

# Framing the Imperfect Victim: Gender, Voice, and Visibility in China's Media Discourse

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## ABSTRACT

This research investigates how gendered expectations shape public perceptions of victimhood in contemporary Chinese media narrative. Focusing on the concept of the “imperfect victim”—a figure disqualified from sympathy due to deviations from behavioral norms—the study analyzes three real-world cases: the Xi'an Metro clothing removal incident, the Alibaba sexual assault case, and the Yang Li–JD.com commercial partnership controversy. Using a qualitative case study method, I conducted close textual and content analysis of both state media reports and civic responses on Chinese social media platforms such as *Weibo* and *Rednote*. Drawing from framing theory and the concept of state media censorship, the project examines how victims' behaviors, speech, and emotional displays are framed as either credible or illegitimate. The analysis shows that loudness, confidence, and expressiveness, especially when exhibited by women, are often reframed as social disruption, thus undermining their authority and legitimacy. Across all three cases, visibility does not guarantee validation; instead, camera surveillance, textual evidence, and visual testimony become fields of tension where interpretation is constantly debated. These findings challenge the assumption that evidence or exposure alone ensures justice. Instead, victimhood emerges as an earned status based on institutionalized gender and social roles. The study thus concludes that the “imperfect victim” is not an isolated phenomenon, but a recurring figure produced at the intersection of state censorship, social media platform dynamics, and public values.

**Keywords:** Imperfect Victim; Media; Gender; Victimhood; Digital Censorship; Public Perception; Narrative Framing; Cultural Expectations

## INTRODUCTION

When Zhao Xun's defense attorney Lin Kan declares in *Imperfect Victim* (2023), a Chinese legal drama series,

“a victim's flaws never license the harm inflicted on them,” the line lands not as courtroom rhetoric but as a cultural provocation—an indictment of the public's need for moral purity of those who suffer (1). The scene is unremarkable in its composition: no dramatic lighting, no soaring score, just a woman speaking plainly in a courtroom. Yet it is precisely this austerity that delivers the line like a scalpel. It cuts through the ideological framework that continues to shape social understandings of victimhood, especially when that victim does not fit the preordained expectations

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**Received** July 10, 2025; **Accepted** August 10, 2025  
<https://doi.org/10.70251/HYJR2348.34270280>

of modesty, innocence, or silence. *Imperfect Victim* rejects conventional scripts of victimhood. Instead, Zhao Xun—the woman at the center of the case who filed a sexual assault complaint against her workplace superior—is fragmented, ambivalent, and morally tangled, and thus everything the public narrative of justice resists.

Zhao Xun is not that kind of victim. She hesitates, retreats, and contradicts herself under pressure. She is neither passive nor consistently sympathetic: she has a temper and a refusal to perform shame on demand. She resists the gendered performance of ideal victimhood, refusing to submit to the emotional legibility that audiences often expect from survivors of sexual violence. Her trauma is not framed for easy consumption; it is unresolved and narratively inconvenient. Yet, through this very refusal, the series was able to encapsulate her figure as the “imperfect victim”—one whose suffering is obscured not by lack of evidence but by her inability to conform to the cultural codes of femininity and submission. Her pain is not aestheticized but interrogated, withheld from the moral spectacle that public judgment often demands. In defending her, Lin Kan challenges more than a legal accusation—she confronts the unspoken rules that determine who gets to be believed.

The notion of the “imperfect victim” reverberates far beyond the frame of fiction. It resurfaces, with disturbing clarity, across three real-life cases that unfold within the fast-moving, emotionally charged age of digital media. Across the Xi'an Metro altercation, the Alibaba sexual assault case, and Yang Li's endorsement fallout, different forms of female assertiveness became sites of public dispute. In the Xi'an railway incident, Ms. Guo's emotional defiance was recast as incivility; in the Alibaba scandal, Zhou's persistent self-advocacy was reframed as destabilizing; and in Yang Li's case, her satirical speech was treated as a reputational vulnerability. Despite differing contexts—transport, workplace, public stage—each woman was penalized for challenging the dominant norms of feminine propriety. Collectively, these cases expose how credibility is withheld from those who refuse quiet compliance, illustrating the structural logic by which the “imperfect victim” is manufactured, not discovered.

Therefore, to examine how this structural logic takes shape in public narrative through analyzing three noteworthy cases in China, this study seeks to understand the mechanisms through which social legibility is gendered and only selectively granted. The study is significant not only for what it reveals about the politics and societal norms of media representation in China, but also for how it contributes to broader feminist inquiries

into who is allowed to be heard, believed, and defended in the public eye.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Framing Theory

Framing theory was first introduced by George Bateson, who defined *psychological frames* as a “spatial and temporary bounding of a set of interactive messages” (2). Gradually, it has emerged as a central paradigm in media and communication studies for explaining how public meaning is constructed through selective emphasis. Chong and Druckman define framing as the process by which “individuals make sense of the [...] world” by drawing on cues embedded in media narratives (3). Frames function not by distorting facts, but by foregrounding specific aspects of an issue—what Entman calls the selection and salience of certain information “...to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (4). According to this model, framing influences how audiences interpret events, assign responsibility, and emotionally react to stories, often without altering the objective content of the message. Scheufele further complements this view by mapping out a process model of framing that distinguishes between the construction of frames (*frame building*) and their influence on public attitudes (*frame setting*), thus reinforcing the idea that framing operates not just at the message level but within a broader system of interaction between media institutions and audiences (5).

Specifically, Entman proposes a practical schema for identifying the dominant rhetorical structures that underlie most news coverage. The framework of “conflict, human interest, consequence, morality, and responsibility” (4) maps the media's role in shaping not just what audiences think about but how they organize and prioritize information. Arowolo thus argues that such framing strategies operate as interpretive shortcuts, helping audiences navigate complex issues through emotionally or culturally familiar scripts (2). Similarly, Kosicki and Mcleod underscore the importance of these recurring cues, noting that audience interpretations are filtered through individual's “...preexisting meaning structures or schemas” and the institutional contexts in which news is produced (5).

Building on this academic dialogue, this study applies framing theory to the intersection of media discourse, gendered victimhood, and digital publics in contemporary China. While much of the existing literature emphasizes how institutional media craft frames to guide public

opinion, this project extends this framework by analyzing how these authoritative narratives interact with, and are contested by, polarized public dialogues in social media spaces. Using three case studies, the study examines how victims are framed not only through official statements but through platform-based affective reactions and narrative contestation. This study is particularly interested in how frame salience is mediated by gendered scripts of behavior, and how civic interpretations challenge, amplify, or neutralize institutional framing. In this sense, this study shifts the focus from framing as a linear process of media influence to a more dynamic, dialogic negotiation of interpretive authority. By attending closely to the language, structure, and emotional tone of both state and civic coverages, the study aims to reveal how framing becomes a mechanism for legitimizing or disqualifying female victims in the Chinese public sphere.

### **State Media Censorship**

Contemporary understanding in media studies reconceptualizes state censorship not as absolute suppression but as a dynamic process of information management shaped by political strategy, media mechanism, and audience psychology. Shadmehr and Bernhard depict censorship as a rational calculation in which rulers weigh the risks of unrest against the costs of suppression. They argue that rulers suppress information not to eliminate all dissent but to reduce the probability of mass mobilization and that "...a ruler gains from relaxing censorship and credibly committing to less censorship" (6) when faced with uncertain public sentiment. Censorship, then, becomes a tactical calibration: a strategic moderation rather than total secrecy.

Such a censorship strategy is echoed in MacKinnon's influential framework of "networked authoritarianism," whereby regimes like China "...embrace and adjust to the inevitable changes brought by digital communications technologies" while retaining centralized control (7). In such environments, censorship operates not simply through deletion, but via algorithmic manipulation, comment filtering, and content prioritization. Oftentimes, these practices shape not just what is seen, but how it is interpreted. The state thus enforces legitimacy not by silencing all voices, but by structuring the flow of public discourse. Indeed, such a perspective is grounded by Bowd's study of media environments in authoritarian contexts. Bowd argues that state-run outlets often present themselves not as repressive institutions but as "stabilizing" agents, selectively foregrounding narratives of national unity and moral order to gain public trust

(8). In such contexts, censorship is not enforced through denial but cultivated through what Bowd calls "discursive legitimacy"—a form of narrative curation that fuses propaganda with plausible storytelling.

Yet, the dynamic system of censorship does not end with state tactics. Audience reception feeds back into the loop. Dal and Nisbet, studying Iranian digital civics, introduce the concept of "motivated resistance to censorship," arguing that individuals' ideological alignment with the regime shapes their willingness to seek out blocked information. As they observe, "resistance to state censorship is not only shaped by technological access but also by the extent to which individuals internalize regime narratives about media trustworthiness" (9). The effectiveness of censorship, then, depends not only on technological barriers but on psychological framing: whether citizens view state media as legitimate media or as instruments of control.

Building on these discussions, this study contributes to the growing body of literature that sees censorship as a mode of "management" rather than mere suppression. By analyzing three recent controversies involving women who were disciplined for their speech or conduct, the study aims to trace how state media deploys specific linguistic framings to neutralize emotional intensity and displace institutional accountability. This project emphasizes that censorship is not always achieved through omission or deletion, but through syntactic structures that recast state violence as bureaucratic procedure and dissent as emotional excess. In doing so, this study aims to expand the conversation around censorship to include a dimension regarding gender—how "loudness," "immodesty," or emotional intensity are framed as deviance when expressed by women, thereby rendering them "imperfect" in both media narratives and public perception. This approach not only illustrates the elasticity of authoritarian censorship but also foregrounds how gender functions as a key axis through which legitimacy and victimhood are either granted or denied.

### **The "Imperfect Victim"**

The concept of the "imperfect victim" has become central in communication and media studies as a way to interrogate how public narratives grant, or withhold, legitimacy from those who report gendered violence. Media portrayals of victims often rely on what Fattah and Fierke (2009) identify as the "ideal victim" schema—where the survivor must be passive, morally upright, and "sympathetic" in order to be believed (10). Bullock and Cubert expand this critique by tracing a

“cultural template” in domestic violence reporting that systematically undermines women who are assertive or deviate from stereotypical vulnerability (11). In both legal and media systems, these templates become forms of structural violence, determining whose suffering is recognized and whose is invalidated.

Yu and Wu provide a particularly telling example in their analysis of the “Wuhan falling mother” incident. They observe that audiences “could not accept the image of ‘bright and beautiful’ victims” (12), with the woman’s physical appearance and self-composure weaponized against her in public narratives. Such rejections of victims who do not visibly perform grief or distress reinforce what Wu describes as a media logic that equates credibility with visible suffering and self-effacement. Similarly, Webb argues that rape victims are framed in news media according to idealized traits—those who are sober, conservative, or show visible injury are endorsed (13), while those whose narratives contain ambiguity are portrayed as suspect or even complicit.

Building on this literature, this study expands the concept of the imperfect victim by shifting the analytical lens from Western media to the specificities of China’s state-regulated yet fragmented digital media environment. While existing literature has illuminated how idealized victimhood operates through moral legibility and gendered expectations, the case studies in this project interrogate how this logic is intensified—and, at times, reconstructed—under authoritarian information control and platform-driven public engagements. By analyzing three thematically connected cases, the study aims to understand how women’s expression and public behavior become adjudicated not only through legal outcomes but also through societal processes of framing, silencing, and backlash. This study’s contribution lies in foregrounding how the imperfect victim is not only pathologized for deviating from ideal scripts but also actively disqualified through the circulation of gendered narratives across state and public media. This project thus reframes the imperfect victim not simply as an individual who “fails” to embody vulnerability, but as a symbolic figure whose deviation threatens the established frameworks of mediated legitimacy itself.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employs a qualitative case study approach—an in-depth, multifaceted examination, using qualitative research methods, of a complex issue in its real-life context (14)—to examine how female figures are

constructed, contested, and delegitimized as “imperfect victims” within a contemporary Chinese media environment. Three high-profile incidents were selected as primary cases: the 2021 Xi’an Metro altercation involving Ms. Guo, the 2021 Alibaba sexual assault case centering on Zhou, and the 2024 backlash against stand-up comedian Yang Li following her partnership controversy with JD.com. These cases were chosen due to a common analytic thread: each features a female figure whose claim to victimhood was complicated and reframed through public contestation. All three incidents are recent and widely circulated on Chinese digital platforms, thus offering a rich medium for studying how gender, speech, and legitimacy intersect in contemporary media settings.

Each case study was constructed through a close textual and discursive analysis of media materials and public responses. Data sources included official state media reports (e.g., *CCTV*, *Sina News*), corporate statements (e.g., *JD.com*, *Alibaba*), and a curated selection of public responses from Chinese social media platforms such as *Weibo* and *Rednote*. These posts were collected through targeted keyword searches including the name of the figure involved (e.g., “Ms. Guo”), relevant descriptors (e.g., “Yang Li’s partnership with JD.com”), and emotionally salient or widely used phrases associated with each case (e.g., “female stand-up comedy,” “sexual assault victim,” “verbal conflicts”). The initial search yielded approximately 200+ posts per case. Posts were then manually filtered based on the following criteria: 1) engagement metrics (likes, comments, and reposts) to identify influential discourse; 2) viewpoint diversity to ensure a variety of perspectives; and 3) relevance and specificity to exclude generic reposts and off-topic rhetoric. Priority was given to posts with high engagement metrics (e.g., 100+ likes and 50+ comments), as they represent conversations that circulated most widely and had the greatest rhetorical significance. Across the three cases, the final sample consisted of approximately 10-20 posts per case for analysis.

For each case, I analyzed how institutional narratives (such as legal statements, news coverage, and organization communications) interacted with civic voices to shape public perception of the individual involved. Specific attention was paid to recurring frames, emotional registers, linguistic patterns, and rhetorical strategies. Theoretical frameworks of narrative framing, media affect, and societal gender norms were used to guide the interpretation and synthesis of findings. By choosing multiple cases from different realms, this study triangulates across contexts

to examine whether the “imperfect victim” operates as a consistent narrative logic rather than an isolated phenomenon. The method enables an extensive view of how legitimacy is constructed across differing contexts. Importantly, while each case is unique in content, all share a high extent of public visibility, emotional polarization, and symbolic conflict, thus supporting the study’s aim to analyze how gendered expectations condition access to public victimhood credibility in China’s digitally mediated society.

## CASE STUDIES

### **The Xi’an Railway Incident: Visual Evidence, Codes of Feminine Conduct, and the Contestation of Victimhood**

On August 30, 2021, an altercation on Xi’an Metro Line 3 between a female passenger, Ms. Guo, and an elderly male commuter escalated into a moment of national contention. Initially triggered by accusations that Ms. Guo was speaking too loudly on her mobile phone, the encounter rapidly devolved into physical conflict. Security personnel intervened and, during the ensuing struggle to remove Ms. Guo from the train, her clothing was torn, exposing her body to passengers and entirely captured by surveillance cameras (15). The video evidence of this moment, circulating widely online, appeared to present incontrovertible documentation of institutional overreach and gendered violence. However, its interpretation fractured along ideological, political, and cultural lines, producing a contentious discursive field in which the meaning of the same image shifted depending on the narrating voice.

The footage, captured via onboard security cameras, presented what some perceived as a “neutral witness” or mechanical eye. Its unflinching gaze documented the physicality of the incident: Ms. Guo being compulsorily dragged out, with her clothes torn and her underwear ripped off. The surveillance footage served as a “visual dossier”: the evidentiary ground zero upon which conflicting interpretations were built. Yet, rather than closing interpretive gaps, the footage became a site of symbolic contestation. In the age of social media witnessing, visual documentation no longer guarantees consensus; instead, it invites proliferating, contradictory readings. This was most apparent in the divergent responses between state-controlled media and the decentralized, chaotic realm of digital publics.

State media outlets such as *China Central Television* (CCTV) and *Sina News* adopted a consistently passive syntactic style in their coverage of the incident.

Specifically, the official CCTV coverage stated that the violence was “A verbal altercation ensued between the two parties, which escalated into a minor physical conflict” and that “In the process, [Ms. Guo’s] outer garment fell off, resulting in partial physical exposure” in which afterward, “[She] returned to the train cabin, rearranged her clothing, and left the station by herself” (16). As expressed, state-controlled media consistently utilized phrases like “outer garment fell off” and “minor physical conflict” to obscure agency and downplay severity. Moreover, phrasings within the official coverage, like “in the situation where persuasion failed,” displaced culpability from the security personnel and subtly placed blame on Ms. Guo. This use of passive voice was not a mere grammatical convention but a political strategy to diffuse accountability and render institutional violence bureaucratically invisible. By contrast, social media users engaged with the footage more explicitly and emotionally. Civics constantly adapted high modality words in framing the situation to emphasize severity and to paint a vivid image, particularly in phrases of “forcibly dragged,” “barely clothed,” and in other instances that depicted the incident where “[Guo’s] clothes were almost completely torn off,” “large areas of her body were exposed,” and “personal belongings scattered all over the ground” (17). These descriptions reframed the incident as a violation of bodily autonomy rather than a public disturbance. While the state sought to contain public sentiment, social media became a volatile space of contestation.

Nevertheless, within social media, reactions were active yet rather polarized. Supporters of Ms. Guo demanded justice and accountability, while others weaponized gender norms to discredit her. Social media users who rallied in support of Ms. Guo exhibited emotional intensity and moral urgency with a high extent of frustration and disbelief. In the comments section of the Chinese social media software *Rednote*, one user exclaimed, “What do you mean by ‘minor physical contact’? What do you mean by ‘partial body exposure’? Her entire skirt was yanked off!!” (18). Here, the civic’s repetition of rhetorical questions along with emphatic punctuation highlights a refusal to accept the lexical minimization of violence. Simultaneously, another post denounces institutional inaction: “Wasn’t she thrown out?! This whole system—from top to bottom—is corrupt” (18), which exemplifies an interplay between indignation and disillusionment, hence exposing deeper anxiety about the futility of seeking justice. Other voices within the digital public, however, worked actively to defend

the institutional actors and redirect blame onto Ms. Guo. One civic commenter insisted that the situation had been exaggerated, stating that Ms. Guo had “lost control of her emotions” and that “everyone moved away” as she was “howling” on her phone (19). This portrayal reframes the event not as a case of excessive force, but as a necessary intervention against a socially disruptive presence. The repeated reference to terms like “disturbing the public” and “annoying” signals a collective disapproval rooted not only in behavioral norms but in broader assumptions about civility in public space. Another user challenged the characterization of the event as violent, claiming, “The security was just dragging her out—what do you mean they tore off her clothes?” and further chastised Guo for failing to “put [her clothes] back on immediately” (20). The implication here is that exposure, however caused, is the woman’s responsibility to correct. Other revealing comments that dubbed her a “female hooligan” and phrases like “wandering around half-naked” (20) further constructed her post-incident actions not as trauma responses but instead as violations of social norms.

Indeed, the issue was not solely what the camera captured, but what audiences chose to see. The video’s clarity did not yield consensus but instead intensified interpretive divergence. Such tension between blame and empathy reflects the complexities of digital witnessing. This divergence often deepens when opposing perspectives converge within a single thread. In media coverage’s comment sections, replies to emotionally charged posts do not merely coexist—they interact. Supporters and detractors respond directly to one another, challenging not only interpretations of the footage but each other’s moral frameworks. These exchanges escalate affective intensity, transforming digital witnessing into a space of public contest of narratives. As users seek to assert dominance over the narrative, the thread itself becomes a snapshot of the broader societal tension over who gets to define victimhood and legitimacy.

Furthermore, the Xi’an Metro incident crystallizes the notion of the “imperfect victim”: a figure whose credibility as a victim is questioned because they do not conform to socially expected behaviors. At the heart of this case lies a gendered accusation: Ms. Guo was “too loud,” thus retroactively legitimizing the violence she experienced. This charge, repeated across state media and public commentary, did not merely describe her volume but coded her as unruly and socially disruptive. Her voice, her crying, and her refusal to submit quietly became the moral infraction that overshadowed the physical violence she endured. Despite video footage documenting

Ms. Guo’s sufferings, public understanding and sympathy were not guaranteed. Instead, the footage triggered a polarized civic response: one that empathized with her suffering and another that dismissed her as hysterical.

This polarization reveals how female victimhood in China’s mediated public sphere remains conditional upon performance. Commentators diverted attention from the violence inflicted on Ms. Guo to how she responded, consistently examining her behavior. The focus thus turned not to her as a “victim,” but to whether she upheld expectations of modesty and restraint, thereby reflecting a deeply entrenched “imperfect victim” logic: the expectation that a woman, even when assaulted, must remain composed to retain moral legitimacy. In failing to conform to this script, Ms. Guo became doubly punished—first through physical exposure, then through narrative exclusion. Even the clarity of the surveillance footage failed to stabilize public judgment. The video’s presumed neutrality did not shield her from scrutiny: it magnified it, with her crying and resistance all reinterpreted through the lens of “etiquette” rather than violence. Here, Ms. Guo’s “loudness” was never just about volume. It became the central means by which her pain was rendered illegible—and to an extent, her claim to justice.

As such, the Xi’an case exemplifies the internal limits of visual evidence. It reveals that even in the presence of presumed objective documentation, the recognition of victimhood is not automatic but negotiated, often along gendered lines. Ms. Guo’s “loudness” was not merely the initial complaint. Instead, it rendered her an “imperfect victim” who was alternately vilified, pitied, defended, and shamed. More importantly, it has become the commentary on who is allowed to occupy public space, whose emotions are legible, and whose suffering is valid. Thus, the case demands a critical media literacy that looks beyond what footage shows to interrogate how it is read and who is granted interpretive authority. In media environments saturated with surveillance and divergence, the question is no longer simply “what happened,” but “who gets to say what happened—and how loudly.”

### **The Alibaba Sexual Assault Case: Gendered Silence, Resistance, and the Myth of the Ideal Victim**

In July 2021, Zhou, an employee at Alibaba’s Freshippo division, reported being sexually assaulted by her supervisor, Wang, during a business trip in Jinan. After her internal complaints were met with indifference, Zhou staged a cafeteria protest in Alibaba’s company and uploaded a statement of her assault experience online.

Her post, meticulous in detail and searing in tone, catalyzed a media storm. Surveillance footage and chat logs circulated online, giving the impression of transparency. Yet, such a deluge of documentation and evidence failed to produce a consensus. What emerged instead was a fragmented public sphere in which media narratives, civic discourse, and institutional silence clashed over who was allowed to speak, how, and with what consequence.

Alibaba's official media coverage was initially muted. Even when the company confirmed the allegations were under internal review, reports adopted language that minimized institutional accountability. Statements often used institutionally detached phrasing, such as "a staff member reported being violated" and "the accused has been suspended pending investigation," subtly reoriented the narrative away from structural accountability and toward personal ambiguity (21). Such syntactic evasiveness, where verbs lack agents and actions become abstractions, created interpretive ambiguity among the audience: Zhou's situation could be seen as either a tragic miscommunication or an opportunistic exaggeration, depending on one's perspective. The eventual state verdict released on September 6, concluded that "there was insufficient evidence for arrest" and imposed a minor 15-day administrative detention—language that transformed a charge of sexual assault into a matter of "inappropriate behavior" (22). This legal de-escalation became a pivot around which public discourse fractured.

Afterward, civic commentaries unfolded in multiple registers on platforms such as *Weibo* and *Rednote*. Supportive voices highlighted the company's hypocrisy, making deliberate contrasts with Alibaba's swift dismissal of an employee who "stole a mooncake" in 2016 in three hours with its slow and reluctant action in response to a sexual assault report. As one comment scathingly put it, "In Alibaba's culture, a mooncake is worth more than a woman" (23). Other civics interrogated Alibaba's "drinking table culture," a euphemism for workplace social coercion veiled as ritual, claiming that Zhou was a worker, not "the last course" at a corporate dinner. Furthermore, more revealing comments emerged from *Ta Lang Qing Nian's* official account, utilizing metaphors to expose Alibaba's institutional neglect: "When you see one cockroach, it means there are 200 hiding" (23). Indeed, the repeated invocation of metaphors like "rot" or "infestation" revealed not only public outrage but also a broader skepticism toward the corporate culture's claim to uphold values.

Yet, just as visible were narratives that undermined

Zhou's credibility with a stream of suspicion and mockery directed at her. Many media engagements questioned her behavior and emotional reactions. Various critics wrote, "She didn't say no clearly—how can we call it rape?" "Why didn't she protect herself better?" and "That night she was drinking, what did she expect?" (24). Others fixated on her act of distributing flyers in the company cafeteria, baptizing her as "hysterical," "overreacting," and "just wanted attention" (25). Her public appeals were reframed not as courageous demands for justice but as excessive and disruptive. In these narratives, she became an "imperfect victim." Yet not because of any legal ambiguity, but because her resistance violated the moral script of "dignified suffering." Indeed, Zhou's breach of expected victim behavior became the defining frame through which her credibility was judged: She had not cried publicly enough to seem sympathetic; she had not remained composed enough to seem respectable; and she had, quite literally, spoken too loudly. Her refusal to perform wounded passivity, choosing instead confrontation, was recoded as a threat to institutional order and public etiquette. This side of the perspective was most acutely articulated by Wang's wife, who released an open letter defending her husband. Her rhetoric hinged not on evidence but on drawing comparisons: Zhou, she claimed, had "stayed out drinking," had "not resisted," and now "wanted to destroy a family" (26). These lexical cues—"stay out," "not resist," "destroy"—relied on gendered assumptions about what real victims do: they do not drink, they do not confuse, and they do not protest this publicly. Within this narrative, Zhou's "imperfection" and deviation from ideal victim behavior became the alibi for institutional inaction. Her lack of idealized victimhood rendered her pain ignorable.

Such tension between support and question echoed across digital platforms, where opposing comment threads unfolded simultaneously in direct opposition. Some commenters exalted Zhou as a symbol of resilience; others questioned her character and responses. Ironically enough, Zhou's suffering was less scrutinized than her conduct. Therefore, the question was not whether she was harmed, but whether she deserved to be heard.

What renders this case paradigmatic is not the ambiguity of facts, but the asymmetry in narrative credibility. Zhou's very act of narrating, and of asserting a voice unfiltered by Alibaba's hierarchy, destabilized the media ecosystem's preferred grammar of female victimhood. She was not meek, not faceless, and not broken in ways that flattered the public's appetite for "purity." Zhou's story, then, is not just about an alleged

assault, but about the costs of refusing silence and speaking too assertively.

By September, the case had largely faded away from the public eye, yet its implications endure. The logic of the imperfect victim not only shaped media representation; rather, it determined who was worth believing and how loudly they were allowed to speak. The case reveals that in China's mediated public sphere, not all victims are equal: their credibility is tethered to how well they perform vulnerability, not how forcefully they demand justice. As such, the Alibaba incident did not merely illustrate the limits of institutional justice in a patriarchal society; what's more, it exposed the bitter reality where female speech is policed. Indeed, Zhou was not denied justice because she lacked evidence. She was denied justice because she spoke—too long, and too loud.

### **The Yang Li—JD.com Controversy: Satire, Gendered Illegitimacy, and the Boundaries of Feminine Voice**

In October 2024, Chinese stand-up comedian Yang Li once again found herself at the center of a media controversy. After being announced as a spokesperson for JD.com's "Double Eleven" shopping campaign, Yang's presence in promotional materials provoked an immediate backlash from a segment of the online male population, leading to the swift withdrawal of the campaign and a public apology from JD.com. The campaign's abrupt termination and the public commentary that followed echoed a familiar pattern—one in which Yang's comedic persona was not simply criticized but pathologized as a social threat. The case illuminates a broader discursive anxiety within the Chinese media environment: the disciplining of female speech, especially when it appears "too confident," "too assertive," or, more pointedly, "too loud."

At the core of the controversy lies a paradox between cultural production and gendered legitimacy. Yang Li's comedy, which rose to prominence with the viral punchline "Why are men so average yet so confident?" in 2020, was widely celebrated among the feminist public for its scathing critique of patriarchal arrogance. Yet, this same line became a point of symbolic divide: one that drew a clear line between supporters who lauded her courage and detractors who condemned her as a provocateur. The phrase evolved into a representation of what critics called "gender antagonism"—a term repeatedly cited in both institutional media and public dialogue. The controversy surrounding her collaboration with JD.com thus did not emerge in a vacuum, but as a

cumulative effect of a longer trajectory of polarization and tension.

Mainstream media coverage of the incident adopted a largely depersonalized tone, with JD.com's response projecting neutrality while sidestepping Yang's name and the gendered dimensions of the incident. Their statement avoided naming Yang Li directly, stating only "the relevant stand-up comedian," which rendered Yang absent from her own controversy, further implying a deliberate distancing from the sociopolitical implications her name now carries (27). The syntactic ambiguity of "brought you an unpleasant experience" (27) reoriented agency from the company to the consumer, positioning JD as the neutral "mediator" responding to the customers' will. In doing so, the brand implicitly disavowed Yang's legitimacy without engaging the gendered nature of the backlash, leaving her voice disposable in the pursuit of reputational respectability.

Yet beyond the sanitized neutrality and the omission of gender-specific contexts in JD.com's official statements, digital publics offered a competing interpretive platform—one in which Yang Li's voice was not erased but reclaimed. On one side, supportive civic voices on Chinese social media constructed a narrative that reframed Yang's public role not as incendiary but as representational. These users challenged the gender imbalances underlying her criticism, particularly underlining how technical criticism, often veiled as neutral evaluation, functions as a coded form of gender exclusion, where women's comedy has to be refined, non-inflammatory, and technically exquisite. Indeed, as civics noted, Yang Li's stand-up has been criticized for weak technique, "...but if it were truly bad, would she be receiving this much commercial work?", emphasizing that her cultural impact is itself proof of competence, not lack thereof (28). Supporters further viewed Yang not as an outlier but as emblematic of broader gender-based power struggles in media visibility. She was framed as a woman operating in an industry where female voices rarely receive recognition, thus positioning her prominence as a necessity (29). Simultaneously, such logic echoed throughout civic commentaries that lauded stand-up comedy as one of the few accessible platforms where "marginalized groups can mock the dominant," with one remark insisting that "There's nothing wrong with Yang Li making jokes about a powerful, patriarchal society" (30). Here, Yang's humor is not merely an artistic expression, but a tactical form of cultural subversion and resistance.

Nevertheless, running alongside these affirmations

was a reactive counternarrative: one that refigured Yang's satire as transgression and her visibility as a provocation. The rhetoric deployed in anti-Yang posts reveals an elaborate affective framework. Emotive phrases such as "man-hating witch," "gender divider," and "ungrateful" underscore the process of moral inversion wherein the one calling out inequality is cast as the aggressor. The transformation of a comedic satire into a collective personal animosity and hatred against Yang is further visible in a widely shared *Weibo* comment, "Yang's just average-looking, yet so confident," whereby civics use aesthetic judgment as grounds to delegitimize Yang's presence in her professional space (30). Similarly, other civics accused her of being "sharp-tongued and mean" and "bitter." The opposition also presented what could be termed "rhetorical entrapment loops," a communicative strategy in which the responder is placed in a "no-win" situation (31). In these framings, Yang is too confident if she defends herself, too sensitive if she reacts to criticism, and too loud if she expresses herself. Her statements, or lack thereof, are perpetually subjected to negative readings. Here, the charge of being "too loud" operates not only as a literal judgment of volume on stage but as an ideological cue for deviating from the normalized norms of feminine discipline. Yang's willingness to speak in tones and registers that challenge patriarchal norms whose very visibility threatens to destabilize normative gender hierarchies has been rebranded as aggression and recoded as social disruption rather than critique. The hatred did not simply respond to her words, but to her audacity in saying them aloud, on a stage, without apology.

More importantly, the campaign to boycott JD.com's products unless "Yang is removed" further illustrates how moral outrage, amplified through social media, can operationalize economic power against an individual. Commenters not only called for her dismissal but also shared screenshots of canceled orders and deleted memberships. Civic posts saying, "If they don't replace Yang, I'll just keep ordering and returning" exhibit a weaponized form of consumer citizenship (32). Yet, the underlying target was never just JD.com—it was Yang's legitimacy as a woman speaking on stage.

This brings into relief the figure of the "imperfect victim." Though Yang Li is not conventionally a victim in juridical terms, she becomes one symbolically—as a woman punished not for wrongdoing but for violating normative comportment. Her comedic persona of being direct, sarcastic, and unapologetic defies the "expectations" of a female. Rather than signaling

contrition, her comedic stance articulates resistance, thereby breaching the emotional contract presumed to secure gendered empathy and likeability. The criticism she faces is not solely for what she says, but how she says it: too confident, too sharp, and crucially, too "loud." These qualities, while professionally essential in comedy, are socially disqualifying in public debates over civility and victimhood. As an "imperfect victim," Yang is not dragged physically from a platform, but rather, socially disqualified. Her erasure is not spectacular but procedural, where campaigns quietly disappear, and reputational support becomes risk-averse. In such a context, being "too loud" is enough to warrant silencing—even when no laws are broken.

Indeed, Yang's case reveals the contradiction at the heart of contemporary Chinese media culture: while states and organizations seek to diversify representation, they remain tied to consumerist logics that penalize dissenting females. Yang's controversy is not reducible to a single phrase, but rather reflects an enduring discomfort with women who speak outside the lines of "acceptability." Her "loudness" is thus neither incidental nor excessive—it is foundational to the disruption she represents. And it is pointedly this loudness that renders her an "imperfect victim": not because her claims lack merit, but because her behavior refuses the script of sanctioned victimhood. For Yang, as with others, the public does not simply ask, "What happened?" but rather, "How dare she speak that boldly and unapologetically?"

## DISCUSSION

The three case studies presented—Ms. Guo in the Xi'an railway incident, Zhou in the Alibaba sexual assault case, and Yang Li in the JD.com partnership controversy—collectively illustrate the persistence and pervasiveness of the "imperfect victim" paradigm in contemporary Chinese media culture. Despite differences in contexts, each figure encountered a similar mechanism of symbolic disqualification. Rather than being recognized unconditionally as victims or subjects of injustice, their credibility was filtered through behavioral and emotional expectations—expectations that they were perceived to have violated.

A key pattern across the cases is the gendered conditioning of public empathy. Each woman's visibility, amplified through both state and public media, became grounds for scrutiny rather than support. Surveillance footage, textual testimony, and comedic speech were not evaluated on factual or artistic merit alone; they were

interpreted through normative frames that prioritize restraint, composure, and docility as the “preconditions” for victimhood. The cases reveal how loudness, whether expressed in voice or action, is repeatedly weaponized to delegitimize female expression. Guo’s cries, Zhou’s protests, and Yang’s satire all became reframed as overreach, excess, or provocation, thus exposing a cultural grammar that penalizes the refusal to perform wounded passivity.

Importantly, these results challenge the assumption that increased media transparency necessarily produces justice. In each case, evidence, whether visual or textual, was insufficient to guarantee institutional accountability or public cohesion. Instead, visibility operated ambivalently: as a condition for speaking, but also a platform of vulnerability. Far from serving as neutral validators, images and statements became “battlefields” for interpretation. The results suggest that in China’s digitally mediated public sphere, moral legitimacy is less a function of what happened and more of how it is narrated and received.

## CONCLUSION

From a theoretical standpoint, the project contributes to feminist media studies by mapping how digital publics and state-affiliated institutions jointly shape the boundaries of gendered legitimacy. It demonstrates that civic commentary can both challenge and reproduce patriarchal logic, often within the same media thread. The convergence of surveillance, social media, and public performance creates a multi-faceted discussion space where emotion, ideology, and one’s reputation are constantly negotiated and redefined. The “imperfect victim” thus becomes not just a media figure, but an interpretive category: one that reveals how legitimacy is policed not only through law or censorship, but through societal expectations and behavioral codes. Practically, the findings have implications for institutional accountability, platform management, and public rhetoric. They suggest that symbolic omission and neglect often substitute for institutional justice, that reputational risk drives corporate silence, and that affective public discourse can either empower or disqualify. The analysis also underscores the need for more critically aware media literacy—one that interrogates not just content but also the social scripts and ethical frameworks into which that content is inserted.

In sum, the project sheds light on the mechanisms through which gendered speech is disciplined,

emotionally policed, and rendered illegible under the guise of civility, composure, or neutrality. By tracing the common narrative arc across three divergent contexts, the research underscores the structural nature of “imperfect victimhood”—not as an anomaly, but instead, as a condition that governs who can speak, how loudly, and at what cost.

Nevertheless, while this study offers a focused analysis of three emblematic cases, its scope is limited by its qualitative nature and concentration on Chinese digital media contexts. The findings may not be universally generalizable across different cultural, social, and political environments, nor do they account for offline reception or the voices of the women involved beyond mediated online representations. Future research could expand the scope by conducting cross-cultural research or ethnographic approaches to examine how notions of victimhood are constructed, internalized, or contested beyond digital platforms. Additionally, further inquiry into how platform algorithms, censorship mechanisms, and audience demographics shape narrative visibility could offer deeper insight into the foundational forces behind legal and public judgments of victimhood.

## FUNDING SOURCES

No external funding was provided for the research or writing of this article.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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