

Gendered performances and norms in Chinese personal blogs

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on a study of identity-related performance in personal blogs. The study is based on an analysis of three A-list Chinese personal blogs (Muzi Mei's blog, Liumang Yan's blog, and Acosta's blog) selected from the top blog service providers in China between 2003 and 2006. A lifestyle mapping model composed of layers of social demographics, interests, activities, and opinions was employed in the data analysis. The analysis revealed that gender was a critical aspect of the performances in personal blogs. Their performances revolved around gendered social norms in terms of compliance, contention, negation, and recreation, even though the performances were diverse and heterogeneous. The study proposes that personal blogs have become an online space and medium for enacting gender and gendered performances.

Introduction

1 This paper analyses a study of gendered performance in personal blogs. The aim of the study is to understand the following aspects of performance in personal blogs: First, what is performed in personal blogs as related to gender? Second, in which way are their gendered performances enacted? Three Chinese A-list personal blogs (Muzi Mei's blog, Liumang Yan's blog, and Acosta's blog) were selected as cases and a lifestyle mapping model originally developed by Wei (2006) for marketing has been employed for the analysis. Personal blogs, as a sub-genre and the primary form of the blog ([Miller and Shepherd *Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog*](#); [Miller and Shepherd "Questions for Genre Theory from the Blogosphere"](#)) can be regarded as instantiation of the blog. In many ways, personal blogs resemble ongoing diaries or commentaries produced by individuals. For personal blog authors, their blogs often are used not just for communicating but for reflecting and reconstructing their living experiences and emotions to seek ways of being, becoming, and belonging ([Thomas](#)). As Nardi et al. argue, the blog functions primarily as a form of personal expression. This is also a reason why micro-blogging such as Twitter that updates extremely detailed personal activities, feelings, emotions, and relations captures attention ([Wong](#); [Java et al.](#)). These kinds of personal blogs allow bloggers to share thoughts and feelings simultaneously with friends, family, and others.

2 In the article, A-list blogs refer to the most famous or popular blogs in a blog hosting portal or a blog service provider. They are not, however, synonymous with celebrity blogs as in other blog studies ([Trammell and Keshelashvili](#); [Keshelashvili](#)). A-list blogs are the blogs that are the most visited or linked to at the time of the data collection and are typical of personal blogs in one or several distinctive aspects. They can function as virtual spaces where various

parties such as bloggers and audiences congregate and interact, according to the long tail theory ([Anderson](#)). This is, however, not to suggest that non-A-list blogs are not significant and should be marginalized or neglected. Rather, each individual blog collaborates in shaping the virtual reality brought forth in the blogosphere ([Bruns and Jacobs](#)). Individualized experiences, feelings, and emotions are being transformed into and transforming human history. In the era of Web 2.0 ([a term coined by O'Reilly](#)), where user-generated content, interaction, and social participation are gaining prominence ([Davies and Merchant](#); [O'Reilly and Battelle](#)), the possibility that an individual blog will be noticed is greater than ever before.

3 In the following, I will first introduce some key features of blogs and personal blogs, and review the previous studies relating to the research questions of this study. This section will also include discussion of the connections between personal blogs and performances by referring to Judith Butler's ([Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'; Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity](#)) conception of performativity. The following section will provide an account of the three personal blogs; in particular, of their influence in the Chinese blogosphere and some of their characteristics. In the third section, I will describe the lifestyle mapping model used for analyzing the selected blogs. The section that follows will present the findings from the analysis as well as a discussion of the findings. The focus will be on the key features of lifestyle construction in the selected blogs, the forms of performative capital, and the ways in which gendered performances are related to social norms in personal blogs. In the conclusion, I will discuss how norms and gendered performances are signified as related to Butler's conception of performativity.

Blogs, personal blogs, and performances

4 The blog, also known as weblog, is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so that the most recent post appears first ([Walker](#)). The blog is not a simple construct but rather a composite of multiplicities as a result of technological innovations and cultural and linguistic changes. In particular, blogs are locales where their owners can present themselves through multimodal semiotics resources such as written texts, emoticons, images, sounds, animations, and hyperlinks. The popularity of blogs depends largely on the performances of blogs rather than on technical add-ons such as tags, trackbacks, and links, and non-technical factors such as marketing promotions and blog service provider manipulation. What do blogs consist of and how do they essentially figure as role models in their reach to the wide websphere in that the majority of the audience may rely on contents or topics of interest for developing their social networks. They can either

do key word search in Google or Bing or get to know certain blogs through friends on other online locales, events, and channels such as emailing lists, discussion groups, forums, BBSs, and second life. A focus on the performance side of the blog, it seems, is a useful lens for understanding the emergence of the blogosphere.

5 Taking Butler's ([*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*](#); [*Butler Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*](#); [*Butler Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*](#)) conception of performativity as the theoretical underpinning, this study seeks to explain "how the subversion of power emerges within a dialectical relation between constraint and agency" ([Boucher 112-13](#)). It also tends to describe the culturally influenced character of identity. Identity is then generated through repeated citations of norms and their extensions. The starting point of Butler's argument is social constructivist in essence ([Boucher](#)). It rejects the essentialist conception of gender as a substantial difference expressing an underlying natural sexual (or biological) division. Gender is seen as being constructed through social rituals that are supported by institutional power. The implication is that gender is not the expression of a fixed entity but a naturalized social ritual of sexualities and therefore a repeated cultural performance ([Boucher](#); [Carver and Chambers](#); [Lloyd](#); [Jagger](#); [Thiem](#)).

6 Central to Butler's concept is iterability or repetition; that is, a performed action needs to repeat itself a number of times in order to be recognized as performance. Through iterability and re-iterability (Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*) or recurrence (Lemke "Identity, Development, and Desire: Critical Questions"), a referent for particular identity categories is constructed both in the minds of speakers and in a large social discourse. As a key concept related to iterability, resignification further emphasizes that gender parody such as drag reveals that the original identity is in effect an imitation without origin. Gender, then, is not constative but performative. The binary division of gender identity is exposed as a fiction and a norm developing as convention over time. The drag queen's subversive repetition of gender norms displaces the hegemonic universality of heterosexuality, constituting a practical deconstruction of the politics of gender normalization. Resignification then helps subvert the derogatory connotation of drag and convert it into an affirmation of the norm and its constitutive exclusions (Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*). The repetitive and de-contextualized character of performative utterances opens the possibility for the subversion of reigning gender norms through resignification; that is, the repetition of a signification in a new context.

7 A performative perspective approaches the processes through which multitudes of identifications are “authorized, legitimate and unmarked, and others are unauthorized, illegitimate, and marked” (Kulick 149), “undermining conscious attempts to produce and maintain subjective coherence and consistency” (Cameron and Kulick 139). Identifications as processes then view identities as always becoming and never finalized. To study identification is to study the processes by which the relational activities occur (Stone). How gendered norms are reified, rectified, or reversed through (re)iterability, resignification, and identification in a process of performing (Lloyd; Salih) is, then, central to Butler’s performative approach.

8 A Butlerian performativity perspective on personal blogs as performance helps avoid making essentialist divisions in identities such as membership and role (Cameron and Kulick; Coupland and Gwyn). It relates closely to the performative nature of personal blogs as a virtual presence and makes identification the focus. More importantly, with heteronormativity at issue, this performative perspective allows the study to explore how gendered norms are reified in personal blogs and how they are vested with power.

The three Chinese personal blogs

9 Three personal blogs were selected as the cases for this study. The first blog is Muzi Mei’s blog (muzimei muzimei) that was dubbed ‘the mother of Chinese blogs’ and the first de facto A-list personal blog in the Chinese blogosphere (Fang). Muzi Mei was the blogger’s Internet blog name. She was reported to be Li Li (lili) in real life, working as a journalist for a metropolitan magazine in Guangzhou. In mid 2003, Muzi Mei published a number of entries on her blog (Muzi Mei De Boke) describing her sexual encounters with a number of male celebrities. In only a few days, her entries had captured enormous public attention and visits to her blog surged. Blog China (Boke zhongguo at www.bokee.com), the BSP that hosted her blog, broke down as the unprecedented traffic triggered by Muzi Mei’s blog had topped its designed volume. As her blog was visited and continuously reported, Muzi Mei’s popularity shot up and the new technology she was using for her writing was soon recognized by Chinese Internet users. Boke, a Chinese term for the blog, gained instant media currency both online and offline. Muzi Mei was then nicknamed ‘the mother of Chinese blogs’ (zhongguo boke zhimu) on many occasions in acknowledgement of her influence upon Chinese blogs (Fang).

10 The second blog is Liumang Yan’s blog (liumang yan liumang yan) that describes life transitions of a ‘middle-aged’ woman who divorced her husband and migrated from the

countryside to the city to seek employment and ultimately a new life. Liumang (流氓) means hooligan, rascal, or rogue characters that have little respect for laws and rules. It used to be a gendered term in Chinese referring to male violators often associated with sexual harassment (predominantly of women) as shua liumang (耍流氓), a kind of male-initiated action and behavior which is often condemned by women in Chinese society. Unlike other female bloggers before her (e.g., Muzi Mei, Zhuying Qingtong, and Sister Lotus), Liumang Yan did not acquire her publicity or ‘notoriety’ in the Chinese blogosphere as an Internet newbie; she was rather an experienced Internet user or veteran (daxia 大侠).

11 Under her assumed net name or ID (*wangming* 网名) Yuyan Danfen, which literally means *a swift flies alone*, Liumang Yan actively and extensively participated in discussions at Tianya (literally meaning ‘the corner of the world’) BBS (Bulletin Board System), one of the earliest and most influential BBSs in the Chinese Internet. However, her vigorous contribution did not disseminate her name beyond the local virtual communities at Tianya. In April 2004, she altered her net name to Liumang Yan and started blogging on Tianya’s newly launched blogging service as a registered user. On 23 March 2005, Liumang Yan uploaded two of her nude photos exhibiting her so-called ‘old woman’s body’ (*lao nüren de shenti*). In just a few hours’ time, her blog was inundated with a large number of visits and comments, which temporarily paralyzed the BSP hosting her blog. Reports, comments, and criticisms of Liumang Yan’s blog from newspapers and tabloids were searched on major web searching engines such as Baidu (www.baidu.com), Google China (*Guge* www.google.com.cn), and Yahoo China (*Yahu* at www.yahoo.com.cn). In just a few days, Liumang Yan’s blog reached celebrity status in the Chinese blogosphere. She was listed as a representative of Chinese women online who use their body as a tool and a place for publicity (*shenti chaozuo*) and named one of the top ten ‘shameless Chinese women’ of the year 2005 together with *Furong Jiejie* (sister lotus) and other Internet notorieties and celebrities. As a result of the sensation her blog had triggered, ‘the phenomenon of Liumang Yan’ became a nominee of the top 10 Chinese Internet Events on Xinlang Web Portal in 2005 (*2005 zhongguo hulianwang shida xianxiang*).

12 The third blog is Acosta’s blog, a blog of a young man whose lifestyle is seen as iconic for young men of the emerging middle class in China and their pursuit of masculinity, which in Chinese can be rephrased as “manly demeanor” (*nanxing qizhi*) or “determined and decisive” (*yanggagn zhiqi*). Given that equivalent terms and concepts for masculinity are not available in Chinese, masculinity in this study is viewed as “being and becoming men”; that is, as a concept and processes that entails fluidity and changes in context (for detailed

discussion of this concept in Chinese context, please see the discussion section). The blog's Chinese name, Jidiyangguang (极地阳光; literally meaning *polar sunlight*), first appeared in March 2006 on Xinlang BSP. The blog was also widely known as Acosta, which is a Portuguese surname referring to people living by the sea. It is used as a part of the web address of the blog (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/acosta>). The name Acosta, as an interview on Chinese Business Morning View in 2006 (<http://ent.sina.com.cn/s/m/p/2006-07-10/10461152107.html>) revealed, had been used by the blogger for five or six years prior to his commencement of blogging. The appearance of Acosta's blog in the Chinese blogosphere was sensational. In just three months, between March and June 2006, Acosta's blog hit the Chinese blogosphere with 40 million visits. This number has continued to increase ever since. According to Xinlang BSP's A-list ranking at that time, Acosta's blog was the third most visited blog in China, marginally falling behind two celebrity blogs. One is Laoxu's blog authored by a super star (singing, acting, and directing) in show business and the other is Han Hai's blog whose author is known nationwide as a prodigious writer and a Formula 4 racer. Acosta was depicted, by contrast, as a common person who was only known by a handful of people before he started blogging. As a result, his blog was advocated as a victory by the grassroots over the elite and the powerful.

Personal blogs and lifestyle mapping

13 The majority of personal blogs concentrate on personal experiences, activities, opinions, interests, and attitudes ([Herring et al.](#)), which makes content a significant part in examining blogs' performance. Content is similar to what Lemke ("[Travels in Hypermodality](#)") terms presentational meanings. In Lemke's (*[Textual Politics: Discourse and Social Dynamics](#)*) conception, presentational meanings refer to the construction of how things are in the natural and social worlds by their explicit description as 'participant', 'process', 'relation' and 'circumstance' ([Halliday](#)), standing in particular semantic relation to one another across meaningful stretches of text, and from text to text. Lemke ("[Travels in Hypermodality](#)") argues that presentational meanings are those which present several state of affairs. People construe a state of affairs principally from the ideational content of texts, that is, what they say about process, relation, event, participant, and circumstance. As Kress and van Leeuwen ([1996](#)) argue, the same terms can be applied to images, recognizing what is shown or portrayed, whether figural or abstract.

14 In fact, those aspects of content can be viewed as elements that contribute to the imaging of a bloggers' lifestyle. Presentational meanings of personal blogs in this regard can

be directed at investigating different aspects of lifestyles on blogs. The fact that personal blogs function as lifestyle media suggests that content analysis of personal blogs should focus on lifestyle features. Therefore, instead of following a linguistic approach to examine the ideational functions of personal blogs, this component of the analysis examines four dimensions of lifestyle based on Wei's (993) framework: 1) activities, 2) interests, 3) opinions, and 4) demographics. Relating blog content to lifestyle identification personal blog as identity construction is concerned with questions relating to one's being, becoming, behaving, and belonging. As Wei's lifestyle positioning originally was designed to investigate the market related to consumers and their consumption, this study repositions them to accommodate these characteristics of personal blogs. Figure 1 sums up the four dimensions of the adapted framework.

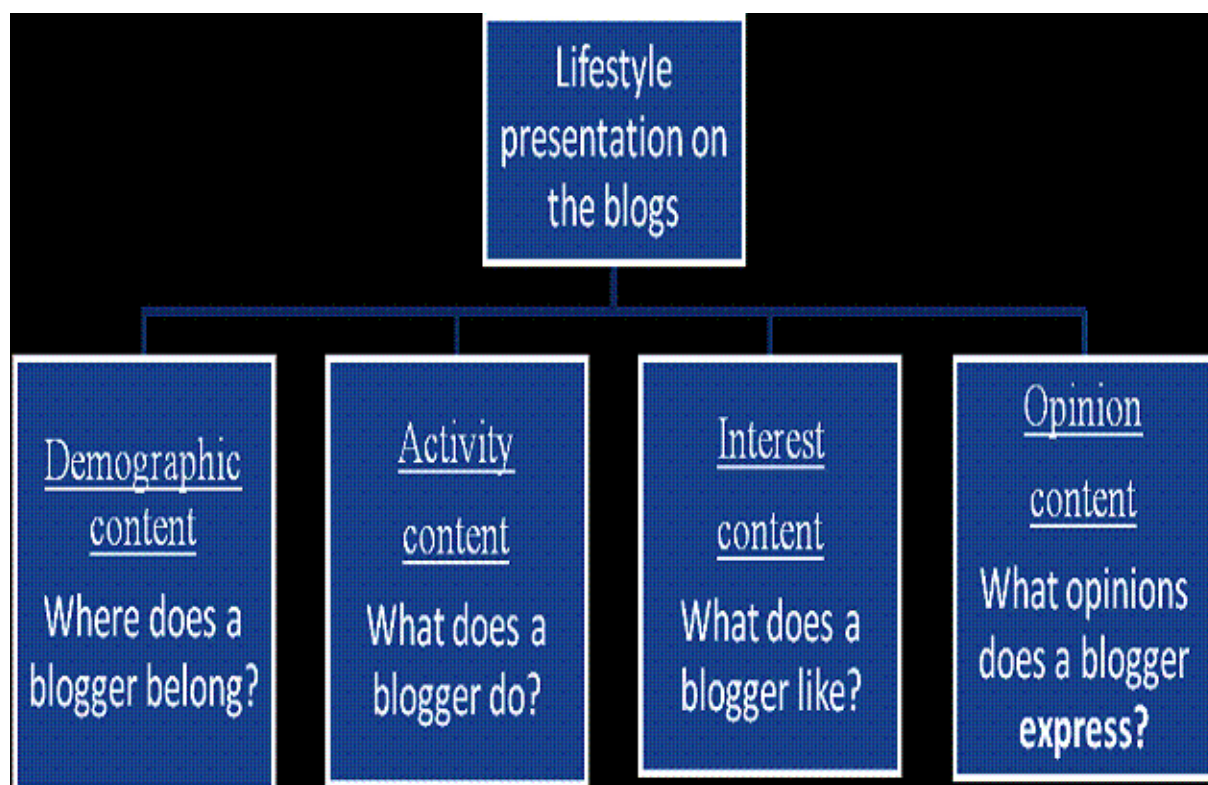


Fig. 1: Dimensions of lifestyle content

15 In this model, activity content focuses on activities that a blog may present about the blogger and others. The analysis focuses on deeds, experiences, and actions. Activities such as going shopping, participating in charity groups, or doing sports for leisure are all taken into account. Opinion content focuses on views and attitudes a blogger expresses regarding social, economic, political, and cultural issues, events, phenomena, institutions, and people. Interest content refers to the blogger's preference for particular phenomena, institutions, relations,

events, and people. Demographic content, which differs in definition from that used by Wei in her research, relates to spatial and institutional aspects that bloggers or other people were involved with or were affiliated with geographically, culturally, and institutionally. Where bloggers were born, raised, have worked, or have travelled helps construct and represent bloggers' course of being, becoming, and belonging, persistently contributing to their identification and position in the blogosphere.

16 Content analysis in terms of activity, interest, opinion, and demographic is undertaken at two levels, that is, the blogsite level and the blog entry level, both of which are related to each other. At the blogsite level, major themes are identified and discussed. Identifying the content themes at this level largely depends on observation since a blogsite is above all a visual composition. At the blog entry level, the content of all entries within the designated data collecting period are re-categorized in terms of activity, opinion, interest, and demographics. The entries are numbered and labeled with their names and the date of publishing. The content of each blog entry is read and categorized into related dimensions of personal lifestyles. Themes (such as sexuality, desire, alienation) that surfaced through the data analysis are identified and used to label the collected blog entries. It is argued that these dimensions of content in personal blogs are not just indicators of lifestyle patterns but are also an index of various identity-related performances.

Gendered performances relating to norms

17 The analysis revealed that performances in the three blogs were constructed through semiotic references associated with gender, each of which has its own idiosyncrasies. Table 1 summarizes the lifestyle features of the three personal blogs.

Table 1 Lifestyle mapping of the three personal blogs

	Muzi Mei	Liumang Yan	Acosta
Demographics	living in a southern metropolitan city; a school student; a college graduate; having extended families; a magazine journalist; an experience	a 'middle-aged' woman; a woman with extended families; a divorced single woman; a mother; a woman raised up in the countryside; a high school graduate in a rural area; a self taught writer; a private school	a Chinese young man; a Chinese metropolitan; a rich person; a middle-class member; a man with wide social connections and relations

	Internet user	teacher; a data entry worker in a small market company; an experienced Internet user; an active BBS participator; a women's rights activist; a migrant (from the countryside to the city and from the east of Mainland China to the southwest)	
Activities	blogging; Internet surfing; writing; partying; smoking; love making; reporting and editing; socializing; shopping; travelling	data entering; Internet surfing and flaming; socializing; writing	travelling; blogging; acting; reading; socializing; hanging out with friends; volunteering; photographing; performing; shopping; walking pets
Interests	sex-related topics and practice; gender relations; men; literature; philosophy; thinking	different types of men; gender relations	writing; reading; making friends
Opinions	gender relations; gender socialization; gender divisions and hierarchies	sex issues; women's rights; gender relations; different types of men; different types of women; family relations	Devoted to charity; valuing friendship; befriending pets; valuing family ties and relations

The table shows that the performance of the three personal blogs concentrates on performing gendered roles and relations. Muzi Mei's blog and Liumang Yan's blog are representative of conflicting images of women whereas in Acosta's blog, an image of the "new man" is presented. Notably, the three personal blogs are associated with the bloggers' sexualities. Muzi Mei's blog constructed a rebellious and self-contained femininity. In Liumang Yan's

blog, macho (being manly) and emphasized femininity (stereotyped femininity) are intertwined with several different types of masculinities such as hegemonic and feminized masculinities. Macho femininity alludes to women with traditionally masculine characteristics, being physically strong, mentally tough, and independent while emphasized femininity reinforces the image of women being weak, soft, and dependent on men. They are certainly categorizations built upon stereotyped perceptions of sexualities and should be introduced with precautions. Acosta's blog, on the other hand, establishes a representation of harmonized masculinities, which corresponds closely to the recent ideological advocacies of the Party for building a harmonious society.

18 Clearly, relations and connections with other people play a significant role in representing their performances. In Muzi Mei's blog, such relations are demonstrated mainly as interactions with other men and women in her professional practice as a journalist, an organizer of a student literary association, and her socializing activities such as partying as well as her interactions with the other gender (boys mainly) in school life. In Liumang Yan's blog, such relations are manifested mainly in family relations, her socializing, and mostly in her online participation. Demographics such as age, location, space, education are equally important in the bloggers' performances, each of which reflect on the bloggers' lifestyle differently and create difference in terms of class and wealth, namely, migrant workers (Liumang Yan), professional writers (Muzi Mei), and the wealthy middle upper class (Acosta).

19 Although both Muzi Mei's blog and Liumang Yan's blog are authored by women, the two women and their femininities are contrastive. Muzi Mei is a metropolitan young woman who was born, raised, educated, and employed in the city and whose lifestyle construction revolves around her professional practice. Because she was a financially and socially able woman, Muzi Mei seemed to be independent of men apart from forming sexual relations. By contrast, Liumang Yan is a migrant woman worker from the countryside where men had dominant influences on women. The legitimization of her as a woman was mostly realized through constant relations to men. The performance of the women in the two blogs is, to some extent, reflective of layers of social norms and of the bloggers' perception of them. In Butler's notion of performativity, gendered norms may be reified, rectified, or reversed in a process of performing through resignification ([Lloyd](#); [Salih](#)). In the following, I will discuss the particular ways in which performances in the three personal blogs are related to gendered norms.

Norm corresponding and compliance

20 Whatever kind of gendered performance an A-list personal blog may fashion, be it a particular kind of woman or sexuality, it either conforms with the mainstream social norms of gender or foresees, evokes, and models a growing trend of gendered norms. Muzi Mei, for example, is representative of the frontier of urban professional women whose lifestyles are knitted closely with those of women worldwide ([Rofel](#); [McLaren](#)). The alienated yet independent woman of Muzi Mei somehow mimics the women in postindustrial countries and entails a desire to become a member of their community. Liumang Yan by contrast depicts migrant women workers' struggle in cities in the era of the computer, Internet, and social networking media ([Han](#)). The appearance of her blog to some extent displays a different life path for women in the countryside. That is, digital participation may create an interface that has dissolved the divide between the urban and the country, drastically altering lifestyles and even redefining the process of urbanization. Undoubtedly, Acosta's harmonized masculinity swiftly echoes the media creation of men's crisis and the desire for new models of masculinity that can accommodate the changes of Chinese men and the social conditions. In order to stand out as A-list, it seems, personal blogs need to connect their gendered performance to upcoming desires of the societal in various ways. For example, alongside his reflections of life, Acosta expresses his desire for friendship and public service as shown in the following:

Extract 1

"We can be happier with friends' company. With friends, we are no longer a lonely island. We will no longer feel lonely, cold, and weak when waves arrive."

Friendship is praised as essential for interpersonal relationships and is viewed as universal. Similarly, voluntary work and charity projects are also highly evident through the blogroll of Acosta's blogsite as well as his blog entries.

Norm revival and reinforcement

21 One way of corresponding to social norms is to revive and reinforce them with newly added elements. Traditional and extant norms are not useless but can be used to manipulate social dynamics and emotions. Many of them are indeed very noteworthy and influential in conveying a blog's performance. For example, Acosta's harmonized masculinity is reminiscent of traditional scholarly masculinity, which is characterized by absolute loyalty to the monarchy. For some researchers, scholarly masculinity may be reflective of scholars' desire, following Confucius's tenets, for absolute control of power in the name of doing social

deeds as a philosophical king, which can be interpreted as an elite ideal that combines knowledge and power or as a the saint and the king (*neisheng waiwang*) ([Fowler and Fowler](#); [Leezenberg](#)). Such masculinity has been criticized as feminine submission to patriarchal power which in the past in the monarchic period was embodied by the royal successors ([Song](#)) and in the socialist China by the Communist Party and its leaders ([Lu](#)).

22 The currently dominant ideology in China of building a harmonious society caters to this scholarly desire and advocates returning to the nation's traditions for a reconstruction of the 'Chinese' so as to consolidate the submission to the Party and maintain social stability and solidarity ([Dillon](#)). Relating his "feminized" masculinity to his metropolitan and globalization peers, Acosta, for instance, reinvigorates his male blog persona and masculinity to comply with mainstream patriarchal norms ([Evans](#)). In Liumang Yan's blog, traditional femininity is not abandoned but rather regarded highly as an emphasized or ideal femininity that symbolizes morality, cultivation, and grace, seemingly superior to other types of femininity and unattainable for most women. By reinforcing the superiority of the traditional or classic emphasized femininity, Liumang Yan, to some extent, expresses her consensus with social order between men and women, especially the ideal match ([Zhong](#)) between the scholar (*caizi*) and the beauty (*jiaren*). In the following extract, Liumang Yan encouraged men to have more than one sex partner.

Extract 2

"I always object to the norm that men should have only one sex partner in their lifetime, which would be boring. A perfect metaphor for that would be a single note in an entire composition."

Liumang Yan concluded that an ideal man should keep his virginity for the woman he loved before marriage and his loyalty to his wife throughout their marriage.

Norm interrogation

23 Questioning norms indicates the bloggers' awareness of some of the thinking that has been taken for granted and the tensions between bloggers' performance and the existing social norms. Some of these norms may hinder bloggers from expressing themselves. Liumang Yan, for example, reinterpreted the Chinese ideographic character for men so as to interrogate gender relations between men and women. Men's dominance in China ([Zheng](#); [Barlow](#) *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*) in her interpretation is not only questioned but also challenged by her tentative suggestion that men are in fact at the service of women in sexual intercourse as indicated by the Chinese character for man (*nan* 男). Liumang Yan reinterpreted the Chinese character for man (*nan*) as follows:

Extract 3

“The character for man (nan男) shows that Li (strength 力) is beneath Tian (land田). Please note that Li’s not beyond but beneath Tian, which means men are those who can’t help but labour on the land. Men are nothing but convenient tools for women to use for their sex arousal.”

Labour on the land is a pun in Chinese. It can be read ideographically as a man working on the farm or as having cultural associations of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. A woman or a woman’s vagina is compared to a patch of land which a man can till (with his penis) in the missionary position. Liumang Yan’s reinterpretation argues that the position should be reversed, with a woman’s vagina riding on a man’s penis. This comparison is much too obscene for the average Chinese to agree with because using sexual intercourse positions as metaphors is seen as taboo in China ([Pan](#)), which may have contributed to the blog’s quick popularity.

24 Muzi Mei further challenges men’s dominance over women in her response to a male journalist’s request for an interview. On 23 August 2003, in response to a journalist’s request for an interview, Muzi Mei blogged,

"[for an interview?], only if you agree to make love to me first... The length of the interview depends on how long you can last in bed."

This response was truly embarrassing for a journalist at that time in China when gender relations including discussions of sex were considered secret or were taboo in public ([Farrer](#)). The journalist had never anticipated that his request for an interview would turn out to be a media fuss. He hesitated and eventually chose to withdraw the request. In this incident, Muzi Mei’s blog persona was in control of not only sexual intercourse but also of the professional practice of interviewing. The function of sexual intercourse was not only questioned but otherwise redefined instrumentally as a facilitator of professional interaction. Questioning gendered norms, then, may be an important aspect in a blogger’s performance.

Norm negation and renunciation

25 On some occasions, bloggers may choose to refuse and negate certain social norms in the process of enacting their gendered performances when particular norms are no longer of relevance or have become blockage. Negation is necessary in creating room for bloggers to dissociate with old or obsolete norms and to proceed with new or useful ones, the extent of which depends on their purposes of blogging as well as the available resources for enacting their performances. Renouncing social norms in the two female blogs may entail actions that deny the dominance of particular gender norms which are no longer held valid or relevant to

the bloggers and their groups and communities. Muzi Mei viewed ordinary socializing occasions with ‘good men and women’ as unbearably boring and was determined to seek alternatives.

Extract 4

“I feel extremely bored each time I get together with good men and women. I can’t stay with ‘normal’ people. They don’t belong to my ‘comfort zone’.”

Liumang Yan dismissed women’s dependence on men and encouraged women to seek pleasure from their sexual encounters. Liumang Yan urged that women “should practice hooliganism” on men to seek sexual pleasure actively rather than passively. For instance, women should take revenge on men and do what men could do such as having mistresses or extramarital affairs, expressing a very strong feminist discontent with the gender status quo in China. For Liumang Yan, sex is a defining character of a woman and an integral, vital part of a woman’s body that gives life as the extract below indicates.

Extract 5

“Most importantly, with sex, I’m still a woman; without it, I am void.”

For a middle-aged woman, sex is even more important. She likened sex to a woman as rain to plants: without sex, a woman’s life is singular and boring. Liumang Yan contended her claim that sexuality is important for women and a vital connection between men and women. She also emphasized the relevance of sexuality to a woman’s life course and explored various ways to present sexuality through body and performance while differentiating sexuality from libertinism.

26 In Acosta’s position, however, renouncing gender norms initiated an affirmative action that connects his performance to the mainstream or the emergent mainstream norms. For example, alongside hanging out with friends, going to the cinema, and walking his pet, Acosta also describes his activities at home. Interestingly, it seems that part of his daily routine is also related to household chores as the following image extract illustrates:



Fig. 2.

In fact, it is not common in many parts of China for men to help in the kitchen. In many villages and towns, it is still considered a disgrace for men to help with dinner preparation and other household chores. In the city, however, a defining character of a so-called ‘new good man’ (xinhao nanren) is the willingness to share housework with women. By distancing himself from Mao’s advocacy for proletariat masculinity (muscular, strong, illiterate, labourer) (Louie; Zhong), Acosta realigned his blog persona of a new man with the desire of the newly emergent middle class in Chinese society (Goodman; Dillon) and strove to become a spokesperson for them. This negating process, as Butler (*Undoing Gender*) suggests, is not necessarily rebellious, defiant, or revolutionary; oftentimes, it is simply a need to remove the old norms to accommodate the new ones.

Norm reclaiming and remaking

27 In order to enact their performances, bloggers may also take extreme actions to reclaim and sometimes remake social norms. For example, in the following extract, Muzi Mei’s elaborate recount of her smoking experience was not to categorize her woman as ‘bad’ or ‘indecent’ but rather to provide her woman with an instrument to become equal to or, as normal as, men.

Extract 7

“Three years ago, when I was still at college, a photo in which I was smoking was published in the supplement of a newspaper with a special topic on woman writers who smoke. Together with me were writers such as Zhang Mei, Zhang Niang, Yi Lichuan, and so on, but I wasn’t a writer and I was the youngest.”

Similarly, sex is seen by Muzi Mei and Liumang Yan as a social action for women’s empowerment both physically and symbolically. Liumang Yan in particular viewed sex as an instrument to defy men’s economic and sexual dominance over women and demanded remoulding gender relations. Sexual intercourse was then seen as a field and action for women’s empowerment. Norms that were distributed by others or other genders are then entangled in their blogging and refashioned for their own use.

28 Liumang Yan’s blog name as a textual avatar in effect exemplifies this reclaiming process. The first part of her blog’s name *Liumang* (流氓) refers to hooligan, rascals, or rogues who retain little respect for laws and rules. This term used to be a gendered term in Chinese derivatively associated with men’s sexual harassment of women (*shua liumang*). Using this term as a part of her blog name, Liumang Yan seems to declare her sexual prowess over men and reject the image of women as prey or victims in cases of sexual harassment. Reclaiming and remaking gender norms may be seen as a way to gender empowerment, although it most commonly refers to women’s empowerment (Yan).

29 The ways that the two female blogs relate to social norms seem more complicated and multidimensional than in the male blog. Instead of being compliant to norms, they problematize, challenge, and negate many of the norms. Whether they are aware of their gender status as women and their feminist position, their blogging portrayed them as repressed, victimized, and dominated by men. Nevertheless, they were obliged to revolt through interrogating sexual norms, which in developed countries has posed a threat to men's dominance and induced discourses on the crisis of men or masculinity (Laughey; Whitehead). By contrast, women do not seem to play any role in Acosta's submission to social norms in that women are not regarded as a threat or powerful others. Rather, Acosta's harmonized masculinity is a combination of the traditional pious masculinity characterized by scholars and officials (Song) and the new globalized masculinity that conforms to a "superior" culture and ideologies (Pan). Recognized as effeminate and subordinated to hegemonic masculinity, this kind of masculinity may relate itself to the powerful "us": the nation state, the Party, and their institutional power (Zhong; Brownell and Wasserstrom "Introduction: Theorizing Femininities and Masculinities"). Through performing and disseminating such masculinities, powerful social groups and institutions are sending messages to other less powerful social groups their expectations of male behaviors (and lifestyles) for the sake of maintaining social solidarity and stability.

Conclusion

30 The women performed by the two female blogs are representative of diverse social classes and their struggles while the young man in Acosta's blog entails a call for reconstructing Chinese masculinities. It may be, in effect, a counter against so-called Western hegemony that is rendered by Chinese authorities and intellectuals as victimization through feminization of Chinese men (e.g., Barlow *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*; Zhong). This reconstruction may be realized by such means as capitalizing on Chinese economic growth to be more internationalized or globalized and reviving the traditional notion intellectual masculinity as physically lacking but mentally loyal and submissive, as also noticed by other researchers (e.g., Brownell and Wasserstrom *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*). Unlike the two female blogs, Acosta's performance was enacted without the presence of women and direct referencing to gender relations. His blog entries center on performing a new man and a new type of Chinese masculinity recognizable as 'harmonized masculinity'. His new man may be a timely response to the Party's propaganda for building 'a harmonious society', which is built upon

China's economic progress and the Party's endeavor to prevent social crisis (Dillon). The performance of Acosta's new man and masculinity, similar to that of the two female blogs, is also conditioned by layered social norms and conventions. The three blogs may have some norms in common and some norms favored by one blog may be challenged or negated by the other two blogs or vice versa. The reasons for this can be related to their performances on one hand; on the other hand, they can be again related to their differences in lifestyle positioning.

31 Nevertheless, the key to (re)signifying social norms in the performances of the personal blogs depends on (dis)identification as argued by Butler ([*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*](#); [*Butler Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*](#); [*Butler Undoing Gender*](#); [*Butler Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*](#)) and other researchers ([Lloyd](#); [Loxley](#); [Robinson](#); [Salih](#)). It seems, however, identification itself cannot be seen as a singular or a coherent process. Rather, it can be refashioned as corresponding identification (solidarity), re-identification (with something old or modified), and dis-identification (with something viewed as useless, outdated, malicious, or problematic) ([Fuss](#); [Brody](#)). Identification, being elastic, mobile, multiple, and volatile, stresses the process in which the kind of performance is recognized in relation to certain norms. It does not matter whether this process is established explicitly by the blog through manipulating forms of social capital or implicitly by the audience's recognition of various gendered social norms. Dis-identification emphasizes that some norms can be taken away or abandoned in performances. Re-identification may realign or revive some norms in performances. Their relations are not only structural relations between an individual and a collective but are also 1) the outcome of the reflective process that relates self to collective, and 2) reproduced through shared symbols (of solidarity). Nevertheless, performances on personal blogs reveal that norms are strategically associated in layers of identification that are contentiously configured ([Paechter](#); [Rasmussen](#)).

32 Due to the diversity of performances in blogs, gender in this study is, then, produced at the individual level while it entails a fundamental aspect of human society, be it online or offline. Personal performances are social and may constitute social relations, actions, and consequences of various kinds and at various scales, depending on the performers' positions and the niche in which the performances are staged ([Alexander](#)). More importantly, personal blogs, as the earliest and the most common type of blogs, are the typical media, means, and sites for bloggers to construct their identities through expressing opinions, emotions, and above all, the self or selves of bloggers, whether the blogger is owned by a single author or may be a creation by many authors. The prevalence of normativity or heteronormativity (in

form of laws, rules, regulations, or conventions) of a society ([Butler Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity](#)), is in effect an embodiment and coercion of heterosexuality. Unveiling and challenging norms in personal blogs involves examining their very grounding in gender performances and their representations, realized not only in subversive practices such as interrogation, confrontation, and negation but also in seemingly submissive practices such as confirmation, compromise, and even reinforcement. As can be seen here, gender identities are at the same time discursively (and semiotically) produced and destabilized while the social order still rests on heteronormativity ([Gamson and Moon](#)). Performances of gendered identities in Chinese personal blogs are nevertheless intertwined with or even constitutive of, power relations and struggles in Chinese society.

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