literature synthesis.

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The discourse around girl power in China has largely emerged across diverse fields of study, appearing in literature on cultural studies, sociology, digital media, consumer behavior, and feminist theory. Accordingly, Chinese scholars and commentators have explored the phenomenon through various disciplinary lenses, from analyses of female objectification in entertainment media (A. R. Liu, 2024; Zhang, 2024) to examinations of women's growing economic independence and political consciousness. This cross-disciplinary presence indicates the concept's cultural significance and suggests that girl power functions not merely as a passing trend but as a meaningful paradigm shift in how gender is conceived, discussed, enacted and negotiated in Chinese society.

At the same time, there is evidence suggesting a complex evolution of gender relations in China, with certain metrics indicating decreasing gender inequality while others reveal persistent barriers that reproduce sexism (Norin, 2016; Riley, 2020). China's rapid socioeconomic transformation has created unique conditions for gender dynamics to evolve at an accelerated pace compared to many other societies. For example, one unintended consequence of China's one child policy is that many young girls were given substantial resources in terms of education and opportunity as the sole child (F. Liu, 2014). The distinct trajectory of Chinese modernization, influenced by its socialist history, Confucian heritage, and current market economy, has produced a gender landscape that cannot be adequately understood through Western feminist frameworks alone. The rise of girl power in China thus represents not simply an adoption of global feminist trends, but rather a culturally specific response to local conditions and challenges (Chang et al., 2018). We offer this qualitative literature synthesis as a way to explore the evolving meaning of this concept.

We see this moment as particularly opportune for taking stock and conducting research into what constitutes girl power in China. To explore its meaning and broader implications, we have undertaken a qualitative literature synthesis to investigate how, where, and why this term is being deployed. We aim to identify key themes and patterns related to the way that girl power is conceptualized, the contexts in which it operates, the forms it takes, and the responses it generates.

Moreover, an initial literature review indicated that studies using qualitative methods had generated richer, deeper understandings of girl power as a concept. It was also evident that qualitative literature on girl power has not yet been aggregated through a qualitative synthesis to produce new insights into girl power. This article thus uses a qualitative synthesis and meta-ethnographic approach to translate themes from original studies into new, broader themes (see methods for more details) (Noblit & Hare, 1988). The synthesis generated five new themes suggesting that girl power is intertwined with broader power structures and the co-construction of self. We find connections between girl power and media objectification and/or representation, ideas around the body, and consumer culture as a whole.

Through examining these interconnected domains, we complicate understandings of how girl power is reshaping gender consciousness and practices in contemporary China and outline areas for future inquiry.

Methods

This article uses a somewhat novel method of synthesizing qualitative literature. While quantitative research has been synthesized in the form of meta-analyses for quite some time, the well-established procedures for a meta-analysis cannot be applied to qualitative literature for both practical and epistemological reasons (Britten et al., 2002; Noblit & Hare, 1988). Qualitative research aims to capture specific experiences or contexts at certain points in time. For this reason, some argue that synthesizing qualitative data is "inappropriate" or "naive" while others argue that qualitative syntheses can build cumulative knowledge, theory and open up new areas of inquiry in a way that individual studies cannot (Britten et al., 2002; Marston & King, 2006; Ryan et al., 2023). At present, there is growing evidence that qualitative syntheses are not only possible, they are particularly useful for concepts like girl power, where experiences and understandings are shaped by complex social and contextual factors less readily studied with quantitative methods. Overall, existing qualitative studies describe girl power as an understudied area that could benefit from further exploration, and because the qualitative literature on girl power has not yet been synthesized, this synthesis is both appropriate and timely in its attempt to contribute to the knowledge base about girl power.

The research began with a comprehensive search on Google Scholar using the keywords "girl power" AND "China" AND "qualitative" covering publications from 2005-2024 to identify relevant scholarly literature related to this notion of girl power in the Chinese context. This initial search yielded approximately 1,300 potential articles. After deleting duplicates and reviewing titles, the search was narrowed to 500 articles for thorough review using specific inclusion criteria focused on qualitative studies (including those with ethnographic data collection, with interviews and/or mixed methods) that explored women's empowerment, gender representation, and feminism within contemporary Chinese society.

This screening allowed us to select 29 articles that directly addressed aspects of girl power in China. We then analyzed these articles working with two coders, extracting key codes from each publication. Codes were developed through an iterative process where we first read articles with a focus on broad codes. Next, we revised and refined these codes by working across and within articles. Through this collaborative thematic analysis, we identified recurring concepts across the codes and consolidated them into eight preliminary categories: Gender Norms & Power, Feminism in China, Modern Womanhood, Digital & Media Representation, Body & Beauty Narratives, Self-Empowerment & Identity, Relational Narratives, and Consumerism & Femvertising. To further refine our research focus and avoid thematic redundancy, we further compressed these eight into five

comprehensive themes that encompass the multifaceted nature of girl power in contemporary China. These five consolidated themes: Gender Norms & Power Structures, Identity & Self-Determination, Media Female Imagery, Body Aesthetic Politics, and Social Consumption Narratives, now form the conceptual framework for our ongoing investigation into girl power in China. We see this research as a baseline upon which to build future and ongoing work.

Results

This study included a review and synthesis of 29 articles that included the concept of girl power. These articles focused on mainland China (27 articles), with two studies examining related phenomena in Hong Kong. The research spanned diverse geographic contexts within China, including major urban centers like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (7 articles), rural areas particularly in northern China (3 articles), and digital spaces such as social media platforms and online communities (8 articles). The remaining studies addressed broader national trends without specifying particular regions. The articles covered a wide range of research objectives, from examining women's digital self-expression on platforms like TikTok (Q. Wu et al., 2023) to analyzing the waning of patriarchy in rural communities (Yan, 2006), from exploring sexual assertiveness among female college students (Dai et al., 2022) to investigating the representation of women in female empowerment advertisements (A. R. Liu, 2024). This diversity in research focus reflects the multifaceted nature of girl power as it manifests across different social contexts in contemporary China. Below we present the five main themes related to girl power that arose in our analysis.

Gender Norms and Power Structures

Gender norms and power structures in China have changed in recent decades. The first theme that emerged in our analysis relates to how patriarchal systems are being challenged and reconfigured through both institutional changes and grassroots activism, revealing the tensions between established gender hierarchies and women's increasing agency in contemporary Chinese society. Our analysis of the literature reveals several key findings. First, there has been a notable shift in how young Chinese women perceive and respond to traditional patriarchal structures. As Yan (2006) documents in rural north China, several generations of young women have gradually altered their position from statusless "outsiders" to active participants in family affairs, challenging long-established patriarchal orders from within. Similarly, Chang and Tian (2021) highlight how female authors of Yaoi fiction (male homoerotic stories) employ creative discursive strategies to challenge heteropatriarchal gender norms through the female gaze. By telling stories from the viewpoint of girls and women, upcoming authors are creating a unique form of cultural resistance. The literature also points to the emergence of diverse feminist expressions that operate within China's specific political context. Wu and Dong (2019) identify distinct strands of

made-in-China grassroots feminism. For instance, they find digital grassroots communication (e.g. blogs, forums) pushing women to forgo traditional wife duties including self-sacrifice and submissiveness, to increase their autonomy in the marriage market and maximize personal returns. Wu and Dong (2019) argue these types of grass-root feminist endeavors in non-Western societies contribute to the disruption of political, economic, and cultural orders. Han and Liu (2024) further examine the phenomenon of pink feminism, where digital feminists strategically align with nationalist narratives to legitimize feminist discourse while navigating strict state censorship and nationalistic backlash. The literature also reveals generational shifts in how gender norms are perceived and contested. This dynamic reflects the ongoing negotiation between traditional values, state ideology, and global feminist discourses that characterizes gender politics in contemporary China.

Self-Identity Construction

In contemporary China, women's identity formation and pursuit of self-determination represent critical dimensions of the evolving girl power movement. The literature reveals a complex process of identity co-construction in dialogue with peers, family and society that navigates between traditional expectations and modern aspirations. Liu (2014) discusses how young women of the only-child generation construct modern womanhood within conflicting gender discourses, simultaneously positioning themselves as both autonomous modern females and dependent modern females. This duality reflects a distinctly Chinese approach to modernity that defies standardized Western notions of modern girlhood, highlighting how self-determination in China often involves strategically balancing independence with culturally valued interdependence (e.g. loyalty and connection to family).

Digital spaces, in particular, have emerged as a significant site for identity exploration and self-expression. Chang, Ren and Yang (2018) analyze how young Chinese women use social media profile pictures as a form of self-empowerment, creating what they term a virtual gender asylum – a place of escape where women have more control over their gender presentation but also experience a respite from rigid expectations. Dai et al. (2022) explore sexual assertiveness among Chinese female college students, revealing how young women navigate personal autonomy within cultural constraints, developing strategies that allow them to assert agency while managing social expectations around female sexuality and relationships. For example, the study found that many participants learned to negotiate condom use with partners while still respecting social interaction dynamics valued in Chinese culture.

Media Female Imagery

Media representation and digital expression have become a center for redefining female identity in contemporary China. In our third theme, our literature synthesis suggests that digital platforms have created opportunities

for women's self-expression while simultaneously reinforcing certain gendered expectations. This classic notion where gender inequality appears to be disputed, yet is somehow recreated is common in long term research on the reproduction and maintenance of gender inequality (Ridgeway, 2011). In the articles we reviewed, digital spaces foster unique forms of feminist activism and cultural resistance. Chang and Tian (2021) analyze how female authors of Yaoi fiction use online platforms to create a female counterculture that challenges heteropatriarchal norms through the female gaze. They do this by creating male characters who embody both masculine and feminine traits, depicting equal romantic relationships rather than hierarchical ones, and using these narratives as a safe space to express female desires that might be censored in more direct contexts. Similarly, Liu (2024) examines Chinese Femvertising (female empowerment video advertisements), while noting that many such representations ultimately serve marketing interests rather than genuine feminist goals. Despite these limitations, digital expression has created what Liao (2024) describes as unpopular feminism, a form of resistance that persists despite intentional control of feminist visibility in China's increasingly digitized and controlled media ecosystem. These digital spaces allow for complex negotiations of gender identity that both challenge and accommodate dominant cultural narratives, representing a distinctly Chinese approach to feminist digital expression.

Body Aesthetic Politics

Body politics and beauty standards occupy a space in China's girl power discourse, reflecting broader tensions between traditional expectations, commercial interests, and emerging feminist consciousness. The literature reveals how women's bodies have once again become sites of both constraint and resistance in contemporary Chinese society. Digital platforms create new spaces for negotiating beauty standards and bodily autonomy in particular. Wu, Jiang and Lu (2023) observe how women on TikTok use both body narratives and physical bodies as a central tool in their video storytelling. For example, they strategically use bodily performances such as makeup transformations and dance routines to attract followers and increase engagement, while simultaneously using this visibility to challenge traditional beauty norms and express personal identity. However, they also note that tensions between beauty and justice persist on the platform, limiting the full realization of women's empowerment. This means that while women gain visibility through beauty-focused content, they simultaneously reinforce the idea that a woman's value is tied to her appearance, creating a contradiction where empowerment remains dependent on meeting conventional beauty standards. Similarly, Bergstrom (2012) documents the case of Sister Feng, whose dating advertisement gained notoriety partly because she was perceived as violating Chinese beauty standards while maintaining high expectations for potential partners. This example illustrates how women who challenge beauty norms while asserting agency face particular scrutiny and backlash. Despite these constraints, Dai et al. (2022) demonstrate how young Chinese

women are developing greater sexual assertiveness and bodily autonomy, suggesting an emerging consciousness that ties politics and the body to broader questions of self-determination and empowerment in contemporary China.

Social Consumption Narratives

Finally, as a fifth theme, the literature reveals transformations in how women navigate personal relationships, including romantic partnerships, family dynamics, and female friendships, while simultaneously responding to market-driven gender ideals. For instance, Wu, Jiang and Lu (2023) identify emerging relational narratives on TikTok that showcase supportive female bonds and more equitable romantic relationships where women are portrayed as confident and in control, challenging traditional power dynamics in intimate spheres. Consumer culture has emerged as a complex terrain for expressing gendered aspirations and feminist sentiments in China. Yang (2023) introduces the concept of consumerist pseudo-feminism to describe how post-feminist culture in China operates through market mechanisms, particularly targeting middle-class women through chick flicks and consumer products (e.g. face masks and beauty products). This phenomenon differs from Western post-feminism in terms of class demographics and the relationship between female elites and the state.

In the Chinese context, the state plays a distinctive role in co-creating and sanctioning certain versions of feminism that simultaneously promote consumer culture and economic growth while controlling more radical feminist expressions. As Yang (2023) argues, this state-market collaboration has produced a "consumerist pseudo-feminism" that channels women's empowerment primarily through purchasing power rather than political mobilization. Similarly, Rao et al. (2023) analyze the She economy trend, noting how it reflects diversification in female cultural psychology while warning against single-value approaches to modern womanhood that might lead to a misunderstanding of female independence. These analyses suggest that consumer culture in China creates spaces for limited empowerment while simultaneously channeling feminist energy into market-friendly expressions that may undermine more transformative political potential. Despite these limitations, women are increasingly using consumer choices as a means of asserting identity and challenging traditional gender expectations.

Discussion

Overall our synthesis suggests that this idea of girl power is indeed one that is both rising in China but also one with its own evolving distinct context. What is notable here, and perhaps most interesting from a theoretical standpoint is the way that gender inequality may be being subtly reproduced in new hidden ways through the promotion of this feminist concept of girl power (Yang, 2023). As Liao (2024) argues, feminism in contemporary China exists as both a popular genre to be consumed and a minority political pursuit, revealing the tensions between visibility and substantive change.

On the one hand, our findings suggest a lot of great things are happening. Women are naming and challenging power structures. They are starting businesses and embracing entrepreneurship (Song, 2015) and becoming icons on digital platforms (Q. Wu et al., 2023). Some are using their bodies, faces, and voices in bold ways-creating perhaps a new form of "fourth wave" feminism that operates through digital media while adapting to China's unique socio-political context (Han & Liu, 2024).

Yet amidst this excitement and movement forward, it is not clear whether equality is actually achieved. In some articles, there is confusion and obfuscation around whether anything has changed. Girls/women are still left balancing challenging expectations to meet traditional expectations around gender/family while not making too much noise (Riley, 2020). In some instances, girl power seems to be more of a feminist token, a second-place trophy, a literal sticker being put on women, with hopes that they will behave appropriately, continue being objectified, stay in line and support the consumer economy. As Liu's (2024) analysis of femvertising shows, many empowerment advertisements are primarily marketing tools rather than genuine support for women's rights, often excluding broader spectrums of women and reinforcing certain stereotypes.

Our study leaves us with more insight but also more questions. We see great potential in the concept of girl power - indeed many of the papers we reviewed expressed the same sentiment. Yet our findings open up a new avenue for research. We push scholars to continue to explore the ways that girl power may benefit women and be used by/for women in productive ways. Yet we also caution scholars to explore the more nefarious underbelly of this concept. We encourage researchers to continue problematizing and questioning where and how this benefits women, as opposed to reproducing their inequality. As Wu and Dong (2019) suggest, understanding China's ongoing gender antagonism requires grasping its full complexity and imagining feminist politics that disrupt political, economic, and cultural orders simultaneously.

Published: October 21, 2025 EDT.

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