

The Politics of the Female Body: Reproductive Control and Sexual Censorship in China

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Abstract

This article examines how the Chinese state's governance of reproduction and sexual expression forms a gendered mode of biopolitical control, and why the recent shift from one-child restriction to two- and three-child encouragement has not led to greater bodily autonomy for women. Using feminist legal and human-rights critique alongside Foucauldian biopolitics, the study conducts discourse analysis across laws and policy documents, curricular and health materials, and platform governance rules.

The findings show that reproductive policy has changed techniques rather than logic. The state continues to determine which reproductive needs become recognised rights, aligning fertility with demographic and developmental priorities. At the same time, policy, media and administrative practice produce an “ideal woman” grounded in marriage, childbearing and care, while sexual expression is regulated through de-sexualised knowledge, platform soft control and selective punitive sanctions. The article contributes a mechanism-level account linking reproductive governance and sexual censorship and proposes a rights-centered framework for evaluating policy outcomes.

Keywords: reproductive governance, platform governance, biopolitics, policy implementation, sexuality regulation

1. Introduction

This article investigates how the Chinese state's management of women's reproduction and sexual expression embodies a gendered form of biopolitical control, and to what extent such management infringes upon women's human rights. Grounded in feminist human rights theory and Foucault's biopolitics, it argues that this is not a merely public-health endeavor but a systematized, gendered mode of biopolitical governance: by politicizing the private sphere of reproduction and sexual desire into objects of regulation, surveillance, and punishment, the state displaces women's autonomy, instrumentalizes women's bodies in service of state goals, and suppresses female agency under the banners of “morality,” “public order,” and “national development.”

This governance operates through two interlinked institutional structures: reproductive control and sexual censorship. These regimes constrain not only biological reproduction but also the emotional dimensions, imaginative space, and discursive possibilities of women's sexual conduct. The aim is not to make sex disappear, but to monopolize its meaning, utility, and legitimacy, thereby shaping a compliant reproductive body.

In this article's formulation, “reproduction” is a continuum: it begins with the arousal of sexual desire—potentially originating in cultural contact, affective responses, or erotic imagination—passes through sexual interaction, and extends to potential reproductive outcomes. Framed this way, the analysis shows that the state intervenes not only in final reproductive results but also in the preceding affective, behavioral, and discursive stages.

Globally, reproductive rights have long been contested within broader human-rights debates. In many countries,

disputes over abortion and bodily autonomy revolve around the tension between protecting fetal life and safeguarding women's reproductive freedom (Mullally, 2005; Eriksson, 2000). In China—the world's second most populous country—reproductive control is implemented primarily through administrative policy rather than constitutional guarantees (Jiang, Li, & Feldman, 2013).

Although China ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2001 and endorsed the 2021 United Nations HIV/AIDS prevention framework (United Nations, 1966; United Nations General Assembly, 2021), female sex workers are still subjected to mandatory STI testing and custodial “re-education.” Under the authority granted by the 2009 amendment, public security organs have imposed compulsory detention and labor reform (National People's Congress, 2009), frequently accompanied by public shaming, identity exposure, and moral denigration (Xia, 2007). The application of these punitive measures is asymmetrical: male clients and other actors often do not face equivalent consequences, revealing patriarchal bias within the state's logic.

By tracing the evolution of reproductive policy and analyzing patterns of sexual censorship, this article offers a case study of gendered state power from a non-Western context, exposing the concealed mechanisms through which women's bodily rights are politicized and suppressed, and thereby contributing analytical evidence from China to international human-rights dialogue.

As a roadmap, the paper proceeds as follows: the Introduction frames the research question in the Chinese context and situates debates on reproductive rights and sexual expression within broader human-rights discourse; the Literature Review synthesizes scholarship on fertility governance, sexual censorship, and gendered law to identify the gap this study addresses; the Theoretical Framework integrates feminist human-rights theory with Foucault's biopolitics, alongside accounts of identity regulation and decolonial feminism; the Methodology explains a text-based approach using policy, law, curricula/health guidance, platform rules, and emblematic censorship cases with feminist critical reading and discourse analysis. The analysis then unfolds in two chapters: Chapter 1, “The ‘Nationalization’ of Women's Bodies through Reproductive Policy,” traces the continuity from restriction to encouragement (1.1), shows how the state translates individual “needs” into “rights/obligations” and thereby politicizes reproduction (1.2), examines how policy–media–law co-produce the “ideal woman” of marriage–childbearing–care (1.3), and sets up the isomorphic mechanism that leads into sexual governance (1.4). Chapter 2, “How Sexual Censorship Reshapes the Legitimacy of Women's Bodies,” details boundary-setting through de-sexualized governance (2.1), sub-threshold expression and emotional labor under platforms' soft control (2.2), hard sanctions across legal–administrative–platform tracks and their gendered effects (2.3), and the coupling-and-feedback chain between sexual governance and fertility governance (2.4). The Conclusion refrains from repeating mechanistic details and instead advances a rights-centered reorientation with an outcomes-based evaluation framework.

2. Literature Review

This section pursues three aims: first, to review empirical studies on China's state–reproductive governance and position the relevant theoretical tools; second, to assemble domestic and international evidence on sex/media governance and platformization, clarifying participatory censorship as a meso-level mechanism; third, to introduce feminist legal and decolonial critiques and, on that basis, identify the gaps in existing research and this article's point of intervention.

To begin with the empirical picture of state reproductive governance, White (2018) shows, through historical and grassroots implementation analysis, how the one-child policy relied on economic penalties and cadre pressure, revealing an instrumental, population-engineering approach. Complementing this, Jiang, Li and Feldman (2013) argue from an institutional/policy perspective that China's reproductive governance is highly administrative and weak in legal/rights foundations, and discuss its social consequences. Although their emphases differ—White foregrounds techniques of enforcement while Jiang et al. stress institutional attributes—together they depict a two-sided configuration in which administrative rationality prevails over rights-based rationality. To explain how this penetrates bodies and everyday life, I draw on two complementary theoretical toolkits: Foucault's biopolitics (1978; 2008), which highlights how discipline and normalization fold population, reproduction and bodies into techniques of rule; and Butler's (2004) account of intelligible/recognizable bodies, which shows how gender norms demarcate “qualified subjects” and exclusions. The former answers how rule operates (techniques/institutions); the latter answers who is governed and by which norms (recognition/exclusion). Together they structure the analysis that follows.

Turning to sex and media governance, studies suggest that “sayable sex” is compressed into “procreative sex” via regulatory discourse and educational supply. On the one hand, Dong and Huang (2014) demonstrate how vague legal/administrative rubrics such as “obscenity/vulgarity” are used to suppress sexual expression, especially women-oriented expression. On the other hand, UNFPA and UNESCO (2020) show that sexuality education in China over-privileges reproduction and hygiene while under-addressing pleasure and consent,

constituting a systemic desexualization in knowledge provision. At the platform/peer level, Han (2023) and Lai and Liu (2023) examine the production of women-oriented content (e.g., otome games) and platform governance in China, showing that female gaze and women-oriented intimate narratives are more readily problematized, prompting creators to develop “anticipating the line—rewriting the text—strategic compliance” practices. Beyond academic work, Chinese mainstream media also document regulatory ambiguities around otome games—content edging, “16+” suitability tags, and phone-number-based real-name checks that minors can bypass—underscoring the non-neutrality of the platform–policy nexus (Jiangsu News, 2024). As a cross-context comparator, Davis (2018) analyses Instagram accounts oriented to U.S. college audiences and finds that caption/hashtag re-contextualization routinely channels neutral images into sexualization/objectification while converting women’s UGC into platforms’ visibility capital (i.e., gendered free labour); visibility also skews toward young, white bodies. Rather than contradicting one another, the domestic and overseas literatures here mutually evidence mechanisms: the U.S. case establishes that the platform–peer nexus is not neutral, while the China-based studies show asymmetric tightening that pushes women-oriented expression into threshold-level strategies.

Building on this platform mechanism, in-context China research further identifies the emergence of participatory censorship. In ostensibly non-political fan communities (danmei), Luo and Li (2024) find that uncertainty and black-box rules foster collective imaginaries about procedures/standards/motives of censorship, which then organise self-censorship and peer reporting as collective community labour; the upshot is that authoritarian control is socially reinforced in micro-settings of weak state presence. This resonates with, and bridges to, the earlier chain of educational desexualization → platform re-contextualization → threshold strategies, providing a meso-level link from knowledge/platforms to community execution.

Finally, on normative critique, MacKinnon (1989) argues that purported legal neutrality often operates through a male norm, producing punitive bias against women (e.g., around sex work and sexual expression). Lugones (2010) pushes the lens to the level of the colonial/modern gender system, showing how state and market co-produce “compliant femininity” and “qualified intimacy”, marginalising non-heterosexual and non-reproductive subjects. These critiques furnish the rights language and value yardsticks that tie back to the technical–normative–platform–community mechanisms above, grounding this article’s human-rights perspective on reproductive and sexual rights in the Chinese context.

In sum, existing research converges in three ways: (1) China’s reproductive governance exhibits an administration-strong/rights-weak structure (White, 2018; Jiang et al., 2013); (2) desexualization is jointly produced by regulatory discourse and educational provision (Dong & Huang, 2014; UNFPA & UNESCO, 2020); and (3) platforms are not neutral—women-oriented expression is more constrained by regulatory and peer mechanisms, and under uncertainty evolves into participatory censorship (Han, 2023; Lai & Liu, 2023; Davis, 2018; Luo & Li, 2024). Differences remain: theoretically, emphases range from techniques/institutions (Foucault, 1978; 2008) to norms/recognition (Butler, 2004) and to law/colonial structures (MacKinnon, 1989; Lugones, 2010); contextually, Davis (2018) offers a mechanism-level analogy from U.S. college social media, whereas Luo and Li (2024) provide an in-context mechanism from Chinese fandom. Against this backdrop, this article addresses the disconnect between “sexual censorship” and “reproductive governance” by proposing and substantiating a mechanism chain—desexualized knowledge/censorship → platform threshold strategies and emotional labour → shaming/(quasi-)penalisation → coupling/feedback between sexual censorship and reproductive governance—to explain how women’s bodies and desires are translated into governance tools serving population engineering and social order.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This article asks: How do China’s governance of reproduction and sexual expression constitute a gendered form of biopolitical control, and to what extent do they erode or negate women’s rights and subjectivity?

I draw on three complementary lenses. First, feminist human-rights and legal critique—MacKinnon (1989) exposes how purported legal “neutrality” operates to male norms and yields punitive bias in the regulation of sex work/sexual expression; Cook (1992) and Ignatieff (1985) supply a normative account of the needs → rights conversion valve, explaining why only “needs” that are state-recognized, resourced, and justiciable become claimable rights. Second, biopolitics/governmentality—Foucault (1978; 2008) underpins my claim that the move from the one-child restriction to two-/three-child encouragement is a switch from prohibition-based to promotion-based techniques within the same governing rationality rather than a paradigm break, and helps read how population targets, health/order discourses, and administrative–platform instruments co-operate. Third, politics of recognition and decolonial feminism—Butler (2004; 2016) illuminates how the boundaries of the “intelligible/recognised body” are produced through repetitive policy–law–media practice as the “ideal woman” of marriage–childbearing–care; Lugones (2010) re-situates these boundaries within a colonial/modern gender system, explaining the co-production of compliant femininity/qualified intimacy and the downgrading of

non-reproductive/non-heterosexual desires; Ahmed (2004) shows how shame/guilt function as the affective fuel of governance, propelling de-sexualisation and self-discipline; Siegel (2007) help parse the tension between instrumental “empowerment/women-friendly” claims and women’s autonomy.

This is a conceptual and normative argument. I use feminist critical discourse analysis and textual interpretation to examine publicly accessible, citable institutional and discursive texts, including: law and policy (e.g., Criminal Law provisions; State Council/General Office programmes on fertility and women’s development), education/health texts (curricular standards, textbook framings, official health guidance), and platform/media materials (community rules and enforcement notices; high-traffic narratives around “fertility anxiety” and the “marital–reproductive order”). These sources are not for statistical inference but serve as argumentative anchors to show how concepts migrate across the policy–education–platform layers and mutually reinforce one another.

Together, these theories and tools structure the analysis: with Foucault (1978; 2008) I show that “restriction → encouragement” remains within the same biopolitical logic; with Cook/Ignatieff I explain how the state holds the valve that translates needs → rights/duties, thereby politicising reproduction; with Butler/Lugones I demonstrate how the “ideal woman” (marriage–childbearing–care) is produced and bound to welfare/legitimacy, and how this normative script is isomorphically extended to sexual governance; finally, through Ahmed’s affective politics, I trace the chain de-sexualised boundaries → below-threshold expression & emotional labour → shaming/(quasi-)penalty → coupling & feedback, showing how women’s bodies and desires are continuously translated into governance instruments serving population engineering and social order. In sum, this integrated framework offers a testable theoretical account of the research question: why “encouraging fertility” does not necessarily entail rights expansion; how sexual censorship becomes routinised through state–platform–community interactions; and how it ultimately feeds back into fertility governance, consolidating the nationalisation of women’s bodies.

4. Analysis

4.1 Reproductive Policy and the “Nationalization” of Women’s Bodies

This chapter addresses how fertility policy nationalizes women’s bodies and operates in conjunction with the governance of sexuality: it first traces the continuous biopolitical logic from strict one-child control to the encouragement of two-/three-child policies, showing how “prohibitive control” is rebranded as “promotive/enabling control” (4.1.1); it then argues how the state translates individual “needs” into manageable “rights/duties,” thereby systematically politicizing reproduction (4.1.2); next, it analyzes how the repeated practices of policy–media–law produce the “ideal woman” of “marriage–childbearing–care,” binding legitimacy and welfare access to a maternal track (4.1.3); on this basis, it proposes an isomorphic mechanism linking the governance of reproduction to the governance of sexuality as the transition to what follows (4.1.4). The second part proceeds accordingly: how desexualization sets the higher-order boundary of what may be said/seen (4.2.1); sub-threshold expression and emotional labor under platforms’ soft control (4.2.2); hard sanctions across the tripartite tracks of law, administration, and platforms and their gendered effects (4.2.3); and the coupling-and-feedback chain between sexual censorship and fertility governance (4.2.4), which ultimately lays the logical groundwork for the rights re-positioning and evaluation framework in the conclusion.

4.1.1 Policy Evolution: The Same Biopolitical Logic from Restriction to Encouragement

This section argues: from “one-child—strict control” to “two-child/three-child—encouragement” is not a paradigm shift, but the same biopolitical logic of governmentality turning from “prohibition-based control” to “promotion-based control” (General Office of the State Council of the PRC, 2024). Within this logic, the state still acts as the subject of population governance, binding “qualified motherhood” to demographic-structural objectives through fiscal, educational, and publicity apparatuses, thereby embodying what Foucault describes as “a mode of rule that takes life as its object” (Foucault, 1978; 2008).

Key policy junctures indicate an update of instruments rather than a rupture of logic. From the universal two-child policy to the three-child policy, the central government set the goals of “optimizing the population structure and promoting long-term balanced development,” rolling out a policy lexicon and measures that are “supportive” rather than “punitive,” and emphasizing institutional arrangements of “burden reduction—capacity enhancement” across taxation, childcare, education, and employment (The State Council of the PRC, 2021; General Office of the State Council, 2024). Such “encouragement” has not relaxed the state’s organizational and evaluative capacity in the fertility domain; instead, it incorporates the formation, conversion, and implementation of fertility intentions into a denser chain of policy tools.

Meanwhile, the discourse of “empowerment” becomes an important veneer of promotion-based control. Policy texts issued in the name of “enhancing women’s endogenous motivation for development” in practice often position women as key resources of domestic reproduction and population reproduction, re-centering the “marriage–childbearing–care” track (The State Council of the PRC, 2021; All-China Women’s Federation,

2024). This empowerment-packaged return aligns closely with Siegel's classic caution regarding reproductive policy—that any arrangement claiming to “advance women's rights” must be examined to see whether it truly expands women's autonomous choice, or merely rewrites maternal norms in the name of rights (Siegel, 2007).

At the normative level, this turn dovetails with colonial/modern corporeal governance: by constructing standards of the “qualified woman,” the state instrumentalizes women's bodies to serve the nation, economy, and social stability; “encouraging childbearing” is thus scripted as a morally justified and policy-accountable goal rather than a choice centered on individual autonomy (Lugones, 2010). This closes the loop with Foucault's account of biopolitics: not the withdrawal of power, but finer-grained discipline implemented through gentler apparatuses (Foucault, 1978; 2008).

Beneath the appearance of “restriction → encouragement” lies a change in the register and instruments of governmentality: from setting punitive boundaries to shaping preferences and incentives, women's reproduction remains continuously subjected to calculation in light of state objectives. The next section (4.1.2) will further show how the state controls the “valve” that translates “needs into rights (or obligations),” thereby systematically politicizing individuals' reproductive choices.

4.1.2 From “Needs” to “Rights” Via State Translation: The Politicisation of Reproduction

This section argues that individuals' “needs” regarding reproduction do not automatically become claimable “rights”; whether such needs are recognised as rights, and how they are defined and allocated, depends on a translation valve controlled by the state and on policy objectives. When this valve operates with population and development as its pivot, reproduction is systematically politicised and incorporated into the state's governance calculus (Ignatieff, 1985, cited in Cook, 1992; Foucault, 1978; Foucault, 2008). Within this logic, the apparent turn “from restriction to encouragement” does not entail ceding power to individual autonomy; rather, it incorporates the shaping, incentivising, and evaluation of reproductive preferences into the policy toolbox, continuing to organise reproduction around state needs (The State Council of the PRC, 2021).

At the level of concrete mechanisms, moralist and nationalist discourses situate individual reproductive decisions within public responsibility and collective goals: media representations and policy publicity around “fertility anxiety” and the “marital–reproductive order” routinely position women who remain unmarried and childfree or delay childbearing as subjects “departing from the norm”, thereby constituting a regime of public disciplining over their choices (China Youth Daily, 2023; Xinhua News Agency, 2024; Legal Daily, 2024). At the level of identity, this disciplining resonates with performative identity construction: through the repetitive practices of law, policy, and public opinion, a particular “legitimate female identity” is normatively affirmed, while other pathways are excluded as inappropriate or irresponsible (Butler, 2016). The resultant shaming and moral pressure further weaken women's capacity to claim their own reproductive needs as rights (Xu, 2020, p. 142; The State Council of the PRC, 2021).

In comparative perspective, the politicisation of reproduction is not unique to China, but the bases of legitimation differ: in Ireland, for example, law once restricted the use and dissemination of contraceptives under a religious–moral framework, incorporating individual sexual and reproductive choice into the governance of the “public moral order” (McCormick, 2009). By contrast, China's logic of legitimation is more oriented to the biopolitical governance and population strategy of the modern state: reproduction is directly tied to population structure and national development goals, so the translation from “needs” to “rights” is more obedient to macro population indicators and policy performance (Foucault, 1978; Foucault, 2008).

In sum, when the state holds the translation power from “needs → rights” and allocates accordingly with population–development as the priority, individual reproductive choices are institutionally politicised, and women's bodies are continually incorporated into governance and evaluation loops oriented to state objectives. The next section turns to the cultural and institutional preconditions of this translation mechanism: how the state produces the “ideal woman” through the disciplinary discourse of “marriage–reproduction–care”, thereby delineating whose reproduction is deemed legitimate and under what conditions it is recognised as a right (Butler, 2016).

4.1.3 The Disciplinary Discourse of the “Ideal Woman” (Marriage–Reproduction–Care)

This section argues that the “ideal woman” is not a natural identity, but a normative position continually produced and affirmed through the repetitive practices of law–policy–media, whose core track is marriage–reproduction–care. This identity is institutionalised via policy texts and routinised through public opinion and workplace practices, such that “what counts as a qualified woman” and “what counts as legitimate reproduction” are defined as objects to be evaluated and rewarded/punished (Butler, 2016; MacKinnon, 1989).

At the level of policy discourse, the rhetoric of “empowerment/family-friendly” is juxtaposed with population goals, driving the re-centring of “qualified motherhood”: in programmatic documents, the state and GONGOS emphasise “enhancing women's endogenous motivation for development”, yet in resource allocation and

institutional arrangements primarily position women as key resources for domestic reproduction and population reproduction (The State Council of the PRC, 2021; All-China Women's Federation, 2024). This disciplining, articulated in the language of "empowerment", sets intra-marital childbearing and care responsibility as the preferred pathway to welfare and social recognition, while placing other pathways in a secondary or even suspect position (Siegel, 2007).

Public opinion and workplace practices further emotionalise/moralise this norm: discourses around "fertility anxiety" and the "marital-reproductive order" mark women who are unmarried and childfree or who delay childbearing as subjects "departing from the norm"; gendered expectations in recruitment, promotion, and labour contracts then establish "married with children/available to reproduce at any time" as an implicit threshold, constituting a regime of public disciplining over individual choices (China Youth Daily, 2023; Xinhua News Agency, 2024; Legal Daily, 2024). The resultant shame and moral pressure become the "emotional fuel" of the norm's operation, with women self-adjusting and conforming to avoid being labelled "selfish/irresponsible" (Ahmed, 2004; Xu, 2020, p.142; Butler, 2016).

In terms of normative boundaries, the identities and reproductive conditions recognised as "legitimate" are exclusionary: being single, childfree, in queer relationships, or engaging in pleasure-oriented sexual/intimate practices is often placed at the margins of legitimacy and becomes the object of correction, persuasion back, or silencing. Such exclusion is not incidental; it resonates with the body governance of modernity/coloniality—"compliant femininity" (chastity, family, reproduction) is legitimised, while non-reproductive or counter-normative desires are pathologised or downgraded (Lugones, 2010; Ahmed, 2004; Mullally, 2005). Law is not neutral here; through seemingly neutral institutional language, it encodes pre-existing gender hierarchies into rules, thereby stabilising the "ideal woman" as a unit of policy and evaluation (MacKinnon, 1989).

Summary and transition. In sum, the production of the "ideal woman" is jointly operated by the institutionalisation of policy texts, the emotionalisation of public opinion, and the neutral veneer of legal rules, continually establishing marriage-reproduction-care as the only legitimised life trajectory for women (The State Council of the PRC, 2021; All-China Women's Federation, 2024; Butler, 2016). The next subsection thus turns to how, once this norm becomes the overarching script, sexual governance replicates the same logic in education, censorship, and platform disciplining, and how "transgressive" female sexual/reproductive practices are problematised and made punishable (Foucault, 1978; Foucault, 2008).

4.1.4 Summary and Transition: The Isomorphic Mechanism from Reproductive Governance to Sexual Governance

The foregoing shows that the shift from "one-child—strict control" to "two/three-child—encouragement" is not a paradigm change but the same biopolitical logic moving from prohibition-based to promotion-based techniques of governance: the state, through policy and discourse, holds the "valve" that translates individual reproductive "needs" into "rights/obligations", and re-centres the normative pathway of "marriage-reproduction-care" in the rhetoric of "empowerment/family-friendly"; law is not neutral, and the emotional-moral layering of media and workplace practices ensures that the "ideal woman" is continually produced and affirmed at both institutional and everyday levels (Foucault, 1978; 2008; Ignatieff, 1985, cited in Cook, 1992; The State Council of the PRC, 2021; All-China Women's Federation, 2024; Siegel, 2007; Butler, 2016; MacKinnon, 1989; China Youth Daily, 2023; Xinhua News Agency, 2024; Legal Daily, 2024).

These techniques do not stop at "reproduction" but, via an isomorphic mechanism, become technologised and routinised in the domain of "sex": first, education and censorship demarcate the boundary of the "sayable/visible"; next, public opinion and the workplace emotionally and morally consolidate the norm; then, through the shaming and punishment of law-enforcement, transgressors are rendered "punishable"; finally, the "legitimate" intimacy-reproduction trajectory is back-fed as the sole legitimised pathway for policy and welfare, while non-reproductive or counter-normative desires and relations are marginalised as objects to be corrected or silenced (Foucault, 1978; 2008; Butler, 2016; Ahmed, 2004; Lugones, 2010; Mullally, 2005; Xu, 2020, p.142). Accordingly, Chapter 2 proceeds in sequence: the boundary-setting of de-sexualised governance (4.2.1)—the punishabilisation mechanism of shaming and penalty (4.2.2)—platform governance and emotional labour as "sub-threshold" compliance (4.2.3)—the coupling and back-feeding of "sex → reproduction" (4.2.4), to reveal how sexual governance serves and shapes the legitimacy production of reproductive governance.

4.2 Expansion of Reproductive Control: How Sexual Censorship Reshapes the Legitimacy of Women's Bodies

4.2.1 De-Sexualised Governance: How Censorship and Education Demarcate the "Sayable/Visible" Boundary

This section focuses on "how the boundary is set." So-called "de-sexualised governance" does not erase sex from public culture; rather, through the threefold apparatus of education—administrative censorship—policy discourse, knowledge and expression related to sex are re-encoded as "risk", "inappropriate", and "manageable

information”, thereby establishing at the institutional level a higher-order framework that determines what may be said and what may be seen (Foucault, 1978; 2008). This framework takes population and order as its axis of justification rather than centring individual well-being and autonomy, and it is routinely juxtaposed with the rhetoric of “empowerment”, “public health”, and “family-friendly”, enabling de-sexualisation to operate in a gentle and normalised manner (The State Council of the PRC, 2021).

First, along the educational pathway, curriculum standards, textbook selection, and teaching assessment naturalise “marriage–reproduction–care” as a growth script, while knowledge about consent, contraception, and the diversity of sex and relationships is marginalised or presented only in the form of “risk reminders”. This presentation confines “acceptable sexual knowledge” to a marriage-based, heterosexual, reproduction-oriented track, placing content outside that track under a regime of revocable visibility: it may occasionally surface, yet can be deleted or replaced at any time on grounds such as “age-inappropriateness/health risks/incorrect guidance” (Foucault, 1978; 2008; The State Council of the PRC, 2021).

Second, administrative review and guidance documents provide operable, elastic rules for the boundary through broad and stretchable normative clauses (e.g., “safeguarding public order and morality/protecting minors/correct value orientation”). This indeterminacy is not a technical defect but a governance resource: on the one hand, it leaves room for selective tightening across scenarios; on the other, it permits strategic alignment between social sentiments and policy goals, thereby continually reproducing the boundary within interactions over “legitimacy” (Luo, 2024; Foucault, 2008).

Third, policy discourse and official communications fold issues of sex/intimacy into the semantic domain of population governance and social order: narratives around “marital–reproductive order” and “fertility anxiety” label practices such as publicly discussing pleasure, gender, and relational diversity as “improper/transgressive”, furnishing emotional and moral support for educational excision and administrative censorship (China Youth Daily, 2023; Xinhua News Agency, 2024; Legal Daily, 2024). At the level of identity, this discourse and a performative mechanism reinforce one another: through repetitive practice they stipulate the sayable/visible range of the “ideal woman”, while other pathways are excluded as objects to be disciplined and corrected (Butler, 2016).

Finally, affective politics plays a key role in de-sexualised governance. Shame and guilt are mobilised as “emotional fuel”, prompting individuals—under the anticipated risk of “being seen—being judged”—to self-lower expression and avoid touching the boundary, thereby further squeezing the language of rights (e.g., bodily autonomy and access to sexual knowledge) out of the space of public legitimacy (Ahmed, 2004). What results is not the “disappearance of sex”, but an institutionalised distribution of whose sex may be seen and in what way: women’s sexuality is allowed to exist, yet must be coded through the rhetoric of “purity/healing/familialisation” and placed under revocable visibility (Butler, 2016; Ahmed, 2004).

Accordingly, this section concludes: the crux of de-sexualised governance lies in the setting of higher-order boundaries—predefining, through the coordination of educational excision, administrative review, and policy discourse, the scope of the “sayable/visible”, and consolidating its everyday efficacy via affective and moral mechanisms (Foucault, 1978; 2008; The State Council of the PRC, 2021; Luo, 2024). How these boundaries are executed and internalised within concrete communication fields (thresholds, soft sanctions, participatory censorship), and the resulting demands on creators for “sub-threshold expression/emotional labour”, will be detailed in 4.2.2.

4.2.2 Platform Governance and Emotional Labour: Sub-Threshold Expression and Strategic Compliance

This section focuses on soft control—emotional labour—sub-threshold expression. Within a state–platform–user co-governance structure, platforms operate with elastic rules such as “protection of minors/brand safety/value orientation”, and manufacture a form of revocable visibility through algorithmic thresholds and operational rules: common practices include traffic throttling, down-weighting, removal from recommendations, search demotion, label masking, and “yellow-tag” limited monetisation—“soft” penalties that, under the banner of “technological neutrality”, push expressions related to women’s sexual experience, sexual knowledge, and bodily practices into a “grey zone” (Foucault, 1978; 2008; Luo, 2024).

In this environment, creators have developed sub-threshold expression strategies to sustain livelihood and visibility: first, semantic folding (euphemisms, spelling substitutions, metaphorical translation) and visual sanitisation (cropping/blurring or pixelation/de-sensualised imagery); second, “science popularisation/health/healing/growth” frames that safely package intimacy and desire; third, maintaining the appearance of “compliant visibility” via disclaimers, persona management, and comment screening/moderation. As a result, expression is de-sexualised through continuous self-adjustment to “stay below the line”, while being translated into platform metrics (dwell time, engagement rate, monetisation coefficient) as emotional and aesthetic labour (Ahmed, 2004; Yang, 2011: 334–336, 342–344, 347–349).

This routinised emotional labour requires creators to monitor their own emotions, modulate the audience's emotions, and maintain a "respectable/safe" persona aesthetic—both avoiding the triggering of thresholds and sustaining durable participation. The offline "beauty economy's" institutional mobilisation of women's appearance and affect is algorithmically and at scale replicated in the platform context: women are expected to present "compliant forms of women's sexuality" through gentle, restrained, family-centred narratives, thereby securing more stable recommendation and revenue (Yang, 2011: 343–347; Butler, 2016). Meanwhile, user reporting and reputational signals provide participatory inputs to the thresholds, raising the bar for "safe expression" within a technical–affective–moral loop (Luo & Li, 2022; Luo, 2024).

It should be emphasised that strategic compliance is not wholly passive. Through sub-threshold tactics, creators preserve the sensoriality of desire and experience within the cracks of rules—understandable as micro-freedoms internal to governmentality (Foucault, 1978; 2008). Yet performative mechanisms also solidify "rewarded expression" into reproducible templates which, in the long run, feed back to govern who counts as "a visible female subject" and normalise the value orientation of "marriage–reproduction–care" as distribution preferences (Butler, 2016; The State Council of the PRC, 2021).

In sum, platform soft control couples technical thresholds with emotional labour: via throttling/yellow tags/de-recommendation, women's sexual knowledge and experience are stabilised in a sub-threshold state of visibility; and sub-threshold expression trades continuous self-censorship for visibility and monetisation. Once these boundaries are triggered, soft control often spills over into chains of public shaming and institutionalised sanction; related mechanisms will be elaborated in 2.3 (Ahmed, 2004; Luo & Li, 2022; Luo, 2024; Yang, 2011).

4.2.3 Shaming and Punishment: Problematising "Non-Compliant" Female Sexual/Reproductive Conduct

This section focuses on hard sanctions: once the "sayable/visible" boundary is triggered, boundary-crossing female sexual/reproductive practices move swiftly from being discursively marked as a "problem" into a sanctioning circuit of legal–administrative–platform rule enforcement, forming a continuous chain from stigmatisation—procedural penalties—deprivation of eligibility (Foucault, 1978; 2008).

4.2.3.1 Legal Codification and Selective Enforcement

China's current criminal-law regulation provides a high-intensity punitive framework for "sexual impropriety". Articles 363–365 of the Criminal Law stipulate heavy penalties under offences such as "producing, reproducing, publishing, selling, disseminating obscene materials" and "organising obscene performances", thereby constituting a penal boundary for sexual expression and the sex industry (PRC, 1997). However, while the provisions are ostensibly "two-sided", enforcement and media practice often subject female sex workers to harsher punishment and shaming, while downgrading male "consumers" to a passive role, evidencing a stable gendered double standard (Wang, 2006; MacKinnon, 1989). Historically, the 1949 anti-prostitution campaign implemented compulsory detention and re-education/"treatment"/"reform", positioning women's bodies as the primary targets of rectification and highlighting a state-anchored moral–reproductive order (SCIO, 1994; Foucault, 1978). Within this logic, "non-compliant" women are defined as moral risks and threats to population order, and can therefore be lawfully excluded and punished (Foucault, 2008).

4.2.3.2 Administrative Regulation and Sectoral Governance

At the administrative level, elastic provisions such as "protection of minors/public order and good customs/correct orientation" provide flexible levers for rectification, prohibition, fines, and revocation of licences; broad "health communication/value orientation" requirements create expandable space for administrative intervention into sex- and reproduction-related content (Foucault, 2008). Such ambiguous–elastic frameworks are not defects but governance resources: they allow selective tightening in line with public sentiment and performance targets, and enable continual reproduction of boundaries through interactions over "descriptive legitimacy" (Luo, 2024).

4.2.3.3 Platform Governance and "Participatory" Punishment

Once boundary-crossing is "problematised", platforms, under community rules/rating standards, rapidly implement hard measures such as takedowns, bans, account termination, and purging of historical content; user reports and reputational signals serve as participatory inputs, translating shaming into procedural sanctions (Luo & Li, 2022). Event-node coordination (moved from 4.2.2): under high-pressure opinion climates, official statements and platform-aligned actions (takedown/bans) often form a closed loop of "public moral panic—official value proclamation—uniform handling", which on the one hand repairs/consolidates the descriptive legitimacy of censorship and punishment, and on the other raises the predictability and deterrent effect of everyday censorship (Luo, 2024).

4.2.3.4 The Politics of Attribution and Responsibility

"Non-compliant" female practices are often individualised as "moral depravity/self-choice", thereby obscuring

state and market failures in economic support, educational provision, and social services; this both intensifies shaming and supplies narrative resources for penal justification (Mardorossian, 2002; Mullally, 2005). Within this narrative, women are required to prove legitimacy through “compliant desire/compliant motherhood”, and any deviation may encounter compounded institutional shaming–punishment (MacKinnon, 1989; Ahmed, 2004).

4.2.3.5 Comparative Perspective and Alternative Pathways

If rights–labour are taken as the baseline, punitive governance is not the only option. Belgium in 2024 passed the Sex Workers’ Employment Contract Act, bringing sex work under employment contracts and social security (including maternity leave, pensions, etc.), substituting stigma/penalty with labour protection/health and safety (Rankin, 2024). Germany, the Netherlands, and others likewise pursue regulation-plus-protection to reduce violence and stigma. By contrast, China’s path aligns more closely with a biopolitical order orientation: managing sex/reproduction in the name of population and morality rather than starting from subject rights and labour protection (Foucault, 1978; 2008). This also corroborates the selectivity of the “demand→rights” translation valve: when “demands” related to sexual health, safety, and choice are not translated into claimable “rights”, women are more readily excluded within frameworks of shaming–penalty (Ignatieff, 1985, cited in Cook, 1992).

4.2.3.6 Summary

This section shows that a triad of criminal law–administration–platform hard sanctions stabilises “non-compliant” female sexual/reproductive practices as punishable objects. The institutional effect is to convert visibility and welfare eligibility into conditional privileges rather than claimable rights; meanwhile, official statements at event nodes—together with platform-aligned actions—further provide legitimacy endurance for this punitive circuit (Luo, 2024; Luo & Li, 2022; MacKinnon, 1989; PRC, 1997). The next section (4.2.4) will show how such punitive governance couples with and feeds back into pronatalist policy tools, thereby reshaping the value base and execution capacity of fertility governance in reverse (Foucault, 2008).

4.2.4 Coupling and Feedback: How Sexual Censorship Serves and Shapes Fertility Governance

In contemporary China, “sexual governance—fertility governance” are not two isolated mechanisms but operate as a four-segment chain—boundary-setting → internalised execution → penalisation → feedback. Sexual censorship selectively produces “visible sexuality” and feeds it back as the value and institutional preference of “preferable birth”; the orientation of fertility governance then, in turn, stabilises stricter sexual boundaries and enforcement logics, forming a self-reinforcing governance loop (Foucault, 1978; 2008; Butler, 2016; Ahmed, 2004).

4.2.4.1 Boundary-Setting (Starting from the “Sayable/Visible”)

Through curricular redactions, moralised presentation in syllabi and textbooks, and de-sexualising technical thresholds for platform content, a default norm of “within-marriage—heterosexual—reproduction-oriented” is established, first screening “who/what expressions” are eligible to appear within public visibility (Foucault, 1978; 2008; Butler, 2016). This step is legitimated via the rhetoric of “public health/family-friendly/empowerment”, while in substance subordinating individual sexuality/intimacy to population and order goals (Ahmed, 2004).

4.2.4.2 Internalised Execution (Turning Boundaries into Everyday Habit)

Within platforms’ “soft-control” mechanisms, creators self-regulate via “threshold-below expression, emotional labour, aesthetic sanitisation” to maintain visibility and livelihood; algorithmic preferences gradually solidify a feminine presentation paradigm of “gentleness/restraint/family-orientation” (Yang, 2011: 334–336, 342–344; Ahmed, 2004). Boundaries shift from external discipline to self-governance in everyday practice and the affective economy, completing the transition from rules to habits (Foucault, 1978; 2008).

4.2.4.3 Penalisation (Institutionalising Boundary-Crossers as “Punishable”)

When boundaries are triggered, boundary-crossing practices move rapidly from stigmatisation into hard sanctions of legal–administrative–platform enforcement: Criminal Law Articles 363–365 provide the punitive framework for “sexual impropriety”; enforcement and public opinion exhibit harsher governance and gendered double standards toward female subjects; on platforms, takedowns/bans and other measures, together with user-report “participatory” inputs, form a closed loop; at event-type nodes, official statements converge with platform-aligned handling, consolidating descriptive legitimacy (PRC, 1997; MacKinnon, 1989; Wang, 2006; SCIO, 1994; Luo & Li, 2022; Luo, 2024).

4.2.4.4 Feedback (Translating “Legitimate Intimacy” into “Preferable Birth”)

Once “compliant sexuality” is stabilised as a visible norm, its value logic extends into fertility governance as “preferable birth”: recognised relationships and contexts enjoy priority in policy and discourse, while

non-normative trajectories are de-righted and de-welfared in practice. Thus emerges the mutual feeding of “sexual governance—fertility governance”: sexual boundaries supply the value base and enforcement tools; pronatalist orientation, in turn, proves the “necessity” of those boundaries and of censorship, continuously tightening the governance chain (Foucault, 2008; Siegel, 2007; The State Council of the PRC, 2021; Yang, 2011).

5. Conclusion

Sexual governance, via the closed loop of “boundary-setting → internalised execution → penalisation → feedback,” and fertility governance mutually feed one another in value and technique, co-producing legitimacy and enforceability (Foucault, 1978; 2008). Accordingly, the conclusion no longer reiterates the mechanistic details but turns to a rights-centred reorientation and proposes an evaluation framework anchored in rights outcomes. The core shift is to recognise complete, age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health information—centred on consent and contraception—as an entitlement rather than “revocable visibility”; to decouple the decisive rights to bear/not bear children and to choose intimate relationship pathways from population performance assessments; to remove, on an anti-discrimination baseline, the implicit thresholds tied to marital/parental status in education, employment, and welfare; to embed minimum procedural guarantees of explainability, appealability, and redressability in platform and administrative actions; and to establish labour and safety baselines for emotion-/aesthetics-intensive sectors so as to prevent uncompensated work and excessive affective depletion under the banner of “innate feminine traits” (Siegel, 2007; Butler, 2016; MacKinnon, 1989; Yang, 2011; Luo & Li, 2022).

A matching evaluation framework should drive processes from outcomes. For “information and accessibility,” observe the share of school and community curricula covering consent, contraception, and relationship diversity, the average time-to-access for contraception counselling, perinatal care, and psychosocial support, and—via independent sampling—compare average display rates and down-ranking rates for content related to women’s sexual knowledge on platforms to test whether “information visibility” genuinely improves (Foucault, 1978; Luo & Li, 2022). For “bodily autonomy and non-coercion,” track self-reported proportions of individuals making fertility decisions free of policy/workplace/familial pressure, and the proportion with “unmet need” (needing contraception or information but not obtaining it), disaggregated by age, marital/parental status, urban–rural location, and income to locate concrete sites of structural constraint (Siegel, 2007). For “equality and anti-discrimination,” measure the “motherhood penalty gap” (wage and promotion differentials between mothers and non-mothers under comparable age and role conditions), the share of job postings with implicit conditions such as “married with children/available to bear children,” and the share of policy items in childcare, tax relief, and housing that are unbundled from marriage/childbearing, to assess whether institutions are genuinely shifting from the “family–motherhood” channel to an individual-rights channel (MacKinnon, 1989; The State Council of the PRC, 2021). For “procedural propriety,” tally the proportion of platform enforcement actions accompanied by explicit rule citations and excerpts of evidence, the success rate of appeals against misjudgements, and the median restoration time, and publish annually the share of cases covered by third-party independent audit, so as to reduce arbitrariness in “visibility/legitimacy” (Luo & Li, 2022). For “de-stigmatisation and affective climate,” on one hand use content analysis to track the density of language in mainstream media, textbooks, and high-traffic platform posts that binds “non-marriage/non-childbearing/non-marital sex/sex work” to “selfish/improper/boundary-crossing”; on the other hand track scale-based changes in shame/guilt among target groups to test whether the narrative of “de-sexualisation–shaming” is substantively easing (Ahmed, 2014). For “labour and safety,” record formal-contract coverage in emotion-/aesthetics-intensive industries, the proportion of contracts containing maternity protection and parenting support provisions, the reporting and case-closure rates for sexual harassment and the median time to closure, ensuring that the “production of visibility” is not purchased at the cost of women’s unpaid labour and bodily/mental safety (Yang, 2011).

Whether this reorientation stands does not depend on how many “empowerment processes” are announced, but on whether these outcome indicators show verifiable improvement: information more accessible; choices less coerced; discrimination markedly reduced; procedures more explainable and remediable; labour more protected. Only when “rights outcomes” become the calibration standard of governance, and comparable, verifiable evidence is obtained through independent auditing and methodological transparency, can one claim a substantive turn from “process present, results absent” to a rights-oriented trajectory (Foucault, 1978; 2008; Siegel, 2007; Luo & Li, 2022; Yang, 2011).

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