

Praise or Discipline? - A Communication Analysis of the "Female Advantage in Civil Service Exam" Discourse

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Abstract. In recent years, the discourse that "female candidates are more suitable for the civil service exam" has circulated widely on Chinese social media platforms like Xiaohongshu. While appearing to praise women, this discourse may reinforce traditional gender roles. This study critically examines this discourse, using discourse and audience reception analysis to investigate its construction and dissemination on Xiaohongshu. Data includes popular success stories, help-seeking posts, controversial discussions, and user comments. Findings reveal three discursive layers: at the discourse level, traits like attentiveness and stability are naturalized as female; at the institutional level, celebratory framing masks public sector career gaps, including slowed women's promotion after 34; at the subject level, female candidates face a double bind of career success versus family priority. The study concludes this "female advantage" discourse is postfeminist contradictory rhetoric that disciplines women through the language of praise.

Keywords: gender discourse, postfeminism, social media, civil service exam

1. Introduction

The civil service exam in China has become one of the most competitive career entry points, particularly for young women. In recent years, social media platforms have witnessed the widespread circulation of a specific discourse claiming that "female candidates are more suitable for the civil service exam." This discourse is often supported by data showing that women comprise a majority of successful candidates in certain recruitment processes.

Existing research on gender and the civil service exam in China has primarily focused on two areas. Existing research has examined gender disparities in public sector promotion and feminist discourses on Chinese social media.

This study addresses three specific research questions. First, it examines how this discourse is constructed through narrative templates and key rhetorical strategies. Second, it explores how audiences respond to, negotiate, or resist this discourse in comment sections. Third, it investigates the hidden assumptions about gender roles underlying this seemingly celebratory discourse.

Using discourse analysis and audience reception analysis, this study examines three types of Xiaohongshu posts: popular "success story" posts, help-seeking posts asking whether women should pursue the civil service exam, and controversial discussions about what the civil service exam means for women. User comments are analyzed using Hall's encoding/decoding model. This research

contributes to the field of communication and gender studies by revealing how contemporary Chinese social media discourses participate in the reproduction of traditional gender roles under the guise of praise and empowerment.

2. Literature review

Existing research relevant to this study falls into three categories: studies on gender disparities in China's public sector, studies on social media and gender discourse in China, and studies on postfeminist discourse in digital contexts.

2.1. Gender disparities in China's public sector

A growing body of literature has documented gender inequalities within China's public sector. Research indicates that while women have achieved parity or even majority representation in civil service recruitment examinations, significant disparities persist in career advancement. Liu, Wang and Zhang found that although women and men show similar promotion trajectories before age 34, a significant gap emerges after this age, with women holding positions 21% lower than their male counterparts by age 42 [1].

Other studies have examined the structural barriers facing female public servants. Ning used grounded theory to identify five factors affecting women's career development in the public sector: [2]. Among these, occupational culture and gender orientation were found to be particularly significant, as workplace norms often implicitly favor male leadership styles. Similarly, another study noted that traditional gender division of labor leads to two consequences: the formation of gender stereotypes and the reinforcement of biased gender culture [3].

More critically, research has documented that informal mechanisms favor male candidates persist in recruitment processes, such as interview scoring biases and job descriptions implicitly targeting male applicants [4]. These findings suggest that the apparent "female advantage" in exam performance masks ongoing institutional discrimination.

2.2. Social media and gender discourse in China

A separate strand of literature examines how gender discourses circulate on Chinese social media platforms. One study analyzed postfeminist discourses in female empowerment advertisements on social media, examining how ostensibly empowering messages can simultaneously reinforce traditional gender expectations [5].

Specific attention has been paid to platform-specific discourse practices. Research on Xiaohongshu has analyzed how female users construct their identities through content creation, revealing that seemingly empowering messages about "becoming a better woman" are shaped by platform algorithms and commercial logics [6]. Another study examined how divorced women present themselves on Xiaohongshu, finding that the platform's emphasis on visual aesthetics and aspirational lifestyles shapes the way women narrate personal transitions [7].

2.3. Postfeminist discourse in digital contexts

The concept of postfeminism provides a useful framework for understanding contemporary gender discourses. Postfeminist sensibility is characterized by the naturalization of gender differences, the emphasis on individual choice, and the simultaneous incorporation of feminist and anti-feminist ideas [8]. In digital contexts, postfeminist discourses often appear as "empowerment" narratives that

celebrate women's achievements while quietly reinstating traditional expectations about femininity and domesticity.

3. Theoretical framework

This study draws on three theoretical perspectives to analyze the "female advantage in civil service exam" discourse on Xiaohongshu: postfeminist sensibility, framing theory, and encoding/decoding model. Each theory addresses a different layer of the communication process.

3.1. Postfeminist sensibility and the contradictory subject

The concept of postfeminist sensibility, developed by Rosalind Gill, describes a contemporary cultural climate in which feminist ideas are simultaneously incorporated and repudiated [8]. Unlike earlier forms of feminism that explicitly challenged gender inequality, postfeminist discourse often operates through apparent empowerment. Women are encouraged to be confident, ambitious, and successful, but this empowerment is frequently framed in individualistic terms that obscure structural barriers. Moreover, postfeminist discourse tends to naturalize traditional gender roles by presenting choices that align with these roles as expressions of personal preference rather than social pressure.

In this study, postfeminist sensibility provides a framework for analyzing the paradoxical nature of the "female advantage" discourse. When Xiaohongshu posts claim that women are "naturally" more attentive, patient, and suited to stable careers, they appear to praise women. However, drawing on postfeminist critique, this study argues that such claims subtly reinforce the traditional association between femininity and domesticity. The emphasis on "stability" and "family-friendly" careers, presented as empowering career advice for women, may function as a form of discipline that discourages women from pursuing more competitive or leadership-oriented paths.

3.2. Framing theory

Framing theory suggests that media texts present reality through selective framing [9]. Certain aspects of a phenomenon are made more salient, while others are obscured. Frames operate through specific choices of words, examples, and narrative structures.

This study applies framing theory to analyze the narrative templates of Xiaohongshu posts about women and the civil service exam. The analysis examines what themes are emphasized (e.g., hard work, persistence, good fortune) and what themes are absent (e.g., career ambition, promotion prospects, structural barriers). The repetitive structure of successful posts also reveals how platform algorithms and user expectations shape which frames become dominant.

3.3. Encoding/decoding model

Hall's encoding/decoding model provides a framework for analyzing audience responses to media texts [10]. Hall proposed that audiences do not simply absorb media messages but actively interpret them from three ideal-typical positions: dominant-hegemonic reading, in which the audience accepts the preferred meaning; negotiated reading, in which the audience accepts some elements while modifying others; and oppositional reading, in which the audience rejects the dominant meaning and substitutes an alternative framework.

In this study, the encoding/decoding model is applied to user comments on Xiaohongshu posts. Comments are coded into three categories: those that fully endorse the "female advantage"

discourse; those that express conditional agreement or partial skepticism; and those that explicitly reject the discourse, often arguing that it reinforces stereotypes or ignores structural inequalities. This analysis reveals how the same discourse is received differently across audiences.

4. Findings

This section presents the main findings from the discourse analysis of Xiaohongshu posts and the audience reception analysis of comment sections. Three major findings emerged from the analysis.

4.1. Narrative templates of success stories

The analysis of popular "success story" posts revealed a highly standardized narrative template. Titles typically followed a formula: identity marker (e.g., "second-tier university graduate," "stay-at-home mom," "over 30") plus duration of preparation (e.g., "prepared for X months") plus outcome ("successfully 'ashore'"—a metaphor for passing the civil service exam, a widely used colloquial expression in Chinese internet culture).

The body of these posts emphasized several themes. First, the difficulty of the preparation process was consistently highlighted. Second, the role of luck or good fortune was often mentioned, with expressions such as "fortunately" and "lucky" appearing in most posts. Third, expressions of gratitude towards family members, particularly parents and spouses who provided support during preparation, were common. Notably absent from these posts were discussions of career ambition, desires for promotion, or aspirations for leadership positions. The word "promotion" appeared rarely, and terms such as "career path" or "ambition" were virtually absent.

4.2. Audience reinforcement of stability expectations

Analysis of comment sections revealed that audiences actively reinforced the association between women, the civil service exam, and domestic stability. In response to success stories, comments frequently praised the poster for achieving "stability" and noted that a government job would allow her to "take care of the family". Comments on help-seeking posts asking whether women should pursue the civil service exam commonly advised that the exam was worth taking because government positions provide "time for family" and are "secure", often referred to as the "iron rice bowl" in the Chinese context.

Notably, very few comments advised female users to seek promotion, develop leadership skills, or consider long-term career trajectories within the public sector. When career development was mentioned, it was almost always in the context of avoiding competition rather than pursuing advancement. For example, one comment advised a female user to choose a less competitive position so that she would have "less pressure and more time for the family."

4.3. Evidence of institutional disparities

Although celebratory posts emphasized individual effort and good fortune, existing research provides evidence of institutional gender disparities within China's public sector. Liu, Wang and Zhang documented that women's promotion rates slow significantly after age 34, with a 21% position gap emerging by age 42 compared to male peers [1]. This finding suggests that the "female advantage" discourse, by focusing exclusively on exam performance, obscures the structural barriers that women face later in their careers.

4.4. Contested discourses in controversial events

Beyond the routine success stories and help-seeking posts, controversial events related to women and the civil service exam also revealed the hidden tensions in this discourse. Two typical events drew widespread attention on Xiaohongshu.

The first was the so-called "Civil Service Exam Sister" incident, where a female user who had just passed the civil service exam posted a demand for a 500,000 RMB betrothal gift from her fiancé. This post triggered widespread mockery, with many users coining the phrase "the first sword after landing the civil service exam", mocking the idea that women who passed the exam would immediately use their new status to extract benefits in marriage.

The second event involved a female user who shared her experience of getting a tattoo removed to take the civil service exam. Many netizens mocked her, commenting "Do you think it's that easy to become a civil servant?" These incidents revealed that the civil service exam had been constructed as an exclusive path for "decent women", closely tied to bodily discipline and marital expectations. Women who deviated from the expected norms, either by being too demanding in marriage or by having a tattoo, were seen as violating the implicit rules of this discourse, triggering public backlash.

5. Discussion

The findings presented above reveal a paradoxical discursive operation on Xiaohongshu. While the "female advantage in civil service exam" discourse appears to celebrate women's achievements, it simultaneously reinforces traditional gender expectations. This section discusses three layers of this discursive operation: the discourse level, the institutional level, and the subject level.

5.1. Discourse level: naturalization of gender differences

The analysis of narrative templates shows that "success stories" consistently emphasize traits such as attentiveness, patience and preference for stability. These traits are presented as natural female characteristics rather than socially constructed attributes. This naturalization operates through what Gill identifies as postfeminist sensibility, in which gender differences are reinscribed as natural and unproblematic [8]. Unlike explicit sexism, which can be easily identified and challenged, this postfeminist discourse works through apparent empowerment, making its disciplinary effects harder to recognize.

5.2. Institutional level: obscured structural barriers

While Xiaohongshu posts celebrate individual effort and good fortune, existing research reveals persistent institutional barriers. This finding suggests that the "female advantage" is limited to the examination stage. Once women enter the public sector, they face structural barriers documented in research on China's public sector recruitment and promotion processes. Zhang and Wang identified a cycle of "three lows"—fewer opportunities, less power, and lower representation—that perpetuates women's subordinate status in public organizations [4]. This pattern, combined with the slower promotion trajectory documented by Liu, Wang and Zhang [1], suggests that informal mechanisms favoring male candidates persist even as formal policies promote gender equality. The celebratory discourse on Xiaohongshu, by focusing exclusively on exam success, renders these structural barriers invisible.

5.3. Subject level: the double bind

The consistent emphasis on stability and family-friendliness in both posts and comments constructs a specific vision of what a successful female life should look like. Women who pursue civil service careers are expected to prioritize family responsibilities while also demonstrating professional competence. This produces what Ning termed a "double role conflict" [2]. Unlike male counterparts, who are encouraged to pursue career ambition and leadership positions, female civil servants face implicit pressure to remain in stable, less demanding roles.

6. Conclusion

This study critically examined the "female advantage in civil service exam" discourse as it circulates on Xiaohongshu, a Chinese social media platform with a predominantly young female user base. Through discourse analysis of popular posts and audience reception analysis of user comments, the study reveals three main findings.

First, the discourse is structured around a standardized narrative template—one that foregrounds individual effort, good fortune, and gratitude while systematically suppressing discussions of career ambition, promotion prospects, and structural barriers. Second, audience comments actively reinforce the association between women, civil service careers, and domestic stability, with few users questioning or challenging this association. Third, despite the celebratory tone of the discourse, existing research documents persistent institutional gender disparities within China's public sector, including slower promotion rates for women after age 34.

These findings suggest that the "female advantage" discourse represents what Gill terms a postfeminist contradictory rhetoric [8]. It appears to empower women by celebrating their examination success while simultaneously disciplining them through the re-inscription of traditional gender roles. The emphasis on stability, family-friendliness, and the absence of career ambition serves to channel women into less competitive career trajectories.

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis is based on a limited sample of posts and comments from a single platform. Future research could expand the sample to multiple platforms and include interviews with female civil service exam candidates. Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the understanding of how postfeminist discourses operate on Chinese social media. It reveals that ostensibly empowering messages about women's "advantages" may function as subtle forms of gender discipline, with implications for how scholars and practitioners understand contemporary gender politics in digital spaces.

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