

# ***Construction of Gender Characters under Social Gaze: The Conceptual Alienation of Freedom in Dress and Its Solution***

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**Abstract:** On the Chinese internet, discussions about gender are often focused on by the public. The study aims to interpret how freedom in dress is alienated and discuss the gender characters and the mechanism of social gaze that constructs them. The research implements the method of process tracing in the case study to analyze the phenomenon related to a specific object. This paper includes an objective description and tracking of the event, an analysis of the mechanisms behind the phenomenon, and a generalization of the illustrated mechanism. The conclusion is that the concept of freedom in dress is alienated to be subjective and used as a commendatory phrase. The social gaze is replacing the traditional male gaze in the field and influencing individuals differently. The research emphasizes that academic words are possibly twisted and construct the connection between media, gender, and language. This research will help with understanding the gender discussions of the public and a possible renewed gender model.

**Keywords:** social gaze, twisted concept, freedom in dress, internet field

## **1. Introduction**

Recently, the discussion on gender is gaining more focus on the Chinese internet. Gender and feminism ideas are involved in different contents, including news commentary, literature or history discussion, and interpretation of imagery and textual material. However, due to the lack of scientific methodology and gender-related theories, the conversations often need to be deeper and more objective. Based on continuing attention to gender-related topics, some events provoked peaks of social engagement, discussion, and disagreement. During these peaks, behaviors and speeches in various internet participants are centralized on specific events and themes while they demonstrate some shared characteristics. In the iteration of general discussions and peaks, social gender characters, gender-related concepts, and the mechanisms that construct them potentially alienate from what is observed by public and traditional gender research. This situation requires a more focused and detailed analysis of the Chinese internet environment. This research picks a classical concept in feminism, freedom in dress, and investigates the following questions: how it is alienated, the mechanism of alienation, and how it changes the model of the male gaze and the character of women in a specific peak event.

The research will be conducted using a case study's process-tracking method to answer these questions. First, the essay will present an integrated analysis of past ideas of dressing, the male gaze, and related phenomena involving media and technology; then, it will elaborate on the methodology

and explanation of why it is used in the research. In the case study, the entire event will be presented objectively; an Analysis of the alienation of freedom in dress revealed in the event will be given. A generalization will then be made about the logic of the separation with a proposed suggestion of the problem. Within these events that provoked peaks, the debate of the blogger Jingchuanliyu (who will be referred to as “Jing” next) is chosen as the case of this study because it is a recent and influential event that involved many subjects on the Chinese internet.

The research’s significance lies under its complete description of a social event with multiple perspectives centered on freedom in dress, a crucial yet often misunderstood concept, and the extension towards the redefinition of gazing and sovereignty in clothing and the distinction between these terms and others. The research will explain how the gendered character of women is reformed under the influence of the “feminism” trend on the internet and contribute to the description of modern cyber gender structure. The results will be generalized to how concepts or social actions might deviate from their intentions and help to illustrate how the new gender structure is similar and different from the traditional gender structure observed by gender studies in terms of power distribution and objectification. The description and generalization would provide background information for later scholars to study the factors in the newly formed gender structure generally or in other specific modern contexts by providing new perspectives and objectives.

## 2. Literature Review

Authors have long examined the hierarchy and gender violence and interpreted it through different theories. Gender violence might be constructed within the relationship between men and women—sexuality—which represents the inequality of power distribution and involves gender power [1]. Other than theoretical definitions, some other authors argue for the distinction between concepts, such as “violence against women” and “gender-based violence,” for conceptual, political, and practical uses [2].

As a concept related to gender hierarchy, scholars from different fields often discuss the male gaze. Male gaze generally refers to the visual and mental examination and judgments that males exert on females. Men pay more visual attention to females’ sexual body parts, which correlates with their explicit, self-reported, sexually objectifying attitudes toward women [3]. The gazing is physical and mental; it is revealed when subjects create images related to women, as it might portray women objectively [4]. The result of gazing is usually taken by women because women react to an anticipated male gaze by having body shame and social physique anxiety [5].

The male gaze usually takes place in different forms. Internet and media are platforms where the male gaze is generally found and studied. In the fashion industry, the male gaze might be reflected by how the difference of anticipation of influence that the product (advertisement) has on the audience contributes to the difference in women’s attitudes and their feelings of whether they are respected [4]. With the continuum concept, it is argued that sexual abuse or harassment in the form of images should be included in the continuum and measured with other forms of sexual violence [6]. Non-consensual creation and distribution of sexual photos against adults is often misperceived by the public as not a form of gender violence and not criminalized by the legislature [7]. As for the interaction between technology (media) and gender roles, authors argue that women often use the internet for purposes like doing housework [8] and have an assumption that the internet is a “misogynist sphere promoting sexual harassment” [9], and point to the gender inequality of using technologies [10].

Considering the theme of dressing, past scholars have investigated how sex-related dressing plays a role in sexual harassment [11] and how to measure the feeling of freedom in dress [12]. Lowe also proposed a definition of freedom in a dress that, other than decision-making, involves a state of mind of a self-defined feeling of freedom; it is also suggested that the limitation of freedom is for the

common good [13]. The definition was distinguished from conformity in dress as not the opposite but a separate dimension of dress [14].

In the interpretations of gender violence and objectification, scholars often assign women to the objective side and men to the subjective side; this assumption is generally valid given that it is a characteristic of the traditional patriarchal system. However, in the modern context, the relationship between subject and object might be different and requires other perspectives and assumptions approaching the study of gender relationships, so this research will not start from the traditional assumption nor deny it. It will instead discuss and try to reestablish an objectification model that fits the specific context. Scholars saw media and technology as tools used to exert violence or factors that influence the status of women; in this research, the internet will be seen as a field in which the interaction between people will be analyzed. The study will also propose and clarify the definition of freedom in dress, as previous scholars did, in the context and generalize the definition to general practice.

### 3. Process Tracking of Jing's Case

On July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Jing released pictures of herself on internet media Weibo demonstrating herself wearing a blouses with a large transparent area or underwear, and the caption was “at home.” Her fans first commented on the blog, mainly praising the beauty or body of the blogger. Comments of praise stay dominant in the comment section of the original blog. But other voices of criticizing also appeared. One word of the same day with high likes conveys that the blogger is an “internet heresy leader” and her fans are “heresy believers.”

Discussions based on this blog quickly gained attention; on the same day, tags like “Jing’s close-up view picture” were created. “jingchuanliyu” soon got to the top of the ranking of most searched hashtags on Weibo. At 00:25, July 13<sup>th</sup>, Jing posted the first replying blog on Weibo and two more in the morning of July 13<sup>th</sup>, one of them saying: “I think it is beautiful, taking pictures under sunshine is beautiful and like to be in sunshine sometimes, but I also like the home that I live in.” The tag of “Jing replying about pictures” ranked most searched on the same day.

Netizens (refers to Weibo users here) responded to the topic under Jing’s and as individual blogs. Responses as commentaries are highly skewed to the appreciation of Jing, but the responses as personal blogs demonstrate more variety. Positive and negative comments coexist under this topic. While reactions with short formats exploded, reports made by entertainment media are also released on platforms other than Weibo, generally spreading the message that Jing’s blogs are a hot spot on the internet. Some use a small portion of the report to illustrate their attitudes. Media of multiple forms--pictures, videos, and texts--are involved.

The points made are varied in terms of their attitudes and perspectives. The optimistic speeches generally are in two different types: The first type is the pure praise of Jing, which does not involve any feminism or gender ideas but appreciates the appearance of Jing. The second type is that even if there is a sexual message, it is acceptable for Jing to post these pictures. These speeches are likely to appear after the critiques against Jing appeared, and the netizens who made these speeches are likely aware that there might be a feminist or gender argument. They do not deny the existence of sexual messages or gender arguments, but they do not think that Jing should be criticized.

The hostile speeches are mainly critiques based on ideas such as male gaze, soft porn, and freedom of dress. This perspective argues that the pictures of Jing should not be posted. One argument is that these pictures should be seen as soft porn, so she should not post these pictures. This perspective perceives posting the picture online as immoral based on judgments of the extent of exposure, dressing style, background setting, gesture of character, etc., and predictions of the influence of the social environment and the younger generation. These judgments and predictions are often made to be factual judgments as words like “definitely” and “obviously” are used. This perspective sometimes

includes judging whether the characters in pictures are considered beautiful. The decision generally goes to the result that they are either not attractive or only beautiful under the male gaze perspective.

One concept often used in the discussion is “the freedom in dress.” It is used in supportive and critical arguments but with modified meanings. Supportive commentaries argue that as long as the legal requirements are met, any dressing should be considered “freedom in dress.” This opinion often extends to the idea that Jing should not be judged and raised to a level of discussing ideologies and gender conflicts. The negative uses of “freedom in dress” usually include a tendency to define “actual freedom in dress” by excluding specific scenarios. For example, dresses that are “unacceptable for the public” and “unsuitable for occasions” are not included in the freedom of dress; “downwards freedom,” which means demonstrating herself objectively or inferior to men, is not a freedom. Posting the pictures is broadcasting soft porn, a bad behavior of Jing, so the freedom in dress cannot be used to exonerate the soft porn or Jing.

#### **4. Case Analysis of Public Voices about Jing**

In the discussion about Jing, the concept of “freedom in dress” and the model of male gazing are modified.

##### **4.1. Modification of “Freedom in Dress”**

Summarized by Lowe, “freedom in dress” implies the ability of an individual to make and carry out choices about dressing and gain self-satisfaction from the choosing-executing process. Freedom is that “the subject...should be left to do or be what can do or be, without the interference by other persons.” [15] Freedom emphasizes choosing and executing individually without being interfered with by any social body. When the dressing is focused, freedom in dress implies that the choices and execution related to clothing are not interrupted. Although most theorists indicate limitations on freedom, the regulations are not a part of the definition of freedom but an external boundary that sets a limit within which freedom is acceptable. These definitions make freedom an essentially individual and neutral concept that does not correlate with others’ opinions or moral judgments.

Some internet definitions of freedom in dress incorporate non-individual factors exerted by “other social bodies.” Judgments are based on subjective opinions after completing behaviors and lack objective judging standards. These judgments twist the concept of freedom by adding non-individual factors and personal views of others to the definition of freedom and deconstructing the individuality of freedom. The twisted freedom incorporates a limitation within the concept exerted by the subjectivity of others. This characteristic is especially significant within the netizens’ definitions that freedom should be “acceptable for the public” or suitable for occasions.”

The neutrality of freedom is also broken. In constructing twisted freedom, subjective factors being injected are mostly commendatory. This injection equalizes freedom and goodness. In this context, the judgment of whether a dress execution can be freedom is not based on the process of choosing and executing by individual will but the moral judgment exerted by another agent. This modification occurs when the comparison between “downward freedom” and “positive freedom in dress” is made. “Downward freedom” generally refers to dressing against another agent's moral judgment, usually based on whether images demonstrate women as inferior, sexually seductive, or objective. The main argument is that these factors make the dressing choice morally incorrect and thus not a freedom in dress. “Positive freedom in dress,” on the other hand, is choices and executions that match the moral judgment of the other agent.

The comments and judgments against Jing can be interpreted as gazing—as Jing is being judged within an unequal power relation and generates “social physique anxiety.” [5]. Still, gazing against

Jing differs from the traditional concept of the male gaze in terms of its subject, mechanism, and goals.

#### 4.2. Modification of Gazing

Traditionally, gazing initiated by males and taken by females is dominant and well-explored [5]. In the case analyzed above, the behavior of Jing is heavily judged on online platforms. This is consistent with the traditional model of gazing, that females are usually on the side of objects and being considered. However, it is notable that both males and females (based on the identity shown on Weibo) criticize Jing in ways discussed in the previous paragraphs. The power distribution demonstrated in the gazing process is not the same as the traditional one, as the subject changes from males to the social voice as a whole, disregarding gender. Females and males are likely to be judged and gazed at by the social agent, although the judgment might include a generalization from individuals to the corresponding gender or sex.

Although the object is gazed at in most contexts is still Jing and the female she represents, judgments against men for exposing dressing or “impolite” also appear, placing males in the position of being judged. The binary gender relation of power disengages from the structure of gazing. It is replaced by a moral hierarchy that does not significantly correlate with sex or gender, within which social voice is the most timely subject, while all sexes can be the object being judged and gazed at. The criteria gazing based on is not limited to conformity or social norms. “Feminism” is usually incorporated in the critiques against Jing. Jing demonstrating herself as inferior and conveying sexual messages are “harmful” to “feminism’s effort of helping women.” Some netizens believe these pictures would degrade women as a social group and worsen women’s societal situation. Concepts like the male gaze are utilized to exert judgments.

### 5. Theory Conclusion about Freedom in Dress and Social Gaze

Feminism and gender theories first influenced China in the early 20th century as a part of Western theories and philosophies imported into China. It was a heated idea used to criticize the gender traditions of China in social discussions and journals represented by *La Jeunesse* [16]. After over a hundred years of development, feminism has become an embedded part of Chinese popular culture and public opinion.

#### 5.1. Historical Context

Feminist thoughts play a role in the social field of Chinese society and the internet. However, as feminism theories are usually complex and essentially Western-originated, related characteristics demonstrated by the Chinese internet, a heterogeneous social field compared to the origin of feminism, are likely to be alienated in importing, spreading, and interpreting. Feminism theories were imported by scholars of the late 19th century, primarily ones of the new culture movement. Most of these scholars had experience studying in Japan, Europe, or America. These scholars and their students are educated in Western countries and adopt Western philosophies and thus are likely to have a relatively accurate understanding of feminism and other Western philosophies.

However, when this knowledge is passed on and the Chinese social field changes, feminism theories in the Chinese social field are likely to be twisted by misunderstanding, indigenous traditions, and other intentional or unintentional influences. A typical slogan is “Women can hold up half of the sky,” emphasizing the significance of women’s power in society. The represented principle that encouraged superficial equality between genders, partially for economic production reasons, is twisted in the historical context of Chinese culture.

## 5.2. Mechanism of Concepts Modification

In the 21st century, the modification takes place with a similar mechanism. Feminism theories are studied by Chinese scholars, while the ideas brought into the social field by early scholars are still present and probably twisted. Chinese populations, however, have limited sexual education [17] and access to gender and social theories, although many people, especially women, do have the general awareness and initiatives to seek gender equality. As people learn a specific gender-related concept, either twisted or original, unsystematically, they likely need to interpret it more accurately. However, because they have specific initiatives, they are likely to injure subjective ideas into these concepts, twist them to serve their personal goals, and express their interpretations. As twisted concepts, these interpretations rejoin the social field and start the loop by influencing other agents.

## 5.3. Possible Solutions

Improve sexual education for the public. Suppose the populations can learn concepts and theories non-professional but systematically. In that case, the deviation between original images and personal interpretation is expected to be decreased, as well as the divergence between the performances of different people. Create a better language and concept environment for academics. Misinterpretation might also influence academics by creating unaware deviation of concept interpretation. Improving the language and concept environment is likely to increase the effectiveness of research by increasing the quality of interaction between theories. Include gender concepts in the domestic language system. This inclusion helps define concepts in the social field by offering authoritative references and reducing subjective inference to the images.

## 5.4. Mechanism of Gazing Structure Change

Although the gender theories modern people perceive are twisted, women, the formerly weak social group, have better situations, as some men also accept the idea of gender equality. From a formal equality perspective, women's right to speech and participation in social life is protected. The power distribution between genders is less extreme in terms of social discursive power, so women are given the ability to examine, judge, and critique. Although its comparison with men's power is uncertain, it will likely be weaker. Both genders share judgmental passion, so traditional one-way gazing replaces two-way judgment and self-judgment. Thus, the gender characteristics are gazed at by multiple agents depending on different criteria. This reduces the extent to which women are objective to men but does not necessarily move the subjectivity once monopolized by men to women in a simple binary sense. Instead, any individual or group, regardless of gender, can be objectified.

## 6. Conclusions

As analyzed in previous sections, the concept of freedom in dress and the traditional model of gazing are modified in the Chinese internet field. These factors have become elements of the field and influence subjects in the area. As a concept, freedom in apparel is injected with objective judgments and commendatory implications. A series of deviations from the source, reception, and application cause this. The relationship of gazing is modified to weaken the necessary connection between gender identities and places in the gazing relationship. Both men and women are in the positions of subject and object simultaneously, and the gender characteristics are influenced in a more complex field than traditional binary and one-way gazing systems.

The conclusion can be generalized to study phenomena in other social fields. It constructs a model of how social thoughts might be interpreted and influence individuals as a part of a field. It also shows that academic concepts can be twisted and even deviated within one social area. It seeks to connect

media, gender, and language phenomena and could be used by scholars from multiple academic fields. The conclusion about modification in gazing proposes a renewed gender relation in which later studies can be carried out. The influence individuals or gender groups take under such a system will likely be different and enriched than in traditional ones.

However, the research can still be improved in multiple ways. From a methodological perspective, quantitative data is absent in tracking the event, so detailed significance comparisons between different voices are not made. Also, the case chosen might lead to a nonrandom distribution of gender in the sample, and this might lead to flawed generalizations made from the point to the general situation or other specific cases. More research implementing quantitative, communicative, or linguistic methodologies can be conducted.

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