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HOW TO UNDERSTAND JINV'S RESISTANCE TOWARDS HETERONORMATIVITY IN CHINA

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This paper explores the intersectionality of the Chinese political, social, cultural, and digital landscape, which is reflected in jinv's resistance to heteronormativity. Jinv refers to a group of Chinese radical grassroots feminists active on social media. The production of a Chinese woman ideal constructed through Confucian ideals, social norms, and policies that expect women to marry and bear children is explained, alongside an analysis of jinv's localised response and resistance on social media. The paper also discusses the potential limitations of jinv's resistance, particularly its emphasis on individual agency over structural problems, and briefly suggests possible reasons for such a limitation. The essay concludes by suggesting that a broader understanding of Chinese cultural and social environments, as well as further research into jinv as a unique feminist group, is essential to fully understand jinv's feminist struggle.

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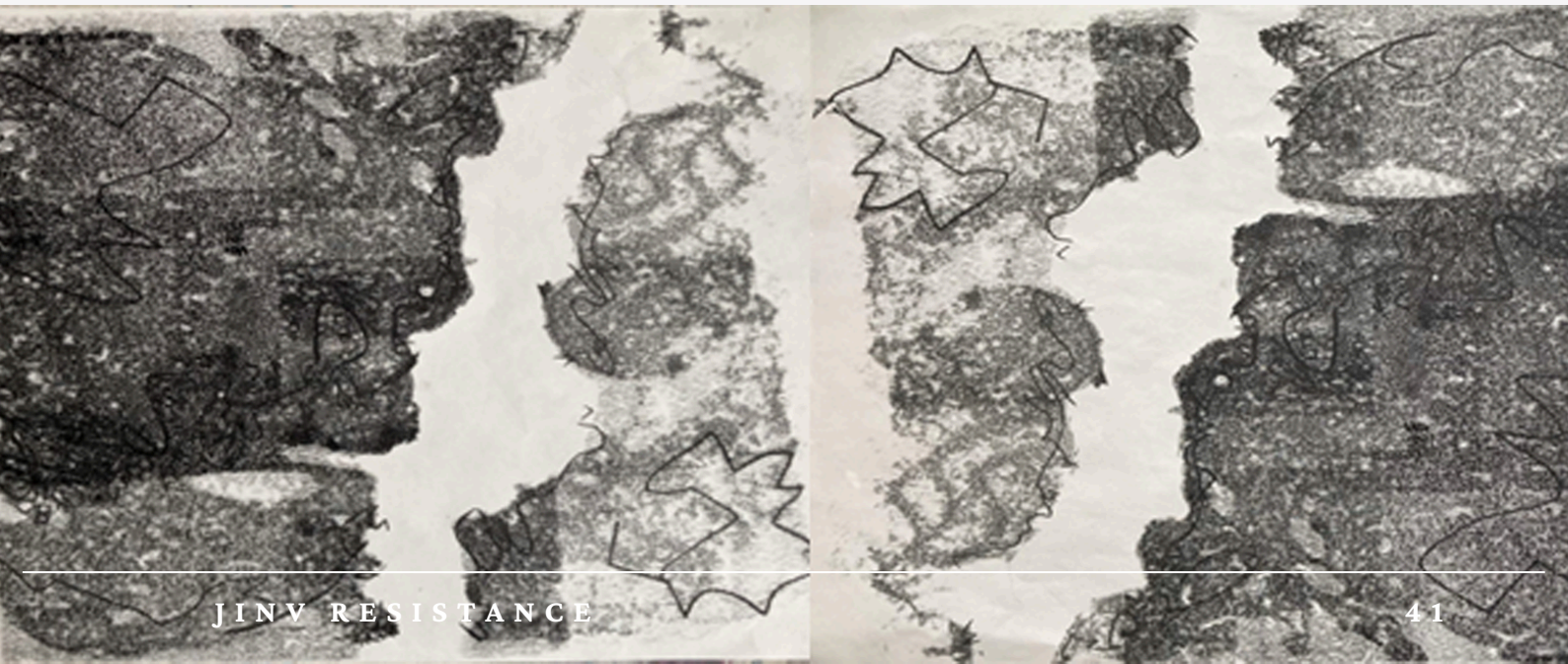
As a feminist born and raised in China, I've observed numerous divergences in ideas around feminist topics on social media. One group of grassroots feminists that are always being criticised by both anti-feminists and feminists are *jinv* (Chinese: 激女, short for 激进女权, which is radical feminists in Chinese). I define *Jinv* as a unique category of grassroots feminists in mainland China that has been active mainly on social media, since the #MeToo movement in 2017 (Xue & Rose, 2022, p.5). There is no agreed official definition for *jinv*, since Chinese feminists on social media are active in a very scattered way (Xue & Rose, 2022, p.8), and *jinv* is now representing something different from the radical feminists a few years ago (Telisha, 2023). Despite the absence of an agreed definition, there is a tacitly agreed commonality of *jinv* among grassroots feminists: the minimum requirement to be a *jinv* is the rejection of heterosexuality and heterosexual culture rooted in Chinese society, represented most clearly through the *jinv*'s determined refusal of heterosexual marriage and romantic or sexual relationships with men. Although such an anti-heterosexual attitude can be found to resonate with other feminists in different parts of the world, Chinese political, social, cultural and digital landscapes intersect to render *jinv*'s resistance very unique and worth investigating to better understand Chinese feminists. This is also the reason I use the pinyin '*jinv*' to refer to this specific radical group of feminists on Chinese social media, rather than using the general term "radical feminists". I want to emphasise that, because *jinv* is still a relatively new concept, there is no sufficient ethnography or academic research on this group of feminists in China, which can cause limitations on my understanding and explanations of *jinv*.

What I intend to achieve by this essay is to suggest a possible theoretical starting point for more research with ethnographies on jinv to understand their resistance. Taking the intersection of Chinese culture and social environment into account, alongside fragmented texts available online by jinv or about jinv, I argue that the jinv's resistance to heteronormativity is highly specific to Confucian culture, the patriarchal and heteronormative social environment in China, where these two factors contribute to shaping a woman ideal who is willing to marry and reproduce. Three aspects will be discussed to explain my argument, including a few core concepts in Confucian culture, the social environments in China focusing on media propaganda and reproduction policy, and jinv's specific forms of resistance to heteronormativity which includes my critique.

Confucian Culture

The patriarchal and heteronormative culture seen within China is heavily influenced by Confucianism. Confucianism is a system of thought developed in the 5th century BCE by the Chinese philosopher Confucius. With its history and development across almost the whole of Chinese history until the 20th century when it began to decline, Confucianism has been deeply embedded into Chinese culture. Given that reproduction and heterosexuality are the main aspects of a female ideal discussed in this essay, patriarchy is understood as the sum of norms and regulations that allow men power in all spheres of human space, especially in women's sexuality and labour (Ueno, 2022). The sanctity of age-old patriarchal rules is essential, where the older males have the power over the younger generation.



Heteronormativity is understood as a discourse that intersects with patriarchy and normalises heterosexuality to produce the ideal heterosexual subjects (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). In ancient China, heteronormativity and the sanctity of patriarchy were evident in early Confucianist ideas about women and the family, and I will select a few core concepts to elaborate to explain these two elements.

There was the concept of nei/wai (内/外, inside/outside), corresponding to a spatial distinction between family and political/social sphere, where women were assigned to the inside sphere of nei, unlike men who can express and engage in the wai sphere of the public political area (Lee, 1999). Based on the concept of nei/wai, the moral requirement sancongzhidao (三从之道, three principles of obedience) for the ideal woman is advocated, where a woman needs to follow the rules of (1) her father before marriage, (2) of her husband after marriage, and (3) of her son after her husband's death (Liji, "Jiaotesheng" chapter). Sancongzhidao further establishes women as unquestionable heterosexual objects, whose roles are restricted to that of a daughter, wife, mother, or widow and whose space is restricted to family, marriage and reproduction.

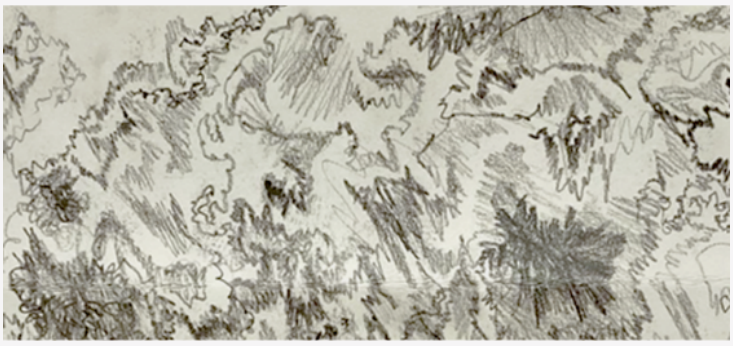
In addition, there is also the idea of xiao (孝), representing family members' filial piety towards the elder, particularly to one's parents. Filial piety, which means respecting the elders of one's family and taking care of them when they get old, is a moral value and a responsibility to be practised. Xiao is considered one of the central elements of Confucianism. Evidence can be found in the Analects, where Confucius argues filial piety is the root of morality (1.2). The necessity for women to marry and reproduce is further justified by xiao.

In Li Lou in Mencius, Mencius argues that out of the three unfilial things, the worst one to commit is having no offspring (26). Being restricted in the field of nei, what a morally upright woman ought to do, and the only thing to do, is to behave as a good daughter, wive and mother – i.e. a proper servant of the patrilineality, thus achieving filial piety. This restriction of women's role as primarily the maid of patrilineage is also highly praised as a gender-specific virtue in Confucian thoughts (Rosenlee, 2023).

Importantly, xiao's importance is not restricted to personal morality but is deeply embedded in the political scheme under the core political concept of jiaguotonggou (家国同构), which stands for the same structure of the family and the state (Csikszentmihalyi, 2024; Lee, 1999, p.17). This political connotation of xiao can be seen in the Analects as well. Confucius parallels filial piety to the elders and loyalty to superiors, which highlights their being biconditional to each other (1.2). In this respect, to 'respect' the elders as part of xiao is not simply to have a high opinion of the elders, but is to defer to them, signalling a similar hierarchy to one between the people and the king. Thus, in the context of family, xiao, beyond its importance in the political framework, is crucial not only as the root of moral values but also as an important ruling principle to sustain patriarchy within the family.

After the collapse of the imperial system in 1911, several intellectual movements set Confucianism as the main target of past feudal ideas to be discarded (Furth, 1983,

p.322). Particularly during the New Cultural Movement from the 1910s to 1920s, the political framework of Confucianism, which has its basis in the concept of xiao within the family, was heavily criticised, and a break of the conceptual link between the family and the state was instead argued for (Wu, 1985, pp. 61-66). Even though Confucianism's influence in politics - particularly the concept of xiao - has been largely reduced since then, xiao's importance in the Chinese cultural system remains central (Furth, 1983, p.325). In contemporary China, xiao in the family as a moral value has become further intertwined with love and emotional bonds in a complicated way (Sun, 2017). In Yuezhu Sun's research with young Chinese singletons in Beijing, these young adults express their view on filial piety in a way that is closely linked to awareness and gratitude towards parents' care and love for them (2017, p.791). This filial piety is not a one-sided obedience with no condition, but is only required to obey when parental love and care are present. However, the filial obligation that the children feel is not only about reciprocal love, but also involves the feeling of guilt. Vanessa Fong's research in Dalian shows that, parents in urban Dalian tend to consider their love and care for children a sacrifice (economic, emotional, etc.), which should be compensated by children's obeying filial obligation. This thought also affects their children, especially when their parents are ill, the children tend to feel a stronger necessity to fulfil their filial obligation resulting from guilt, for both the children and the parents attribute the illness partly to parents' sacrifice to raise the children (2004, p.143-147). Hidden behind the idea of filial piety, the patriarchal form of ruling and obedience within the family is justified by both moral and emotional factors (Schwartz, 1985, p.155), where the necessity of getting married and having children is justified as filling in their filial obligation as the time in ancient China (Chai, 2021).



Social Environment

The patriarchal and heteronormative elements in Confucianism remain influential, even after the Cultural Revolution in the late 60s and the cultural reforms – through education, media propaganda and legal changes - which aimed at removing Confucianist feudal ideology to improve gender equality (Hashimoto & Ikels, 2005). It can still be spotted in present gender norms, practices and policies where marriage and reproduction are tacitly regarded as women's primary tasks. For example, in 2007, the derogatory term leftover women (剩女), used for single women in their late twenties and above, was used by the government to urge women to marry (Fincher, 2016, p.86). The term leftover women was also disseminated by the mass media to spread the anxiety of being a single woman. Cultural and commercial products, including varying TV shows, were created to teach leftover women 'out' of their 'single predicament' (e.g. cosmetic products). Thus, leftover women became a consumer group characterised as sexual subjects to be disciplined (Liu & Zhang, 2013).

Additionally, under the Three-child Policy introduced in 2021, which encourages women to have more children to combat the demographic imbalance within China, the discussion around women's declining willingness to have children is mostly about the high costs of bearing and rearing, gender discrimination in the workplace and, the lack of public care resources. Lv Pin - the founder of Feminist Voice (女权之声), which was one of the most influential feminist media in China - pointed out that both such policy and discourse treat women's reluctance to be mothers as an issue caused only by external factors, which assume and normalise women's obligation and willingness to reproduce for the country and treat women as having the natural impulse to be heterosexual mothers (2021).

From the prohibition of contraception and abortion in the 50s, to the *One-child Policy* to restrict the population increase in the late 70s, and to the *Three-child Policy* now, the government's policy on reproduction has always been viewed by feminists as female bodies *planning* policy rather than a *family planning* policy (Xue & Rose, 2022, p.3). In this context, sex, especially women's, is the target and means to manage life and to serve public welfare, where regulating sex becomes a necessity for the sustainability of the country's economy (Foucault, 1978, p.25, pp.146-7). In the above two cases, the ideal of a

heterosexual Chinese woman who is willing to marry and have children is reproduced, coinciding with the female ideal established in Confucianism. In the principle sancongzhidao, it is made explicit that women should obey their fathers, husbands or sons, and women's role as daughters, wives and mothers come first. In contrast, this control over women's sexuality is made much more implicit in family planning policy and media propaganda, and women's role as citizens and consumers becomes the primary.

Jinv's Resistance and their Limitation

Facing the instrumentalisation of women in the name of the nation and the misogynist element in culture affected by Confucian thoughts, *Jinv* reacts to Chinese heteronormativity in a destructive way. In their recent feminist slogan *sanzhengsanfan* (三争三反, three things to fight for and three things to fight against), designed in 2021 specifically to adapt to the Chinese context[1] , three things to fight against are the following: filial duties, heterosexual marriage and the fetish of men. This fetish refers to both the romantic and sexual relationship with men, as well as any form of entertainment related to the fetish of men or the male gaze, where they take idol culture as one form of it. For *jinv*, heterosexuality might be defined as how Adrienne Cecile Rich describes, which is a 'political institution which disempowers women' that is socially constructed, to be imposed on women and regulated through norms, economic pressures and law structures, where these aspects are all inter-related (Rich, 2003, p.11). Among these means of regulation, *jinv* take filial piety as what Chinese women should be specifically cautious of, for how it justifies the necessity of marriage and reproduction of women in the name of morality and love, as I explained above. I think, by including fighting against filial duties as part of their feminist movement, *jinv* localise their resistance to heteronormativity with a consideration of the Chinese cultural context.

However, considering the heavy-handed crackdown on activism and censorship (Xue & Rose, 2022, pp.4-5), jinv's strategy to fight against heterosexuality is restricted to individual rejection of heterosexual relationships and to inspiring other women to turn away from heterosexual relationships. Although a lot of radical feminists have argued that the "personal is political", such an individualistic strategy emphasising personal agency might be criticised for melting down the structural problem of heteronormativity to an individual level, therefore hindersing the potential structural systematic issues (Mohanty, 2013, p.971). I think this worry is reasonable. In jinv's defiant discourse against heteronormativity, women entering heterosexual relationships should be excluded from the social category of 'women' - the category of women as a whole - for they think heterosexuality is a choice of complicit with men, which is a betrayal towards all women (Wang, 2021). A famous *jinv* blogger on Weibo posted that, 'heterosexual women are masochists, and there is no such distinction between jinv and normal women, only the distinction between natural women and masochists' (Qian, 2024). There are also specific stigmatised words for married women, like *hunlv* (婚驴, married donkey, a homophony of *hunnv,* 婚女, meaning married women) and *hunren* (昏人, people losing their mind, a homophony of *hunren,* 婚人, meaning married people); and for women in heterosexual relationships with men, they are called *jiaoqi* (娇妻, meaning docile wife). These words, connotating the humiliation of women in heterosexual relationships as losing their agency and becoming the accomplice of heteronormativity and patriarchy, can be seen as ways to exclude heterosexual people from feminists' and women's communities. In this instance, *jinv*'s affront and exclusion of heterosexual women exemplified the aforementioned worry of ignoring structural problems. In the Chinese heteronormative context, where being a heterosexual woman who enters heterosexual is still the dominant expectation and lifestyle, going against this discourse can take a lot, and some women might not be able to bear it (Mimiyana, 2023). The choice and agency to not be in a heterosexual relationship is rather a luxury open for only certain groups of elite women with good education who are economically independent. This overemphasis on individual agency might be related to the overwhelming proportion of well-educated, young and (or) high-income women in the online feminist

community (Wu, 2023), who are less likely to be negatively affected by choosing not to enter heterosexual relationships. However, I think it is still not clear whether jinv, as a specific feminist group, is rooted in specific classes, since there is not enough research at present. Despite the disagreement I have with the ruling out and stigmatisation of women in heterosexual relationships, I think the individual rejection of heterosexual relationships is a valuable and essential form of resistance, especially in China. Under the oppression and internet censorship of the feminist movement and discourse, the rejection of heterosexual relationships, as a form of nonviolent resistance, might be the safest yet still rebellious form of resistance. And though such rejection only focuses on personal choice which seems to be minor, we should be aware that the resistance is not always massive or violent, and that the most common form of resistance is usually like *jinv*'s, which is at the individual level, scattered in the social stratification. When these minor pieces of resistance come together, they can be subversive (Foucault, 1978, p.96).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have analysed the Confucian culture, social environment and jinv's resistance towards heteronormativity in a Chinese context. With a heteronormative discourse traced back to Confucianism rooted in Chinese history over 2000 years, society, including the mass media and the government, is still reproducing a similar ideal of women like the one in Confucianism, who is heterosexual and willing to marry and reproduce. It is exactly in such a context, that Chinese radical grassroots feminists jinv show their resistance towards heteronormativity in a localised and unique way to respond to the intersection of Confucian culture and social and political environment. I have also argued that there is a limitation in jinv's resistance, for they underestimate the structural problems and overestimate women's agency as individuals, which leads to the exclusion and stigmatisation of certain, often lower class groups of women. Such a limitation might be understood in relation to the severe crackdown on feminist activism, as well as the demographic of jinv, who are mostly young and elite women. In conclusion, I think to understand jinv's unique resistance towards heterosexuality, an understanding of Chinese Confucian cultures and the social environment, particularly the policy and regulation, should be taken into account. However, given the fact that jinv is a relatively new concept lacking enough literature and research, as well as the scattered reality of jinv and internet censorship, my analysis and understanding might deviate from the reality of jinv. I hope that more research and work about these grassroots feminists will emerge, to understand their unique and determined resistance towards heteronormativity and inequality.

Footnote

1. Due to the fact that the original post that suggested this slogan has been deleted, and there has not been any academic research on this, there is no available resource to cite this slogan properly. The only resource I found is this Reddit post reposting the screenshot of the original discussion of the slogan: https://www.reddit.com/r/DoubanFeministGroup/comments/xc1uas/%E4%B8%89%E4%BA%89%E4%B8%89%E5%8F%8D/..

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