



# A dialectical-relational approach to anti-trans sentiments on Hupu

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## ABSTRACT

As the first edition of the Olympics including transgender sportswomen, Tokyo 2020 brought trans-rights debates to the forefront of global sports spectatorship during the summer of 2021. In this article, we adopt a dialectical-relational approach to address how anti-trans sentiments unfold in male Chinese sports fans' social-mediated communication. Based on textual analysis of posts retrieved from Hupu, the research reveals that anti-trans sentiments are largely informed by an essentialist notion of sex, which considers it to be a purely biological construct that is paramount in policymaking, being perpetuated in the process of China's modernisation. Anti-trans discourses manifest in the sampled postings tend to converge with China's official nationalist rhetoric, projecting critical voices against liberal-progressive values and Western-style democracy. The research findings shed new light on the dialectical relations between nationalist politics and anti-trans sentiments and, by extension, queerphobic views in China's sports fandom, pointing towards the heteronormative monopoly of public discourses in sport and beyond.

## 1. Introduction

Following the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) decision to lift restrictions on transgender athletes, we witnessed the New Zealand weightlifter, Laurel Hubbard, becoming the first-ever transwoman eligible to compete at the Olympics (BBC, 2021). This unprecedented move represents a milestone for the inclusion of trans athletes at the megaevent. However, the decision does not come without controversy; it once again prompts wider debates over transwomen's athletic rights, due to their perceived biological advantages compared to their cisgender rivals (Flores et al., 2020). Opinions against transwomen's athletic participation still have strongholds amongst global sports fans, who are used to the gender-binary organisation of competitive sport (Stryker and Whittle, 2013). This situation marks the continuous marginalisation of the trans community and their voices in both the traditional media and the social-mediated sphere (Ciszek et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2018).

Drawing on Butler's (2006, p. 191) performative theory, which defines gender as "a stylised repetition of acts" that is not independent of one's bodily experiences, we offer a timely critique of anti-trans sentiments in China's sports fandom, in the wake of Hubbard being picked for New Zealand's weightlifting team to compete at Tokyo 2020. Instead of confronting trans-rights debates per se, we use a dialectical-relational

approach to analysing posts retrieved from the Chinese-language fandom platform, Hupu, to foreground how a large cohort of male Chinese sports fans insult trans athletes in social-mediated communication. We discover that these fans' projection of anti-trans sentiments is not only informed by the historically entrenched, essentialist notion of sex but also serves as a subtextual vehicle for political commentaries specific to the Chinese context. The latter trajectory echoes the growing hostile voices against Western democratic nations and left-wing liberal worldviews in China, amid the recent intensification of Sino-Western geopolitical frictions. Instead of offering an objective assessment of current trans-rights debates, we follow the progressive, political tradition of Fairclough's (2016) dialectical-relational approach, highlighting how anti-trans sentiments dialectically relate to nationalist politics in Chinese-language social-mediated communication. The research findings justify the need for trans-inclusive policymaking by exposing severe discrimination against the trans community, which is not only observed in China but also increasingly visible across the globe.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Transwomen in sport

In 2015, the IOC removed the sex-reassignment surgical

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requirements, paving the way for openly transgender athletes, such as Hubbard, to compete at Tokyo 2020 (BBC, 2021). The IOC's trans-inclusive turn is scaffolded by a skill thesis, which defines competitive games as tests designed "to determine which opponent is more skilful in the sport being played" (Bianchi, 2017, p. 233). A key area of concern over trans-inclusivity in sport refers to transwomen's testosterone levels, which are considered a factor that might give them unfair advantages by stimulating their muscle growth (Hilton and Lundberg, 2021). Following the skill thesis, restrictions on trans athletes based on the tests of their testosterone levels are also applicable to their cisgender rivals to both account for any relevant genetic advantages and avoid marginalising transwomen in existing sporting governance (Bianchi, 2017). However, the IOC's decision is not welcomed by all. A recent opinion poll suggests that 57% of British people are against transwomen's participation in women-only games, three times those in favour of it (Tryl et al., 2022). The divided public opinions on trans-inclusivity are amplified by the tribalisation of political views in the social-mediated sphere, hampering sensible, evidence-based debates on the matter (McLean, 2021).

While some scientists have raised legitimate concerns over the IOC's current framework (Hilton and Lundberg, 2021), public opinions against trans-inclusive sporting infrastructure are typically informed by widespread anti-trans sentiments, which are rooted in an essentialist view that considers sex as being biologically determined at birth and separated from one's socially conditioned experiences of the gendered body (Hines, 2019). However, genetic research has repeatedly reported "the occurrence of abnormal gonadal development," typically including XY individuals developing ovaries or XX individuals developing testes (Eicher and Washburn, 1986, p. 331). A recent *Nature* article has systematically examined the sexes of humankind, revealing that their natural construct is far more complex than a female-male dichotomy (Ainsworth, 2015). Such compelling evidence offers the scientific basis for Butler's (2004, p. 4) socio-political critiques, which call the long-existing practice of "performing coercive surgery on infants and children with sexually indeterminate or hermaphroditic anatomy in the name of normalising these bodies" into question by acknowledging "the continuum of human morphology." In light of her conceptualisation of gender as being "instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts," the performative theory invalidates essentialist attempts to separate gender from sex in policymaking because one's experience of the body never exists in a vacuum free of societal influence (Butler, 2006, p. 91).

In recent years, trans-inclusivity in sport has antagonised a large cohort of global spectators, who subscribe to sex essentialism and are used to the gender-binary organisation of sporting events (Flores et al., 2020). Their anti-trans sentiments have distorted wider trans-rights debates, contributing to the penetration of polarised political views in the social-mediated sphere (Hines, 2019). It is worth noting that accepting or rejecting trans-inclusivity never reflects a simple left-vs.-right/feminist-vs.-conservative paradigm (McLean, 2021). In the West, gender-critical feminism, which is accepted by some members of the non-binary community, emerges as an anti-trans backlash from within the broader left-feminist-leaning camp (Hines, 2019), and it has gained momentum in the social-mediated sphere, as a result of high-profile celebrities (e.g., JK Rowling), academics (e.g., Katherine Stock), and special interest groups' (e.g., the LGB Alliance) participation (Zanghellini, 2020). In this process, gender-critical feminists show a tendency of coinciding with right-wing populists in pursuing trans-exclusive agendas, despite their differing standpoints on non-trans-related gender/social issues (Zanghellini, 2020). To foreground how anti-trans sentiments unfold in China's sports fandom, it is necessary to account for the processes by which such sentiments are developed against the country's specific socio-political context.

## 2.2. China's sports fandom

Existing Chinese fandom scholarship largely explores two issues centring around how sports fandom culture dialectically intersects with state/international politics (Lu and Fan, 2013) or gender power relations (Gong, 2017). Considering the nationality-based organisation of sports megaevents, nationalism constitutes a latitude to measure how Chinese fans navigate their fandom experience. Since 1984, the medal-winning tours of state-sponsored Olympic athletes have fuelled public support for the Chinese government (Lu and Fan, 2013). The prime time of such sporting nationalism has faded away because the market-led economic reforms have created an entire younger generation of fans, who are appreciative of individualistic values and experienced in consuming professionalised games, resulting in the state-planned sporting infrastructure being criticised (Gong, 2020). However, public opinion against state sponsorship has not completely overturned China's sports governance, given that the infrastructure has already been institutionalised and the government still needs such ideological instruments to energise its political base (Dong and Mangan, 2008).

Gender politics constitutes a variable that shapes China's sporting nationalism. Research has demonstrated that China's sports media tend to sexualise female athletes when they do not deliver expected results. This is most tellingly evidenced by their coverage of the Chinese women's gymnastics team at the 2016 Olympics, in which female athletes' failures are interpreted as a result of their "biologically determined" weaknesses (Xu et al., 2018). The gendered nature of China's sports nationalism is consistent with the male monopoly of political discourses in wider society (Fang and Repnikova, 2018). Considering the absence of openly transgender athletes and the censorship over LGBTQ culture in China, it also underscores the specifics of its sports fandom, which remains entrenched as a masculinist terrain, where the voices of heteronormative men are most vibrant (Gong, 2017).

## 2.3. Transgenderism in China

Traces of indigenous trans communities were found in China's historical archives, but transgenderism was largely suppressed until the end of Mao's leadership (Chiang, 2017). Catering to the diversification of contemporary audiences, the post-reform media industry has created differing gender ideals, leading to the emergence of non-heterosexual representations today (Tan et al., 2022). However, Evans (2008, p. 374) argues that the post-reform diversity of media representations does not conceal the fact that sex is marginalised as "a critical category of analysis," reflecting an alliance between the nation-state and the market economy to legitimatise existing gender hierarchy and injustice. In this process, an essentialist understanding of sex akin to its Western counterpart is perpetuated in China's public discourses, although the former shows a stronger heteronormative character, as an outcome of the state censorship over both LGBTQ media content and feminist activism (Chiang, 2017).

The nationwide fame of the openly transgender reality-TV star, Jin Xing, seems puzzling in the context of the largely heteronormative Chinese popular culture. Yet, trans people always represent a unique camp within the broader LGBTQ community (Tortajada et al., 2021). On the one hand, transgenderism allows one to oscillate between being female and male, posing threats to the orthodox view of sex being assigned at birth (Scarcelli et al., 2021). On the other hand, moving from one end of the spectrum to the other simultaneously subjects some members of the trans community to certain heteronormative gender norms (Tortajada et al., 2021). This paradoxical phenomenon is particularly applicable to Jin Xing, who overtly advocates patriarchal ideas, such as women's responsibility for fertility and family services (Potter, 2016). Her advocacy of patriarchal norms aligns the trans celebrity with the government's call for a return to female-male, *yin-yang* balance in the post-reform era (Evans, 2008). Despite her embodiment of transgenderism, the "political correctness" of her

commentaries, to a certain extent, explains her success in state-run TV, amongst other reasons, her elite background, career accomplishment, and commercial value.

A single successful case by no means suggests that transgenderism receives public support. Rather, anti-trans sentiments emerge as a defining characteristic of the heteronormative majority of the population (Wei and Liu, 2019). While China's sports-governing body does not implement restrictions on trans athletic participation outside of the IOC's framework (NBC, 2022), the misunderstanding of trans people as sexual deviants still subjects them to the most severe, blatant discrimination (Chiang, 2017). As globalisation becomes internalised in post-reform China, the celebration of sexual desires and the diversification of gender identities are often perceived as global constructs associated with the increased Sino-Western cultural exchanges (Tang et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, anti-trans sentiments have the potential to feed into nationalist rhetoric, pointing towards the pro-regime Chinese masses' rejection of liberal-progressive values, which are considered to be the West's ideological weapon aiming to destabilise their nation-state (Zhang, 2020).

### 3. A dialectical-relational approach

A dialectical-relational approach offers the theoretical framework to specifically foreground how anti-trans sentiments play out in Chinese-language social-mediated sports communication. Alongside Wodak and Meyer's (2009) theorisation of the discourse-historical entanglement and van Dijk's (2009) conceptualisation of the socio-cognitive dimension of discourses, Fairclough's (2001) scholarship represents a transdisciplinary trajectory of critical discourse studies (CDS), which aims to elucidate how power relations are (re)produced in the discursive realm (Ferrara and Mey, 2013). Such an intellectual quest reflects his progressive politics, explicitly aiming to uncover social injustice to scaffold liberal-progressive activism and address the situation of marginalised communities facing discrimination.

The dialectical-relational approach situates itself within sociolinguistics, whilst accounting for the shaping of discourses concerning wider socio-economic/political structures and other social actions. In Fairclough's (2016, p. 231) words, discourse is defined as both "the language associated with a particular social field or practice" and "a way of constructing aspects of the world associated with a particular social perspective." The two basic definitions unveil how discourses function in communicative actions to facilitate a specific pattern of sense-making processes (Ferrara and Mey, 2013). Such sense-making processes are not simply cognitive but conditioned by societal influences, which are dialectically related to other social actors and actions. In this sense, the dialectical-relational approach oscillates between a focus upon socio-economy and political infrastructure and a focus upon social actions to detect the "linguistic manifestations [of social conflict] in discourse, in specific elements of dominance, difference, and resistance" (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p. 27).

The dialectical-relational approach follows a Marxist paradigm of inquiry (Richardson and Wodak, 2009). With the Marxist premise in mind, Fairclough (2016, p. 91) prescribes that the research design of CDS following this approach involves four interlocking stages, namely, 1) "focus[ing] upon a social wrong," 2) "identify[ing] obstacles to addressing the social wrong," 3) "consider[ing] whether the social order 'needs' the social wrong," and 4) "identify[ing] possible ways past the obstacles." In this way, the approach not only provides an analytical framework within the CDS field but also develops a transdisciplinary theoretical lens to address the "dialectical relationships between and within discourse structures and between discourse and other elements of social life" (Ferrara and Mey, 2013, p. 76).

As a common issue shared by classic CDS literature (Bouvier and Machin, 2018), Fairclough's (2001) scholarship primarily investigates elite discourses (e.g., news articles and political speeches), reflecting a top-down pattern of Marxist intervention. Yet, his theorisation of the

dialectical-relational approach simultaneously considers the dynamics between different social actors, including not only powerful institutions but also individuals from various backgrounds (Fairclough, 2016). As such, it opens up the opportunity for unveiling the dialectical relations between top-down and bottom-up societal processes, which converge on social media platforms, considering the interactive pattern of discursive practice in social-mediated communication (Bouvier and Machin, 2018). The dialectical-relational approach, thus, offers a conceptual standpoint to scrutinise the representation and perpetuation of discriminatory actions in social-mediated scenarios, without marginalising their interconnectedness with discursive events and structural problems.

### 4. Research questions and methods

Identifying anti-trans sentiments in sport as a societal issue that exacerbates existing queerphobia, this research offers a purposively designed, critical intervention, using a dialectical-relational approach to analysing how such sentiments play out in male Hupu users' postings about the New Zealand transwoman athlete, Hubbard. Hupu is the most popular Chinese-language sports fandom platform adopted by 55 million netizens, with men comprising over 90% of its user demographics (Zhou et al., 2020). As the first transwoman competing against a Chinese gold-medal-hopeful weightlifter at the Olympics, Hubbard was widely discussed on Hupu. This allowed us to gather a large amount of relevant postings to answer the following research questions, which were predicated upon the historical entrenched anti-trans sentiments in wider Chinese society and the continuous reflection of toxic values, such as nationalism and sexism, in social-mediated communication occurring on Hupu, as identified by previous research (Chiang, 2017; Peng et al., 2022).

- 1) In what ways do male Hupu users express their anti-trans sentiments?
- 2) How do male Hupu users rationalise their anti-trans sentiments through the notion of sex essentialism?
- 3) How does male Hupu users' appropriation of anti-trans discourses dialectically relate to their international geopolitical commentaries?

Data collection was set for six months between April and September 2021. Adopting the default search engine, using "New Zealand transgender" and "Olympics" as the keywords, we located seven Hupu threads about Hubbard prompting 1,021 posts.<sup>1</sup> The dataset is detailed in Table 1.

The analysis of the sampled postings was conducted under the rubric of a dialectical-relational approach. Specifically, we followed Fairclough's (2001) prescription of a three-dimensional framework, which conducts analysis at 1) textual, 2) discursive, and 3) socio-cultural levels. At the textual level, we scrutinised the lexical choice and linguistic feature of the sampled postings, focusing on their use of rhetorical devices (e.g., rhetorical questions, metaphors, and irony) (Fairclough, 2001). Building on the textual analysis, we examined the discursive pattern of the sampled postings, focusing on instances of a) nomination (allowing ideological meanings to be established through naming people, objects, or events), b) predication (attributing differing characteristics to a subject to facilitate the "discursive qualification of social actors [...] and actions") (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p. 94), c) argumentation (providing "content-related warrants" to connect arguments and conclusions and justify the latter) (Richardson and Wodak, 2009, p. 255), as well as d) intertextuality (decoding what "genres, discourses and styles [the text] draws upon, and how it works them into

<sup>1</sup> We examined all posters' profiles and posting history and excluded seven posts found to be posted by women, based on their self-identification on Hupu profiles.

**Table 1**  
Dataset summary.

Threads	In Chinese	Posts	URLs
A New Zealand trans might participate in women's weightlifting at the Tokyo Olympics, becoming the first in Olympic history.	新西兰变性人或参加东京奥运女子举重项目, 成为奥运史上第一人	4	<a href="https://bbs.hupu.com/42745599.html">https://bbs.hupu.com/42745599.html</a>
The first trans at the Olympics is accused by netzines of cheating.	奥运会第一位变性人参赛, 网友指其“作弊”	621	<a href="https://bbs.hupu.com/44394861.html">https://bbs.hupu.com/44394861.html</a>
Is it fair for other athletes to allow trans to participate in the Olympics?	变性人参加奥运比赛对其它选手公平吗	18	<a href="https://bbs.hupu.com/44540707.html">https://bbs.hupu.com/44540707.html</a>
Bros, the weightlifting competition featuring trans has started.	开始了兄弟们, 举重大战变性人	20	<a href="https://bbs.hupu.com/44541834.html">https://bbs.hupu.com/44541834.html</a>
So funny, the New Zealand trans failed three snatches.	笑死, 新西兰的变性人三次抓举都失败了	6	<a href="https://bbs.hupu.com/44542395.html">https://bbs.hupu.com/44542395.html</a>
The New Zealand trans is only capable of doing this?	新西兰变性人就这	282	<a href="https://bbs.hupu.com/44542402.html">https://bbs.hupu.com/44542402.html</a>
Where is the New Zealand trans?	新西兰那个变性人呢	70	<a href="https://bbs.hupu.com/44543786.html">https://bbs.hupu.com/44543786.html</a>

particular articulations”) (Fairclough, 2016, p. 234). The discursive analysis facilitated further socio-cultural critiques of the sampled postings, paying special attention to the dialectical relations between anti-trans sentiments and international geopolitics.

Considering the sample size, we also incorporated techniques of content analysis (CA) to provide a systematic description of the entire manifest content (Neuendorf, 2017). The coding scheme was developed upon our initial, theory-informed reading of the data (see coding and measurement). All 1,021 readable posts were subsequently coded upon the scheme by a research assistant, with 11% (n = 116) of them coded by second author to test intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability (Scott's Pi) was 0.85 for the first variable, 0.72 for the second, and 0.90 for the last. CA was used to offer a glimpse of the general characteristics of the posts to avoid cherry-picking data at the qualitative, dialectical-relational step of the analysis. The sampled postings were composed in Chinese, and we translated them into English.

## 5. CA results

### 5.1. Coding and measurement

The coding scheme consisted of five variables coded at two levels. The first level comprised two variables: the number of upvotes and the number of follow-up commentaries for each post extrapolated from Hupu. The second level of coding assessed variables: sentiments towards trans people, biological commentary, and political commentary. Table 2 offers an overview of the coding scheme.

### 5.2. Statistical analysis

We re-coded each independent variable into dummy variables and used comparing means and linear regression tests to determine the extent to which the textual features of a post might influence the number of upvotes or follow-up commentaries it received. The results are detailed in Table 3.

The results of linear regression substantiated correlations between the number of upvotes or follow-up commentaries that a post received and the inclusion of biological terms and anti-foreign political commentaries in the posting. There was a significant and positive correlation between biological commentaries and the number of upvotes ( $\beta = 38.04$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The number of follow-up commentaries was significantly influenced by biological commentating as well ( $\beta = 0.79$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

**Table 2**  
Coding scheme overview.

Level 1	Dependent variables and measurement
Upvotes	The number of upvotes for each post.
Follow-up commentaries	The number of follow-up commentaries for each post.
Level 2	<b>Independent variables and measurement</b>
Sentiments	We coded each post according to the <b>sentiments</b> towards trans people it expresses (non-applicable = 0, supporting trans = 1, against trans = 2)
Biological commentary	We coded each post according to its <b>biological commentaries</b> based on the presence or absence of mentioning sex differences or the body of women/men (no biological commenting = 0, biological commenting = 1)
Political commentary	We coded each post according to its inclusion of <b>political commentaries</b> (non-applicable or neutral about foreign nations = 0, supporting any foreign nation = 1, criticising any foreign nation = 2)

Moreover, the results showed that a post was more likely to have follow-up commentaries when it contained criticisms of any foreign nation ( $\beta = 59.04$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

The results showed that there were many more male Hupu users who expressed negative sentiments towards trans people (N = 590) than those who expressed positive sentiments towards this group (N = 78). Furthermore, the inclusion of biological commentary was likely to lead to increases in the average numbers of both upvotes and follow-up commentaries attached to a post. According to Table 3, the average number of upvotes for posts mentioning biological terms (49.81, N = 283) was more than twice as many as that for posts without such terms (18.97, N = 738). A similar tendency was identified when the number of follow-up commentaries was measured. The average number of follow-up commentaries for posts with biological commentaries (1.33, N = 283) was twice as many as that for posts without biological commentaries (0.60, N = 738). Moreover, there were many more posts criticising foreign nations (N = 82) than that expressing supportive attitudes towards foreign nations (N = 6). The average number of upvotes for posts criticising foreign nations (69.05, N = 82) was nearly three times that of posts without such criticisms (23.89, N = 939).

Based on volumes of sampled posts detected to contain negative assessments of trans people, it becomes apparent that anti-trans sentiments prevail in the Hupu community. The statistical analysis discovers that postings within the threads containing biological terms and political commentaries critical of foreign nations significantly increase fellow Hupu users' engagement. The implications of the results are unpacked below.

## 6. A dialectical-relational analysis

The dialectical-relational analysis focuses on how anti-trans sentiments shape male Hupu users' postings at a textual level and their implications for the negotiation of gender and national identities at discursive and socio-cultural levels.

### 6.1. Mocking transwomen with an insulting undertone

As the coding results reveal, opinions against Hubbard and transgender athletes constitute a dominant camp amongst male Hupu users who posted in the threads. At first glance, the formation of this opinion camp seems to be associated with their concerns over fairness in sport.

User-Q2-A146: How is this not cheating?

User-Q2-A202: How can [he] be included? This is ridiculous and is cheating!

As can be seen in the above extracts, these posts share a similar style

Table 3

The textual features of a post and upvotes or follow-up commentaries it received.

	The average number of upvotes				The average number of follow-up commentaries			
	Yes	No	$\beta$	$p$	Yes	No	$\beta$	$p$
Positive about trans	13.12	28.71	-13.238	0.587	1.46	0.75	0.689	0.237
Negative about trans	27.21	27.95	-23.035	0.105	0.74	0.88	-0.235	0.489
Biological commentary	49.81	18.97	38.038	0.005**	1.33	0.60	0.789	0.016*
Supporting any foreign nation	15.67	27.59	7.049	0.928	1.67	0.80	0.904	0.629
Criticising any foreign nation	69.05	23.89	59.037	0.009**	1.13	0.77	0.668	0.214

in their briefness, emerging as a consistent pattern in communication occurring on Hupu (Peng et al., 2022). With explicit or implicit usage (e.g., ending a sentence with “ah”) of exclamatory marks, these postings are composed to make statements entailing vocal objection to trans-inclusivity at the Olympics. Offering little justification, it is unclear what scientific evidence or socio-cultural critiques have informed these male Hupu users’ postings. The existence of such postings is not surprising, considering the cognitive dissonance that openly transgender athletes bring to a large cohort of male Chinese spectators, who are used to the gender-binary organisation of sports games. Yet, the interactive nature of social-mediated communication theoretically permits different ideas to be exchanged (Peng, 2021), but these opinionated statements hardly receive any challenge from fellow Hupu users. These postings merely serve as a starting point, underlining how trans-exclusive opinions are taken for granted within the Hupu community.

Opinionated statements are salient in capturing “mainstream” opinions on Hupu, but they do not describe the style of numerous postings, which express anti-trans sentiments in a rather implicit way. With volumes of postings exploiting humour as a communicative vehicle, the stylised discursive pattern underscores how “social control and power are exerted through teasing and joking” in communicative actions (Kaaristo, 2022, p. 5).

User-Q1-A4: [He] would castrate him[self] to lift [the heaviest] barbells.

User-Q7-A1004: [You] have to castrate yourself to obtain the magic power. [He] did not get the spirits of the *Sunflower Bible* (葵花宝典)!

Postings of the humorous style represent a subgenre relying on intertextuality to facilitate sense-making. As shown in the above extracts, Q1-A4’s lexical choice, on the surface, exploits the semantic ambiguity of the Chinese words, “cut” and “castrate,” using the sex-reassignment surgery that Hubbard experienced as a metonymy to ridicule her endeavour to participate in women’s games. The posting involves an intertextual reference to the slang, “one who is not afraid of death by a thousand cuts dares to unhouse the emperor,” which originated from classic Chinese-language literature and became widespread in the country after being quoted by its former national leader, Mao Zedong, in propaganda materials. Hollowing out its ideological essence, the post adapts the quote to create a catchy pun, which effectively increases its spreadability in the Hupu community. A similar style of intertextual referencing is also observed in Q7-A1004’s posting, which invokes the “*Sunflower Bible*,” a fictional martial arts scripture requiring swordsmen to castrate themselves to practise, as the metonymy to mock Hubbard’s transition. These seemingly playful postings constitute dissent against the IOC, the world’s most influential sports-governing body, reflecting how humour serves to challenge institutional domination by “enhancing [in-group] relationships and solidarity” (Kaaristo, 2022, p. 5). Yet, such dissent is distorted because it simultaneously reiterates the existing gender hierarchy in Chinese society, which abnormalises trans people to create another layer of power dynamics that subjects them to blatant insults (Chiang, 2017).

User-Q2-A243: What does LGBT mean? [Does that mean] big brother is a psychopath?

User-Q2-A203: [They] are disgusting gays or homosexual men, who are super stinky.

The heteronormativity of wider Chinese society determines that anti-trans sentiments do not occur in isolation but are indicative of broader queerphobic opinions (Bao, 2022). This phenomenon is most tellingly revealed by the pair quoted above. The commentating cycle starts with Q2-A243’s post, which is characterised by his nomination of the LGBTQ people as “psychopaths” that marks his insult on not only transwomen but also other members of the non-binary family. Taking the form of a rhetorical question, the post conceals his malicious intention with a naïve, humorous veneer. Yet, this veneer is abandoned by Q2-A203, who reiterates his anti-trans stance with explicitly insulting words, such as “disgusting” and “stinky,” to predicate the traits of gay men in general. The postings per se are not outliers against the anti-trans sentiments of the sampled threads but are indicative of how heteronormativity is established as an axis of such sentiments in China’s sports fandom. This marks the specifics of the biological, essentialist understanding of sex deeply held in contemporary China, where most indigenous LGBTQ people are still hidden in the closet, offering its social members limited opportunities to distinguish between different non-binary gender identities and practices (Chiang, 2017).

## 6.2. Rationalising anti-trans sentiments in sex-essentialist terms

Anti-trans sentiments in China’s sports fandom are largely informed by an essentialist view, which considers sex as a biological trait assigned at birth without any account of one’s socially conditioned experience of the body (Hines, 2019). In the sampled threads, volumes of male Hupu users’ postings explicitly evoke an essentialist perception of female-male differences to justify their anti-trans stance.

User-Q6-A848: You tell me he is a girl, but he did not even cut his little bro [...] What makes him think simply self-identifying as a woman could allow him to participate in women’s sports? Did he not join the Olympics by replacing a real woman? Why can’t I mock him?

Taking Q-A848’s posting as an example, the Hupu user devises a series of rhetorical questions to voice his objection to trans-inclusivity in sport. The rhetoric device is used alongside a series of predication, suggesting Hubbard is born a man, rendering her transition invalid because of its self-identification grounds. Such a predication, to a certain extent, legitimates a bodily process of transgenderism, which places sex-reassignment surgeries at the very heart of the transition. Yet, in association with the blatant insults on the entire LGBTQ community observed on Hupu, such predicational instances merely reveal a focus upon biology in Hupu users’ discursive portrayal of the gendered body.

User-Q6-A858: First, trans people belong to the third gender. You can call them “her,” but they are not women. Second, this person [Hubbard] transitioned when he was already a grown man. He keeps his male genitalia and merely uses testosterone control to accomplish the transition. Third, men’s muscle groups were developed during their adolescence by the stimulation of testosterone, so she is using a male body to compete in women’s games.

Different from Q6-A848's emotionally expressive posting, Q6-A858 offers a seemingly sensible commentary, using scientific rationalisation to project his anti-trans voices. As an argumentation strategy, scientific rationalisation involves deploying "differentiated bodies of knowledge" to "legitimate institutional practices" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 116). This argumentation strategy is substantiated by Q6-A848's lexical choices, which involve combined uses of scientific terms (e.g., "testosterone") and discourse markers (e.g., "first," "second," and "third") that make the post stand out compared with other opinionated ones. Yet, while raising legitimate questions concerning the fairness of trans-inclusivity in current sports governance that deserves scientific scrutiny (Hilton and Lundberg, 2021), the post simultaneously entails an anti-trans undertone, evidenced by the male Hupu user's nomination of transwomen as the "third gender," an offensive Chinese-language buzzword diminishing any non-heteronormative gender identity across the spectrum, as well as his further predication that denies the very existence of transwomen by refusing their rights to live as women. Such postings turn generic trans-rights debates to the forefront, facilitating complex identity politics to emerge from the sampled threads.

### 6.3. Critiquing international geopolitics through trans-rights debates

Considering the historical absence of trans-visibility within China (Bao, 2022), anti-trans sentiments tend to align themselves with its heteronormative population's moral panic being fuelled by trans-rights debates outside of the country.

User-Q2-A620: There is this kind of people in the US. [I] heard this from a friend living in California. He saw many masculine men mumbling that "I am a girl" and then walking into female toilets. This shocked him, who happens to have two daughters.

In recent years, global anti-trans campaigns have increasingly exploited the cisgender public's moral panic, in the wake of a series of trans-inclusive/exclusive policies being introduced in Euro-American nations, placing trans people's human rights under the spotlight in public debates (McLean, 2021). This moral panic not only exposes the divides between the trans-inclusive and gender-critical wings of feminist activists, who either accept or reject an essentialist understanding of sex (Hines, 2019; Zanghellini, 2020). It clearly has a degree of cross-cultural acceptance in China, as reflected in Q2-A640's intertextual reference to trans-rights debates unfolding in the US. With the focal point of the sampled threads being about a trans athlete coming from a Western country, international geopolitics surfaces as an intersectional vector defining an important category of the postings.

User-Q6-A912: Women and men share different muscular strengths. Once accepted, trans people's participation will make it very difficult for women to succeed in women's sports [...]. I think that Euro-American idiots just enjoyed creating more messes. They have deceived themselves and want to deceive other people as well. Respecting trans people has nothing to do with the Olympian [spirits]!

As shown in the above extract, Q6-A912's posting begins by invoking scientific rationalisation, referencing an essentialist understanding of women and men's biological differences to dismiss the legitimacy of trans-inclusivity in sport. The scientific rationalisation is offered to substantiate his predication, painting a glooming future for sports-women, should transwomen be accepted in their category. Yet, instead of continuing with scientific rationalisation, the male Hupu user offers an intertextual reference to wider trans-rights debates unfolding in the outside world. Invoking another predication, he attributes the social cleavages opened up by trans-rights debates to members of the Western liberal-progressive wing, who are considered to have created a "non-issue" from nowhere. The posting appears in the threads in which a New

Zealand transgender athlete is at stake, but it arbitrarily nominates progressive liberals as "idiots" coming from Europe and North America, instead of the Oceania nation. This seemingly inaccurate instance of nomination is unlikely to be an illustration of the male Hupu user's geographical illiteracy but rather indicative of a homogenous imagination of the West inscribed in his perception of the outside world.

A Chinese worldview is characterised by its othering of Euro-American nations through a homogenous imagination of the West. This imagination is widespread in everyday Chinese-language use and contains a stereotypical/discriminatory undertone, despite its neutral semblance perceived by native speakers (Liu and Self, 2019). In the context of international geopolitics, this imagination exploits and feeds into China's official narrative of Western-style democracy, offering the population an anchor point to rationalise their version of their nation-state's position on the world stage (Lin, 2021). A key feature of this official narrative refers to the dismantling of in-group differences between Western democratic nations, aligning them all into a community of shared interests built upon their anti-China agenda (Zhang, 2020). With this narrative being widely propagated in Chinese society, an us-them discourse is perpetuated in a large segment of the population's Sinocentric vision of the world geopolitical order.

Evoking the Chinese narrative of Western-style democracy, postings of the geopolitical category emerge as an "off-topic" cluster in the threads, pointing towards general criticisms of Western democratic politics without engaging the trans-rights debates per se. In such postings, anti-trans sentiments become a shared consensus, turning the threads into a proxy for an active camp of male Hupu fans to promote their biased geopolitical views.

User-Q2-A572: I remembered that JK Rowling was boycotted by white leftists [白左] because she was against transwomen's rights to enter female toilets and female bathhouses. Even the entire cast members of Harry Potter have drawn a line with her.

As reflected in Q2-A572's posting, the textual production is defined by its nomination of Western progressive liberals as "white leftists," a highly racist term invented by Chinese social media users to paradoxically protest against the Euro-American Caucasian domination of international geopolitics (Zhang, 2020, p. 96). In this specific instance, the male Hupu user has noted the political polarisation occurring in major Western democracies by highlighting the dissonance between their trans-inclusive and gender-critical camps of feminist activism. Yet, the complexity of trans-rights debates is raised without critical scrutiny. Instead, his predication of the consequence of such political conflicts serves as an anchor point for his argumentation to reject liberal-progressive values altogether.

Recent literature has noted a surge of nationalism across the globe (Schneider, 2018), with the appropriation of such rhetoric in China's domestic politics exhibiting increased compatibility with Western right-wing populism (Lin, 2021). Against this backdrop, "white leftists," alongside a series of nominations with overtly negative connotations, are invented by Chinese social media users to stigmatise Western left-leaning progressive politics (Zhang, 2020, p. 96). Invoking such a nomination strategy has dual functions in Hupu users' postings. First, the stigmatisation of left-leaning progressive politics exploits the cultural wars unfolding in Euro-American societies to substantiate the perceived chaotic nature of Western-style democratic practice from an authoritarian standpoint (Lin, 2021). Second, the stigmatisation also echoes the pro-state masses' nationalist agendas, manifest as their incentive to protest against the Western domination of globalisation through a Sinocentric lens, amid China's return to the central stage of the world in the post-reform era (Zhang, 2020). Reflected in the sampled postings, the dual functions of the nomination strategy are affirmative of the effects of the government's post-reform propaganda campaigns, which prioritise harmony in domestic politics to conceal its internal structural issues on one hand and confront US-led alliances in

international geopolitics with hawkish public diplomacy to engineer the population's support for the regime on the other (Schneider, 2018).

User-Q6-A951: In fact, many people in Europe and America are like that. They do gross things but feel that they are white lotuses.<sup>2</sup>

User-Q2-A568: The US is looking for self-destruction if it keeps messing around.

User-Q2-A609: The people: Please remember to reincarnate as an American. This trick does not work well in China.

As revealed by the above extracts and confirmed by the CA results, volumes of male Hupu users' postings entailing political commentaries involve using stigmatised nominations of the progressive liberals in Euro-American societies. In such postings, trans-inclusive movements and Western democratic traditions are intertextually connected to forge a stereotypical, simplified imagination of Euro-American civilisations. With heteronormative gender norms being established as part of accepted, "core" Chinese values, these posts have turned the threads into an extended field for many male Hupu users' nationalist projects. In this sense, anti-trans sentiments spreading within the Hupu community do not simply reflect the heteronormativity of Chinese society but dialectically relate to the male dominance of China's sports fandom (Gong, 2017) and its nationalist politics (Fang and Repnikova, 2018). This marks the political specifics of social-mediated sports communication in China, which echo the general occupation of the fandom by heteronormative, masculinist men (Peng et al., 2022) and the trending intensification of geopolitical tensions between China and major Western democracies (Schneider, 2018).

## 7. Conclusion

This article has uncovered how anti-trans sentiments unfold in China's sports fandom by analysing male Hupu fans' postings about the New Zealand weightlifting athlete, Laurel Hubbard. As a starting point, the CA results show that an anti-trans stance describes a large camp of male Hupu users' position in trans-rights debates, with the statistical analysis confirming that postings involving 1) a biological or 2) an anti-foreign-nation trajectory of commentary significantly increase fellow Hupu users' engagement, measured by the number of upvotes and follow-up commentaries they receive.

Building on the CA results, our dialectical-relational scrutiny of the sampled postings illustrates that the implication of the results is threefold. First, anti-trans sentiments are often expressed at a textual level through a mocking undertone, which constitutes "humorous" dissent being expressed to protest the trans-inclusive decision made by the IOC as the world's most powerful sports-governing body. Yet, the dissent is distorted as it offers the grounding for blatant insults on transwomen and, by extension, the entire LGBTQ community, showcasing how anti-trans sentiments converge with wider queerphobia on Hupu, where heteronormative values evidently prevail. Second, emerging as a consistent discursive pattern, anti-trans sentiments on Hupu are expressed upon an essentialist notion that defines sex in biological terms. The perpetuation of sex essentialism in Chinese society enables a large cohort of male Hupu users to justify their anti-trans sentiments through scientific rationalisation. While attempting to substantiate their arguments on evidence-based grounds, the scientific rationalisation rarely distances these male Hupu users from biased views, and this alludes to their discrimination against all non-heteronormative gender identities and practices. Third, the appropriation of anti-trans discourses in the sampled threads is specific to the socio-cultural and political trends in China, mirroring the widespread penetration of opinions critical of liberal-progressive values and Western-style democratic politics

<sup>2</sup> White lotus is a slang invented by nationalist Chinese social media users to mock Euro-American left-wing, middle-classes.

on Chinese-language social media (Zhang, 2020). The political vector of these postings exposes a nuanced, dialectical intersection of nationalist rhetoric and anti-trans sentiments in the Chinese context that defines a key aspect of the sampled Hupu postings.

Underlain by heteronormative gender norms established in the nation's modern history, anti-trans sentiments indeed describe a salient theme of Chinese public discourses (Chiang, 2017). Yet, the scope of gender alone does not capture the very characteristics of how anti-trans sentiments unfold in its sports fandom, as such sentiments also entail a dynamic interplay with other identity politics outside of the sporting context. We have recently witnessed nationalism becoming a defining feature of the global political climate, amid the rise of populist leaders on the world stage (Schneider, 2018). Such a political climate has a profound impact on Chinese popular culture. On the one hand, nationalism has always formed an axis that shapes China's sports fandom (Lu and Fan, 2013), although some fans start calling the government's medal-oriented policies into question, due to their discovery of new areas to perform national pride (Gong, 2020). On the other hand, the male dominance of political institutions and socio-economic structures entrenches nationalist politics as a masculinist terrain, permitting heteronormative Chinese men to appropriate nationalist rhetoric to justify their monopoly of public discourses (Fang and Repnikova, 2018). The nationalist rhetoric, which surfaces from the sampled postings on Hupu, reveals an entangled relation between international geopolitics and trans-rights debates that is not specific to China but also observed elsewhere (Clarkson, 2020). This reiterates the nationalist interference with popular cultural consumption, amid increasingly more hard-lining populist politicians gripping power around the world today (Liu et al., 2021; Scarcelli et al., 2021; Yang and Fang, 2021).

Relying on textual analysis of postings retrieved from a single social media platform, the research findings cannot offer overgeneralised descriptions of China's sports fandom. Yet, as the wider social implications of the research findings are unpacked, we indeed shed new light on China's sports fandom by accounting for the dialectical relations between anti-trans sentiments and international geopolitics beyond the scope of sport per se. This trajectory of research advances Fairclough's (2016) dialectical-relational approach to CDS in the context of China's sports fandom by offering a glimpse of how such dialectical relations shape Chinese sports fans' social-mediated communication. Such research findings showcase how the cultural wars currently unfolding in Western societies are imitated in China in the context of trans-rights debates. We encourage future studies to offer further dialectical-relational accounts of social-mediated sports communication in China and beyond following the CDS research tradition, considering both the pivotal role sports consumption plays in people's everyday lives and its entanglement with the discursive practice of differing identity politics.

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