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Zhengyu Yang

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Seeing labor: A critical socialist feminist analysis of the “call for rest spaces for cleaner ayi (aunties)” activism on Xiaohongshu

Zhengyu YANG

Communication and Media Research Institute, University of Westminster, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This study examines digital visibility as both recognition and regulation in post-socialist China through the “call for rest spaces for cleaner aunties” campaign on Xiaohongshu. Using multimodal discourse analysis, it explores how female cleaners’ labor is represented and contained under platform capitalism and state surveillance. The analysis identifies two regimes of visibility. The first is a form of moralized empathy that remains structurally contained. The second is an intervention that disrupts the boundaries of visibility and marks a shift from sentimental witnessing to structural awareness. While emotional narratives foster solidarity, they often depoliticize critique through platform capital. However, posts invoking a “worker’s gaze” disrupt this logic, reframing cleaners as laboring subjects rather than moral symbols. The study extends critical socialist feminism to digital activism, arguing that visibility in China functions less as emancipation than as a regulated condition of being seen, yet within these constraints, new solidarities and modes of recognition quietly emerge.

KEYWORDS Critical socialist feminism; digital visibility; multimodal critical discourse; digital feminist activism; affective publics

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Introduction

Over the past decade, Chinese social media platforms have become key sites for the articulation of feminist consciousness and labor justice (Wang & Driscoll, 2018; Yin & Zhang, 2024). Against a backdrop of tightening platform regulation, algorithmic visibility, and uneven gender progress, digital activism has increasingly taken affective and moralized forms, relying on storytelling, virality, and symbolic affect rather than formal protest (Xiao, 2019). These practices illuminate the shifting dynamics of feminist politics in post-socialist

CONTACT Zhengyu YANG  w2076172@westminster.ac.uk

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China, where civic expression must navigate the boundaries of both market and state discourse. In March 2025, a wave of online mobilization emerged on Xiaohongshu, one of China's most prominent lifestyle and social media platforms. Users began posting photographs of female cleaning workers resting in undignified spaces such as toilet floors, janitors' closets, or stairwells. Circulating under the viral hashtag "call for rest spaces for cleaner ayi (aunties)," these images sparked widespread outrage and empathy for women whose indispensable labor remains socially invisible. The term *ayi* (auntie), once a familial designation, has come to denote feminized domestic and service labor, encapsulating the ambivalent intimacy and hierarchy that define care work in contemporary China (Ji, 2014).

The topic garnered 17.387 million views and 158,000 discussions on Xiaohongshu, quickly gaining momentum beyond the platform. On Weibo, related hashtags such as "cleaner aunties resting in toilets should be seen" and "please give cleaners a rest space" accumulated over 5 million views. Users collectively formulated slogans, called government hotlines, and submitted online feedback demanding institutional change. Notably, this work was later featured by CCTV¹ (China Central Television) News and Xinhua News Agency², signaling its entry into the mainstream moral discourse on labor dignity and social civility. By June, multiple universities and public facilities reportedly established designated rest areas for cleaning staff (CCTV News, 2025; Ifeng, 2025). Although modest in scope, these outcomes mark a rare instance in which online affect translated into tangible infrastructural reform.

Launched in 2013, Xiaohongshu has evolved from a lifestyle-sharing app into one of China's most influential hybrid platforms for social media and e-commerce, with 83.4% of its users being women aged 25–35 (Ge & Tian, 2024; iResearch, 2019). Positioning itself as a "lifestyle platform" that integrates authentic user-generated content with commerce, Xiaohongshu blends affective sharing with consumption-driven visibility (Guo, 2022). The platform attracts young women who seek recognition and influence by aestheticizing everyday life and consumption practices (Gong, 2022). This paper situates the "call for rest spaces for cleaner aunties" activism as a paradigmatic instance of feminist digital activism in post-socialist China. It conceptualizes activism not as oppositional protest, but as a form of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) that mobilizes moral affect and aesthetic visibility to negotiate structural injustice within state-compatible boundaries. Drawing on multimodal critical discourse analysis of posts from the Xiaohongshu campaign, the study examines how feminized cleaning labor is visually and discursively constructed through affect, class, and platform capital.

Engaging the theoretical framework of critical socialist feminism, the article interrogates how visibility functions simultaneously as empowerment and containment. It argues that digital visibility in China operates as a mode

of symbolic governance, a process through which affective and moral representations of labor render inequality emotionally legible yet politically manageable.

The study contributes to three interrelated debates. First, it extends critical socialist feminist theory into the digital sphere, analyzing how female cleaners' labor is mediated through the logics of post-socialist governance (Rofel, 2007; Shaopeng & Wesoky, 2022). Second, it critiques the neoliberalization of digital feminism, where emotional resonance and symbolic affect often supplant collective organizing (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016). Third, it introduces the concept of the worker's gaze as an emergent counter-discursive perspective that contests the sympathetic gaze of middle-class spectators (Mulvey, 1975) and reclaims epistemic agency for feminized workers.

Literature review

Critical socialist feminism

Critical socialist feminism (CSF) is a recent theoretical formation rooted in the intellectual and historical conditions of post-socialist China. Emerging in the early 2010s, CSF has developed through engagements with the Chinese New Left and East Asian critical thought, offering a distinct intervention into global feminist theory. It builds on the legacies of Maoist socialism while critically engaging with the consequences of market reform and the neoliberal restructuring of gender, labor, and the state. CSF emerges in response to what many see as the insufficiency of liberal gender frameworks to account for material inequality or the continuing legacies and potentials of socialism (Ni, 2025). Though it remains relatively marginal compared to liberal gender studies or activism focused on rights and identity. CSF is more prominent in academic and intellectual circles than in mass feminist activism. It functions as a corrective and alternative theoretical framework rather than the dominant paradigm (Ni, 2025).

CSF in China emerges as a distinct feminist framework that historicizes gender within socialist and post-socialist trajectories while foregrounding class, labor, and social reproduction. Theoretically, Shaopeng and Wesoky (2022) consolidate key essays defining CSF, and Tian (2022) situates it in contrast to liberal gender frameworks, emphasizing China specific material and historical conditions. Empirical and historical analyses by Cui (2011), Wang (2017), and Xiaoxian and Ma (2006) illuminate women's experiences under collectivization, state policies, and the systematic invisibility of social-reproductive labor, collectively grounding CSF as both a corrective to transnational feminism and a locally informed feminist praxis.

Unlike liberal or transnational feminist frameworks, which often universalize gender oppression, CSF insists on historicizing Chinese feminism within

the country's specific socialist and post-socialist trajectories. Central to CSF is a critique of how "gender" (*xingbie*), introduced in the 1990s through transnational development discourses, has been depoliticized and disconnected from earlier Marxist-feminist commitments to class struggle and collective emancipation (Dong, 2016; Shaopeng & Wesoky, 2022). The uncritical adoption of gender theory, according to CSF scholars, has coincided with the privatization of social reproduction and the rollback of state welfare functions, displacing the working-class woman from the center of feminist analysis. A defining feature of CSF is its attention to social-reproductive labor and community-based resistance. Song Shaopeng and others argue that care work and housework, once partially socialized under Maoist collectivism, have been individualized through market reforms and naturalized through essentialist gender discourse (Shaopeng & Wesoky, 2022). In response, CSF calls for the reconstruction of feminist imaginaries not through the state, but through grassroots, community-based socialism that revives the collective spirit without reproducing statist paternalism.

Critically, CSF diverges from Western socialist feminism by embedding its analysis in anti-colonial and anti-imperialist histories. It does not romanticize Maoist policies but seeks to recover lost or marginalized experiences of socialist-era women to build a historically grounded feminist praxis attentive to class, labor, and geopolitical inequality (Cui, 2011; Xiaoxian & Ma, 2006). In doing so, CSF attempts to provincialize Western feminism and reassert Chinese feminist subjectivity on its own terms.

Visibility and platform capital

Visibility has long been central to the study of power, representation, and social hierarchy. In visual culture theory, visibility is not a neutral condition but a political technology that determines who is seen, how, and by whom. Building on Foucault's (1975/1977) notion of surveillance as visibility's disciplinary form and Bourdieu's (1984) concept of distinction, scholars such as Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) have argued that "visuality" operates as a regime that organizes the perceptual field of social relations, legitimizing certain bodies and erasing others. Visibility thus functions as a site where recognition, regulation, and resistance intersect. Within feminist and labor studies, visibility has been theorized as both a demand for justice and a tool of containment. Nancy Fraser (1997, 2009) distinguishes between recognition and redistribution, cautioning that visibility politics often convert structural inequality into moral empathy without altering material conditions. Mignon Duffy (2007) and Lauren Berlant (2011) describe how the emotional visibility of care work reproduces social order through what Berlant calls "cruel optimism:" a sentimental attachment to conditions that sustain precarity.

Platform capital refers to the economic logic through which digital infrastructures extract, monetize, and govern user participation (Srnicek, 2017). Platforms act simultaneously as intermediaries, data brokers, and regulators, capturing value not only from transactions but from attention, emotion, and sociality itself. In the Chinese context, platform capitalism is characterized by what Jin (2021) calls “state—capital symbiosis:” a hybrid system in which corporate accumulation and state regulation are mutually reinforcing. As Plantin and de Seta (2019) observe, China’s digital ecosystem operates through platform governance, where infrastructural control, algorithmic curation, and ideological guidance converge to align user participation with both commercial profitability and political stability. Within this system, visibility becomes a key terrain of governance. Platforms such as Xiaohongshu operationalize affective visibility through engagement metrics that reward emotionally resonant but non-disruptive content. Zhang and Zhang (2024) describe Chinese content moderation as a co-constitutive system of algorithmic and state control, in which politically sensitive narratives are softened through “algorithmic camouflage” rather than explicit removal. Chen and Yang (2023) conceptualize this as “bidirectional mediation,” where corporate moderation and state discourse converge to maintain social harmony.

These dynamics extend to broader models of affective governance. Zeng (2020) shows that during China’s #MeToo movement, digital activism was channeled into compassionate yet politically contained forms, while Sun and Wright (2024) describe “contentious empathy,” where moral affect replaces structural critique. Yuan and Wang (2025) identify “algorithmic empathy” in feminist podcasting, where emotional resonance is rewarded over dissent. Together, these studies illustrate that visibility under platform capital is both commodified and constrained.

Chinese digital feminism activism

Digital feminist activism in China has evolved significantly over the past two decades, navigating the complexities of state censorship, algorithmic suppression, and market-driven platforms. Early initiatives, such as 2000s blog-based communities, laid the groundwork for contemporary movements (Hou, 2020). As platforms gained prominence, feminist discourse flourished, yet activists faced increasing state surveillance and algorithmic censorship, leading to semi-invisibility for many initiatives (Xu, 2025). The #MeToo movement, which gained traction in 2018, exemplifies this tension. Despite widespread support, the movement encountered swift platform repression and shifting public sentiment, often due to algorithmic filtering and state intervention (Jing, 2021). Activists employed strategies such as coded language and aesthetic subversion to circumvent censorship, a practice termed “digital masquerade” (Tan, 2023). Building on this, intersectional campaigns

emerged, such as #SeeFemaleWorkers (2020–2022), a Weibo initiative during COVID-19 that exposed female laborers' invisibility in healthcare and delivery roles, generating over 1 billion views through viral shares and role-model narratives to forge cross-class alliances without overt confrontation (Wang & Tavmen, 2024). Similarly, #StopMenstrualShaming (2021–present) on Xiaohongshu integrated grassroots advocacy with e-commerce tie-ins, destigmatizing periods via user content and mainstreaming feminist hygiene without triggering repression (Gu et al., 2024).

These adaptations reflect broader shifts toward depoliticization, where state strategies tolerate individualized expressions but neutralize collective challenges, funneling feminism into apolitical consumerism or self-help (Xu, 2025). A key hybrid emerges in “pink feminism,” which strategically cloaks gender critiques in nationalist rhetoric on Weibo. It frames women's empowerment as enhancing China's global stature to align with cyber-patriots, subverting patriarchy while evading censorship as a form of legitimate national discourse (Han & Liu, 2024). Yet, radical undercurrents resist this dilution, as seen in Douban's 6B4 T groups (2022–ongoing), where women vow six “no's” (e.g., no marriage, no childbirth) and four “T's” (e.g., no religion, no idol worship) against Confucian norms (Cheng, 2023; Izakson & Kim, 2020). This strand rejects both state-sanctioned and liberal feminisms, using transgressive memes for viral opacity and community resilience, though it invites internal divisions and heightened scrutiny (Li & Gu, 2025). Further reflecting on China's unique socio-political environment, Zeng and Engebretsen (2024) argue that feminist digital activism in the post-2010s Sinosphere is characterized by transnational knowledge exchange, creative solidarity, and informal networks that persist beyond visible protests.

Research questions

This study investigates how the labor of female cleaning workers is represented, negotiated, and politically delimited within the 2025 Xiaohongshu activism “call for a rest space for cleaner aunties.” Rather than taking visibility as inherently empowering, the research interrogates the conditions, boundaries, and ideological work of visibility in digital feminist activism. The central question guiding this study is: How is the visibility of cleaning labor constructed, moralized, and contained within the affective and institutional logics of Xiaohongshu-based activism? The analytical focus is therefore twofold: (1) the visibility of cleaning workers' rights under emotional—moral, platform, and state constraints; and (2) the discursive strategies that resist restrictive forms of visibility and advocate for the recognition and protection of cleaning workers' rights. Through this lens, the study advances a critical understanding of how digital affect and civic emotion operate as both enabling and constraining forces of feminist politics in post-socialist

China. It reveals the ambivalent nexus between moral advocacy and structural transformation, foregrounding the ways in which state and platform power co-produce the conditions of feminist visibility and its limits.

Methodology

This study employs multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), situated within a critical socialist feminist epistemology, to examine how digital representations of female cleaners' labor are constructed, circulated, and ideologically managed on the Chinese lifestyle platform Xiaohongshu. The MCDA approach, informed by Norman Fairclough's (1992, 2001) conceptualization of discourse as both language and social practice, and by Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of visual grammar, enables an integrated analysis of linguistic, visual, and platform-afforded meaning-making. The textual analysis draws on key CDA concepts including discourse as social practice, interdiscursivity, and ideological framing (Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 1997). Posts were examined for how they reproduce or contest dominant discourses of labor, gender, morality, and governance within China's post-socialist digital environment. Particular attention was paid to affective expression, discursive strategies of visibility, and moral modality, tracing how linguistic and metaphorical constructions articulate concern for cleaners' rights and dignity while remaining circumscribed by platform-sanctioned norms of civility and state-aligned ideals.

The visual analysis follows Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar, focusing on three principal systems: representational meaning (the kinds of social actions and relations depicted), interactive meaning (the gaze, distance, and angle mediating viewer—subject relations), and compositional meaning (the layout, salience, and framing that guide interpretive emphasis). This framework allows for the tracing of how cleaners are visually encoded as moral objects and centers of affect, and ultimately as anchors that disrupt the boundaries of visibility. Such imagery reveals how the aesthetics of Xiaohongshu mediate the tension between empathy and critique, turning scenes of labor into both moral spectacle and potential sites of counter-visibility.

Rather than treating these analytical dimensions as discrete, the study integrates them through a critical socialist feminist lens, which interrogates how multimodal meaning-making is embedded in political economies of visibility. From this perspective, visibility is theorized not as an unqualified good, but as a social relation mediated by class, gender, and platform governance.

The dataset was collected by searching Xiaohongshu under the hashtag "call for rest spaces for cleaning aunties" and sorting the results by the number of likes in descending order. This initial search yielded 218 posts, which were then filtered to remove duplicates, marketing content, irrelevant material, and posts outside the temporal scope of the study, resulting in a

final dataset of 188 posts. It is also acknowledged that some posts may have become inaccessible due to platform moderation or content removal. The timeframe of the dataset spans March to September 2025. Since the campaign did not have a clear endpoint and may continue to evolve, this study includes all accessible posts containing the relevant hashtag up to the time of writing, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the most active period of online discussion. Collectively, these posts garnered over 1.4 million combined likes, comments, and shares, with the most popular post receiving more than 140,000 interactions.

Analysis followed a constructivist grounded-theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), during open coding, each post was examined line by line to identify discrete meaning units, such as “empathy appeals,” “university reforms,” and “online advocacy.” These codes were iteratively compared across posts using the constant comparative method and grouped through axial coding into five higher-order thematic categories (See Table 1): (A) institutional response and policy implementation, (B) labor dignity and rights protection, (C) material conditions and infrastructure needs, (D) gender and equality awareness, and (E) digital mobilization and collective voice. To ensure reliability and credibility, a subset of 30 posts was recoded two weeks later

Table 1. Five thematic categories.

Core Theme	Subthemes	Subthemes	Number of Discourses
Institutional Response and Policy Implementation	University reforms / Government responsibility / Facility creation	Discussions focused on universities, local governments, and public institutions responding to the campaign by establishing rest areas or revising management policies.	43
Labor Dignity and Rights Protection	Dignity narratives / Legal and moral discourse / Empathy appeals	Emphasizes respect, dignity, and recognition of cleaners as workers deserving humane treatment and lawful rights; includes moral reflections and affective discourse.	44
Material Conditions and Infrastructure Needs	Facility quality / Comfort and hygiene / Safety and accessibility	Highlights practical and infrastructural aspects of rest spaces and protection of occupational health.	29
Gender and Equality Awareness	Feminist framing / Gender narrative / Equality in rest spaces	Frames the issue through a gendered lens, linking the cleaners (mostly women) to broader concerns of gender equality and workplace fairness.	31
Digital Mobilization and Collective Voice	Online advocacy / Social amplification / Moral contagion / Power of speaking up	Focuses on online participation and mobilization through Xiaohongshu, showing how collective affect led to tangible institutional action.	41

by the same researcher to assess intra-coder consistency. Building on this data collection and thematic identity coding, the final analysis employed a social semiotic-based multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). This approach integrated visual, textual, and symbolic modes of communication to examine how digital posts construct, reproduce, and negotiate labor, gender, and class discourses in online spaces.

Multimodal critical discourse analysis

This section builds on the thematic and identity coding of Xiaohongshu posts related to the “call for rest spaces for cleaning aunties” campaign to examine how affect, visual discourse, and platform-mediated narratives shape the representation and political legibility of feminized labor under post-socialist governance. Drawing on earlier thematic analysis, the discussion interprets how recurrent meanings identified across posts are discursively and visually organized to sustain or contest dominant understandings of labor, affect, and state responsibility. Building on these findings, the final stage employed a social semiotic-based multimodal critical discourse analysis to explore how textual, visual, and symbolic elements co-construct ideological meanings. Guided by a critical socialist feminist perspective, this approach situates affective expressions within broader relations of class, gender, and production, revealing how narratives of empathy, moral witnessing, and institutional responsiveness simultaneously reproduce and unsettle hierarchies of value in female cleaners’ labor.

These analytical layers expose a regime of visibility through which cleaning work becomes publicly legible via emotion and aesthetics yet often detached from structural critique. What appears as civic affect is frequently absorbed into depoliticized circuits of symbolic compassion and bureaucratic self-legitimation. At moments, however, counter-discourses emerge that recast cleaners not as passive beneficiaries but as collective subjects embedded within exploitative and gendered political economies. The discussion that follows examines how such tensions articulate the affective containment and contingent resistances of feminist labor politics in China’s digitally mediated public sphere.

Visibility through emotion: recognition, morality, and the limits of affect

Drawing from the coding analysis, emotional expressions emerged as a central modality of visibility. Posts under themes (B) labor dignity and rights protection and (E) digital mobilization and collective voice revealed how affect, particularly compassion, guilt, and collective empathy, functioned as a mode of political articulation. Users did not simply “pity” cleaning staff;

they re-signified emotional discourse as an entry point for moral recognition and collective responsibility, using sentiment as a substitute for structural critique.

A central rhetorical device is the use of affective appeals to generate moral obligation and emotional solidarity with cleaning workers. Posts commonly frame care labor as a matter of basic dignity rather than policy, echoing statements such as “this is not a privilege, it’s basic dignity.” These are often accompanied by highly emotional imagery: photos showing female cleaners crouched beside restroom stalls (see [Figure 1](#) and [Figure 3](#)), lying flat on public toilet floors (see [Figure 2](#)), or resting in cluttered stairwells (see [Figure 4](#)). Captions frequently include emotive language such as “xinsuan” (心酸heart-wrenching) and “nanguo” (难过sad), aiming to stimulate moral sentiment rather than political critique.

Visually, these images construct a stark contrast between immaculate public spaces and the resting bodies of cleaning women. Following Kress



Figure 1. A female cleaner is using one of the public toilet stalls as a resting space.



Figure 2. A female cleaner is sleeping on the floor of a public toilet.

and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar, the representational meaning reveals labor and fatigue as the hidden underside of urban cleanliness, positioning the worker as both the agent and the casualty of hygienic ideals. The interactive meaning frames the photographer, as an ordinary restroom user, as an inadvertent intruder whose empathetic yet intrusive gaze unsettles the cleaner's privacy and dignity. The compositional meaning further intensifies this tension: the cleaner, occupying the central space of the spotless restroom, becomes the visual anchor through which cleanliness itself is materialized.

Through this multimodal configuration, both the cleaner and the viewer emerge as implicated subjects, the former exhausted and exposed, the latter morally awakened yet distanced. However, rather than revealing the structural inequalities that underpin the division of labor, this mediated relationship redirects attention toward the emotional resonance of witnessing. The viewer's gaze, saturated with compassion, transforms systemic injustice into an individualized moral scene. In this affective circuit,



Figure 3. A female cleaner is curled up to rest inside a public toilet.

empathy becomes a mode of comfort rather than confrontation, absorbing critique into feeling and rendering inequality visible yet politically inert.

A recurring discursive strategy in the dataset involves urging audiences to remember that cleaners are “someone’s mother” or “someone’s daughter,” invoking relational intimacy to elicit affect. Rather than articulating collective demands for labor protection or workplace reform, such posts humanize cleaners through gendered and familial tropes. One widely circulated post expressed: “they are someone’s daughters, someone’s mothers, yet they toil endlessly in such cramped, exhausting spaces.” This invocation of kinship and maternal identity reframes labor precarity as a sentimental concern rather than a structural injustice. The affective resonance of this framing is evident: posts employing kinship rhetoric garnered over 35,000 likes, signaling how moralized sentiment achieves visibility while diverting attention from the political economy of outsourced cleaning labor.

Beyond sadness and sympathy, a second dominant affective register in the dataset is joy, a celebratory emotion tied to the perceived success of digital

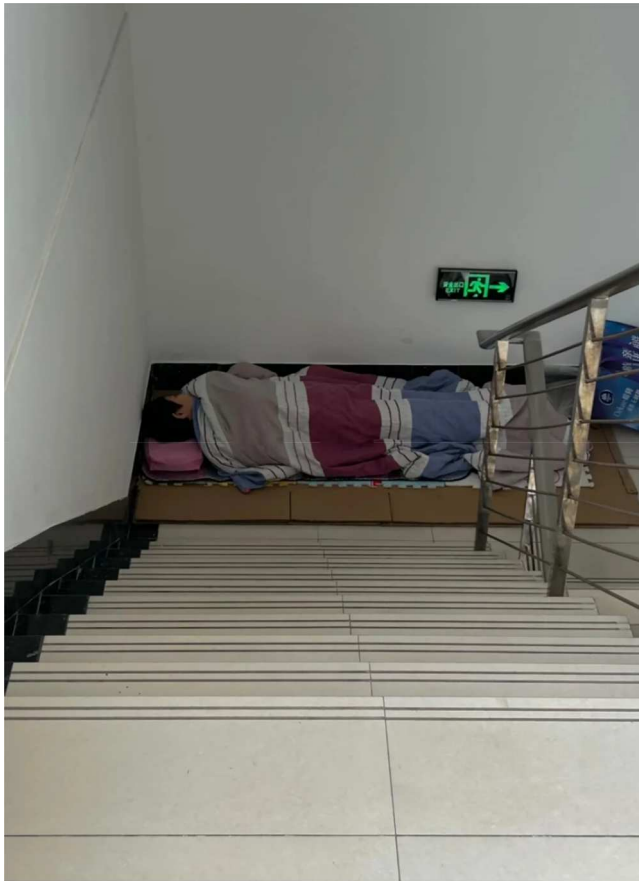


Figure 4. A female cleaner is sleeping in the stairwell.

activism. Many users expressed pride that their online advocacy “made a difference,” citing media coverage or newly built rest spaces in universities as tangible proof of progress (see [Figure 5](#)).

This collective joy constructs a narrative of moral accomplishment, framing participants as socially responsible citizens. While well-intentioned, such affective triumphalism often masks class divides and serves institutional interests. The very rest spaces celebrated online frequently reappear in university publicity materials, functioning less as tools of labor care than as symbols of institutional benevolence.

This sense of joy is also evident in posts where participants assert that “speaking out works.” Such posts appear frequently, for example: “who says speaking out doesn’t work? Now that CCTV has mentioned it, the issue of cleaners’ restrooms might finally be solved,” or “we made noise, and finally, people started paying attention” (see [Figure 6](#)). These expressions



Figure 5. Participant praises the university for building a rest room for cleaners; The left is the picture of the rest room.

serve to affirm both the legitimacy and the effectiveness of collective action, while simultaneously encouraging continued engagement. This affective register of joy undoubtedly contributes to the maintenance of collective identity within social movements (Jasper, 2011). Yet, it also risks slipping into the mire of neoliberal feminism: overemphasizing individual agency and empowerment while overlooking the structural inequalities that underpin such struggles.

This emotional economy reveals how structural inequalities are obscured through moral feeling. Female cleaners are rendered visible as subjects of pity



Figure 6. Participant posts a screenshot of the CCTV News report on the campaign.

and objects of gratitude, but rarely as agents in political or class struggle (Fraser, 1995, 2009). The affectionate yet paternalistic label “cleaning auntie” exemplifies this dynamic, it personalizes labor but erases its economic and gendered precarity. Critical socialist feminism emphasizes that gestures of affect, even when benevolent, remain embedded in capitalist and post-socialist systems of reproduction where gender, class, and labor are structurally intertwined (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 1995). Seemingly compassionate actions, media praise, or the construction of rest rooms, thus operate as affective displays rather than material solidarities. The representation of cleaners becomes a form of tokenized visibility that institutions commodify for reputational gain. As Miriam Ticktin (2011) argues, such moral economies of affect substitute sentiment for justice: instead of challenging exploitation, institutions perform empathy. In this context, the campaign’s emotional success becomes its political limitation, which creates recognition without redistribution, visibility without transformation.

Visibility under platform capital: classed aesthetics, governance, and gender comparative

Under platform capitalism, visibility is not a neutral outcome but a carefully mediated effect, shaped by aesthetic logics, governance rationalities, and gendered expectations. While emotional discourse often serves as the initial vehicle for making labor visible, Xiaohongshu’s algorithmic architecture and ideological apparatus determine which expressions circulate widely and which remain marginal. Themes (A) institutional response and policy implementation, (C) material conditions and infrastructure needs, and (D) gender and equality awareness illustrate how visibility is constrained and channeled within the intertwined logics of platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, and state-sanctioned norms, highlighting the ways in which female cleaning labor is both rendered visible and simultaneously contained.

A widely circulated quote encapsulates the emotional register of the activism (see Figure 7): “As we sip coffee by floor-to-ceiling windows, let us remember to leave a warm door for those who keep our cities clean.” These statements foster a moralized identification with laboring others but from a classed, spectatorial stance. The aesthetic: “coffee on marble counters,” “sunlit interiors,” and polished empathy, reflects middle-class sensibilities rather than cleaners’ lived realities. The classed spectatorship surrounding cleaning labor rests on deeper structures of gendered inequality. Cleaning has historically been naturalized as an extension of women’s reproductive work (Beechey & Perkins, 1987; Soni-Sinha & Yates, 2013), making it indispensable yet devalued within capitalist and patriarchal systems (Duffy, 2007). In China, post-1978 market reforms re-gendered and stratified labor, concentrating rural migrant women in low-paid jobs (Chang et al., 2011;

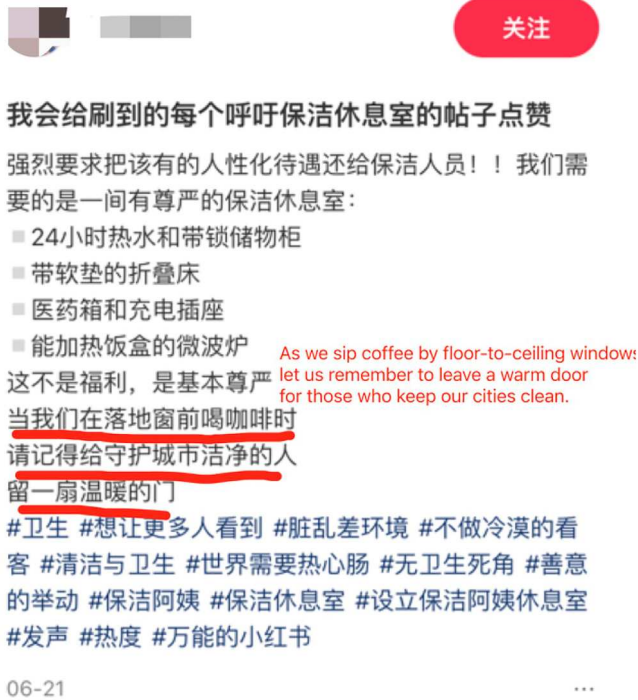


Figure 7. Participant posts messages calling others to join the campaign.

Wang & Tang, 2020). Cleaning thus became a feminized and precarious occupation, sustained by hukou-based exclusion and moralized ideals of propriety and discipline (He & Leurs, 2024; Heller, 2019).

Within this context, the “middle class” is defined less as a demographic category than as a discursive formation characterized by cultural capital, aesthetic distinction, and the performance of civility, markers that signify aspiration, moral refinement, and consumption-based belonging. Within Xiaohongshu, this subjectivity is produced through algorithmic visibility regimes that reward emotional resonance and tasteful self-presentation (Lundahl, 2020). Yet these platform logics are inseparable from state regulatory power: algorithmic meta-capital operates in tandem with censorship mechanisms that delimit acceptable feminist and class discourses, filtering out content deemed politically sensitive or disruptive to social harmony (Yuan & Zhang, 2025). Consequently, the advocacy on Xiaohongshu remains confined within moral-aesthetic repertoires that align with both market and state interests. Under the ethos of “ordinary life’s charm,” platform curation privileges aspirational yet relatable imagery that sustains monetizable engagement while sidelining radical articulations (Yang, 1999; Yi &

Lu, 2024; Zeng & Engebretsen, 2024). This visual encoding is further reflected in the aesthetic choices imposed by Xiaohongshu's platform constraints. In the creation of poster-style posts, color palettes are restricted to bright and vivid tones. In the 2025 campaign, many cover images prominently feature pink and white hues (see Figures 8 and 9), which convey warmth, softness, and approachability. Additionally, several posts incorporated AI-generated imagery.

While these images also visualize the lack of rest spaces for cleaning workers, they render the subjects with a gentle radiance and upwardly oriented tonal values (see Figure 10), aligning the representation with the platform's overarching aesthetic of sympathy, optimism, and moral virtue. This middle-class aesthetic composition dilutes the campaign's critical potential. The soft visual language and polished imagery translate labor struggle into consumable civility, turning female cleaners' labor visibility into a moral spectacle rather than a political demand. Such an aesthetic reflects

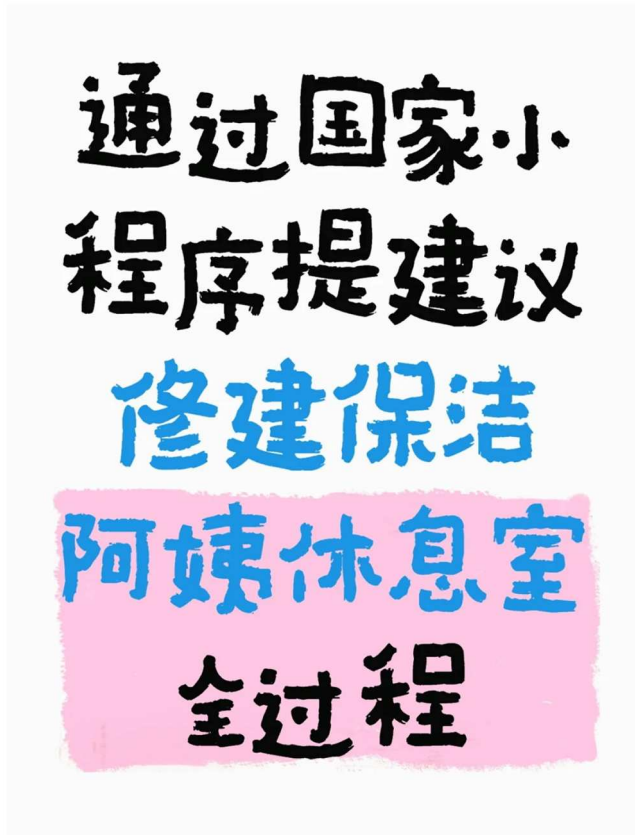


Figure 8. The cover image created by participant for the campaign.

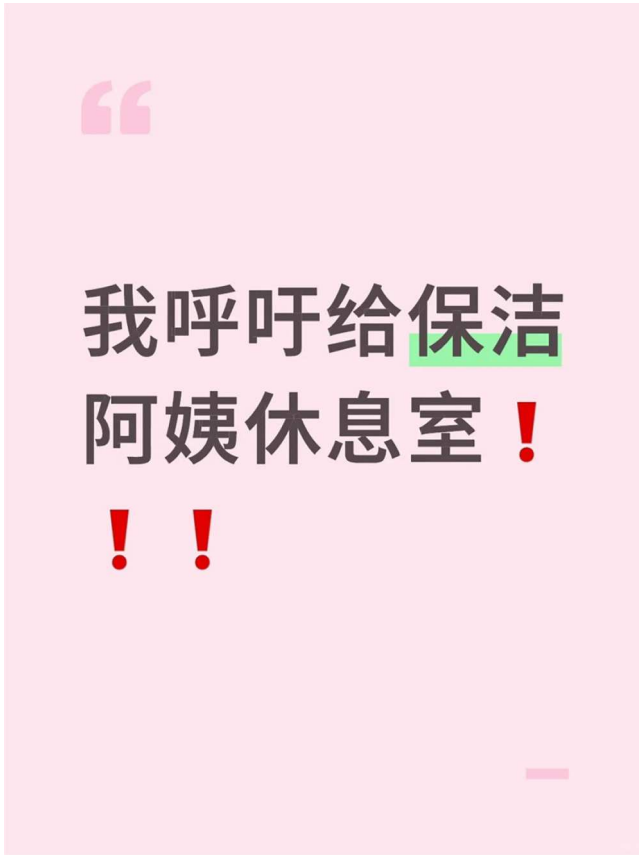


Figure 9. The cover image created by participant for the campaign.

urban middle-class taste cultures that prize refinement, warmth, and emotional moderation (Bourdieu, 1984; O'Brien, 2023). Xiaohongshu's visual codes of cleanliness, optimism, and tasteful compassion align with consumerist ideals of self-cultivation and moral propriety, domesticating class difference through a depoliticized empathy (Bainotti, 2024; Duffy & Sawey, 2022; Pettinger, 2008). Framed through tones of purity and affect, the Call for a Rest Space for Cleaner Aunties becomes a performative display of virtue, labor rendered beautiful, disciplined, and emotionally palatable to aspirational viewers. What emerges is a paradox of classed visibility: to be seen, labor must first be aestheticized, its roughness softened to fit the moral expectations of platform culture.

Within platform capitalism, the aesthetic domestication of labor is inseparable from governance rationalities. Xiaohongshu's moral-aesthetic regime not only translates class difference into affective civility, but also naturalizes compliance with state-endorsed values (Guo, 2022). At the same time, the



Figure 10. An AI-generated image by participant of a female cleaner resting in a public toilet.

state's discourse of harmony and gratitude overlays these economic logics with ideological constraint, reinforcing the platform's function as a moral-technocratic space (Chang, 2025). In the digital narratives surrounding the visibility of cleaning workers, civic concern is reframed through administrative, moralized, and non-confrontational registers. Posts construct a mode of citizenship that is affectively charged yet politically subdued, redirecting critique into state-sanctioned channels of communication. One of the most emblematic rhetorical moves is the encouragement to "speak up," but only through officially legitimate pathways: calling city hotlines or submitting feedback via government mini-programs (see Figures 11 and 12).

These forms of engagement, framed as rational, effective, and solution-oriented, are exemplified by statements like: "the city hotline works best. They'll pass on your suggestions and call you back." Such responses illustrate a logic of governance-by-feedback, where civic participation is reduced to



Figure 11. Participant shares how to suggest solutions to the government for cleaners' rest rooms.

compliant acts of bureaucratic suggestion rather than confrontational demands. Within this framework, labor exploitation is recast as a coordination problem or spatial inefficiency, issues that can be “fixed” through better management, not through political contestation. Structural inequalities are absorbed into technocratic domains, stripped of their systemic roots and reinterpreted as merely administrative lapses (Fraser, 2009).

This shift shows that cleaning labor is neutralized through institutionalized sentiment and moralized empathy. Within state-aligned discourses, affective solidarity is tolerated, indeed, encouraged, so long as it remains depoliticized. For example, one widely circulated post with over 37,000 likes described



Figure 12. Participant shares how to suggest solutions to the government for cleaners' rest rooms.

cleaners as “low-income people without much education or generous pensions, the ‘forgotten ones’ of urbanization,” lamenting that “in such a big city, there isn’t even a single decent rest room.” While the language of “low income” and “pension disparity” gestures toward structural inequality beneath the rhetoric of a “harmonious society,” the prefatory remark, “without much education,” reaffirms a moral hierarchy linking poverty to personal deficiency. The post transforms systemic injustice into a consumable moral anecdote, thereby remaining comfortably visible within the platform’s normative bounds.

Another discourse of visibility unfolds through gendered comparison, a recurrent rhetorical move juxtaposing female cleaners with male security guards to dramatize inequality (see Figure 13). Posts frequently ask, “why do security guards have rest rooms while cleaners don’t?” or “Security work is lighter and better paid, yet cleaning aunties do the real labor.” These formulations expose uneven recognition in the spatial and institutional distribution of rest and dignity but redirect systemic critique into intra-class moral contrast. Such comparisons exemplify how sharp social contradictions are displaced into the safer terrain of gender discourse, the “quicksand” of China’s internet politics (Jiang, 2010).

This tendency is intensified by the platform’s demographic composition, over two-thirds of Xiaohongshu users are women (Li & Wang, 2025; Wang, 2023). Although the platform algorithmically discourages explicit feminist content, its predominantly female userbase naturally gravitates toward narratives that appear empathetic yet remain non-confrontational. In the tension between class antagonism and gender empathy, discourse predictably leans toward the latter (Wu & Dong, 2019), as it aligns with both platform norms and state-sanctioned governance. The result is a containment: critique becomes comparison. For instance, posts comparing cleaners and guards often frame injustice through essentialized gender traits, “women are meticulous and kind; men are lazy but privileged,” transforming structural exploitation into moral imbalance. One post wrote, “men are stronger—why not have them clean? Women are gentler, perfect for security work.”



Figure 13. Participant questions the unequal working conditions between security guards and cleaners.

These narratives do not challenge wage hierarchies, subcontracting regimes, or the absence of labor rights. Crucially, these gendered comparisons are shaped by platform capitalism and governance rationalities. Xiaohongshu's algorithms amplify content that maximizes engagement while minimizing political risk, privileging affectively charged but ideologically safe discourse (Chang, 2025; Li, 2024; Wan et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2025). Simultaneously, the platform functions as a moral-technocratic space, embedding state-endorsed norms within the circulation of everyday labor narratives. In effect, visibility is not inherently emancipatory; it becomes a site where economic logics, algorithmic governance, and ideological constraint intersect, producing a constrained affective politics that naturalizes compliance with both market imperatives and state-sanctioned values.

Breaking the boundary of visibility—the worker's gaze

A third and rarer discourse emerges under themes (B) labor dignity and rights protection and (C) material conditions and infrastructure needs. This discourse begins to break the boundaries of representational visibility, shifting focus from moralized empathy to the material conditions of cleaning labor itself. Unlike earlier posts that perform affect through moral sentiment or intra-class comparison, these posts situate emotion within the texture of work. Their affect does not derive from pity but from witnessing labor in its lived, embodied form. One widely circulated post describes: "it's over 30 degrees. They work eight hours without rest, earning 2,100 yuan a month. A GPS tracker beeps if they stay still for more than half an hour, and a supervisor comes to scold them." Another recounts descending a dark stairwell: "The stairs were unlit, I used a flashlight. The smell grew heavy and sour the lower I went. I didn't expect that the auntie who cleans our corridors—who arrives before us and leaves after us—rests here in this narrow, windowless space. Two women clean ten floors, collecting garbage, fallen leaves, and laboratory waste in the heat. Their fans roar beside the smell, and their rest corner holds a stool, a steamer, and a pair of shoes."

Such descriptions are neither sentimental nor theatrical. They refuse the aesthetics of pity by presenting the labor scene as it is, sensory, spatial, and corporeal. The emotion expressed (心酸 heartache, 难过 soreness) is inseparable from the recognition of exploitation; affect here functions as critical perception, not moral performance. These posts do not "sympathize with the auntie" from above; they see with her, reconstructing the conditions of work as shared precarity. A particular post written by a cleaner's daughter exemplifies this shift: "my mother loves her work and keeps our home spotless. I've never felt ashamed of what she does. Even after long, hard days, she still comes to pick me up from school, clean and smiling." This voice displaces the outsider's gaze entirely. The cleaner appears not as an object of

compassion but as a subject of dignity, whose labor and discipline ground the family's moral and material life. The daughter's narration transforms visibility into relational recognition, what bell Hooks (1992) calls an oppositional gaze, one that resists dominant hierarchies of who looks and who is looked at.

In contrast to the former two visibility strategies, the worker's gaze constitutes a counter-visibility. It replaces the aesthetic of empathy with the politics of witnessing, foregrounding how cleaners inhabit the spatial and institutional margins of the city. Posts focus on the architecture of invisibility: "behind old doors," "under staircases," "in janitor's closets beside toilets" (see Figure 14), thereby making absence itself visible. Such spatial marginalization reflects the deep entanglement of gendered labor and institutional neglect (Acker, 2006 & Yan, 2008).

This gaze advances previous modes of visibility in two significant ways. First, it reclaims the locus of representation from moral spectatorship to a shared material consciousness. The viewer is no longer positioned as a benevolent observer offering sympathy from a distance, but is instead drawn into an awareness of their own structural connection with the cleaning aunties, a moment of recognition that, "I too am a laboring subject, like them." Such recognition transforms seeing into self-implication, shifting visibility from the realm of moral empathy to that of material solidarity.

Second, this gaze reconfigures affect as critique. Rather than eliciting sentimental compassion, it renders exhaustion, heat, and spatial deprivation as structural conditions produced by the intersection of gendered labor,

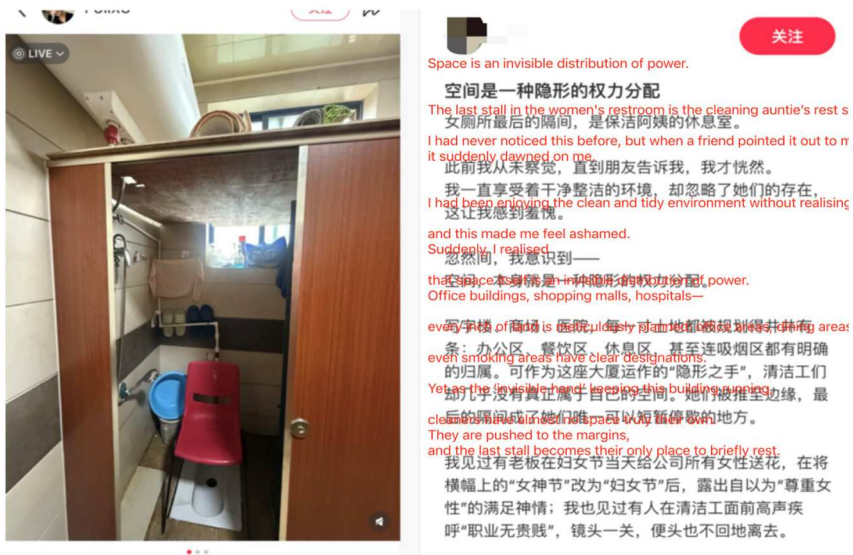


Figure 14. The cramped resting space for the female cleaner in the public toilet.

urban inequality, and platform governance. The emotional register here is thus markedly distinct from earlier affective modes of visibility that relied on overt displays of care and empathy. Instead of pathos or emotional immediacy, these posts employ a restrained, matter-of-fact tone that foregrounds the tangible realities of cleaners' working environments: cramped corridors, makeshift resting corners, and the absence of legitimate rest spaces. Notably, most of these posts include few or no images of the cleaning aunties themselves. As exemplified in [Figure 14](#), what is shown is not the laboring body but the narrow, uncomfortable space that substitutes for a resting place. This strategic absence produces a reflective form of engagement: viewers are invited to imagine themselves in such a space and to question its legitimacy: Could I endure resting here? Is this condition justifiable? Through this aesthetic of absence and restraint, affect is transformed into a medium of structural critique. The emotional response it solicits is not one of pity but of cognitive and ethical recognition, marking a shift from sentimental witnessing to situated solidarity.

Yet the worker's gaze remains both progressive and partial. It functions as a compensatory act: a seeing for the worker that gestures toward her agency without fully transferring voice or power. It is progressive in expanding representational space, yet limited by its mediated form, its reliance on spectatorship and algorithmic circulation. Nevertheless, this counter-visibility marks a significant step forward. Compared to the earlier regimes of moral empathy and gender comparison, it reorients digital feminism from caring about to seeing with, from emotional validation to structural testimony. It brings the cleaner's labor from the margins of infrastructure to the center of representation, an act of epistemic justice within tightly controlled circuits of visibility (Fraser, 2009).

Findings

The analysis of the "call for rest spaces for cleaner aunties" campaign reveals how visibility functions as both a mechanism of empowerment and a technology of containment within China's post-socialist digital sphere. Across the three regimes of representation: emotional visibility, platform-mediated visibility, and the worker's gaze, a complex negotiation emerges between affective recognition, algorithmic governance, and the politics of labor justice. Taken together, these dynamics exemplify the contradictions that critical socialist feminism identifies between symbolic inclusion and material transformation: visibility is granted, but only within parameters that sustain, rather than subvert, existing hierarchies of class, gender, and governance.

First, affective visibility transforms labor injustice into a moral spectacle. Emotional expression, while central to the campaign's virality, converts classed suffering into sentimental capital. As the analysis demonstrated,

images of cleaners resting in toilets or stairwells circulated as moral testaments rather than political demands. Compassion becomes the dominant affective mode through which injustice is rendered intelligible, reaffirming what Fraser (2009) describes as recognition without redistribution. Such emotion-centered discourse domesticated collective anger into a politics of virtue, producing affective citizens rather than collective actors. Within this affective economy, empathy for the “auntie” constitutes not resistance but participation in a moralized social order that prizes civility and gratitude over confrontation.

Second, visibility under platform capitalism reveals that digital feminism on Xiaohongshu operates within a tightly managed regime of visibility, where visibility functions less as a means of empowerment than as a regulated privilege. It is produced through the convergence of platform governance, marketable aesthetics, and state-sanctioned moralities. Within this configuration, visibility is both classed and gendered: the campaign’s middle-class aesthetic sensibility reframes the labor of female cleaners through modes of representation that align with Xiaohongshu’s preferred visual and affective styles. The result is a selective amplification that privileges what is visually pleasing, emotionally palatable, and commercially viable. Gender discourse, accordingly, is permitted only when wrapped in the sugar coating of affective comparison rather than structural critique. What becomes visible, therefore, is not necessarily what is most urgent or just, but what can be aestheticized and monetized within the platform’s moral and economic logic.

Third, the emergence of the worker’s gaze signals a nascent yet significant rupture in this regime of affective containment. Unlike earlier posts that aestheticize suffering, worker’s gaze posts anchor emotion within the lived experience of labor itself. By describing the cleaner’s embodied routines, the heat, exhaustion, and spatial confinement, they transform emotion into critical perception. This shift from “feeling for” to “seeing with” constitutes a move from spectatorship to relational witnessing. It resonates with Hooks (1992) notion of the oppositional gaze, where looking becomes a political act of reclamation. Importantly, the worker’s gaze articulates visibility through proximity rather than hierarchy: empathy arises not from pity but from shared conditions of precarity. Such posts resist moral domestication by grounding affect in material critique, making the invisible infrastructures of feminized labor legible.

Nevertheless, this gaze remains compensatory and contingent. As the analysis noted, even counter-visibility operates within algorithmic and ideological constraints. These posts survive precisely because they translate critique into the permissible idiom of lived realism rather than explicit dissent. Their radical potential lies not in direct opposition, but in displacement, they render the structural visible through the everyday, exposing

what the moral gaze obscures. Yet, their dependence on mediated spectatorship underscores the persistent asymmetry between those who see and those seen. The worker's gaze, though progressive, still circulates within the same affective economy that commodifies visibility.

From a broader perspective, the campaign exemplifies what critical socialist feminism describes as the post-socialist contradiction of care: the moral valorization of feminized labor without its material recognition (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015; Tahmaseb, 2021). Digital feminism in China, under these conditions, negotiates a delicate balance between expression and erasure. Activism is tolerated insofar as it remains emotionally legible and politically innocuous. The "call for rest spaces" campaign thus becomes an instructive instance of managed emancipation, wherein structural critique is repackaged as emotional appeal and moral performance under the platform's aesthetic regime and circulated through platform logics that sustain both capitalist and statist legitimacy. At the same time, the emergence of alternative gazes and narratives suggests latent possibilities for politicizing visibility. When users narrate cleaners' experiences in detail, they begin to translate empathy into situated knowledge. Such discourses hint at a critical socialist feminist reorientation of visibility: from moral witnessing to collective seeing. The challenge, however, remains how to convert these visual and emotional solidarities into enduring forms of collective action beyond the algorithmic feed.

Conclusion and discussion

As a framework that foregrounds the intersection of gender, labor, and class, critical socialist feminism (CSF) has seldom been applied to analyze feminist activism, partly because of its historical association with socialist contexts. Yet CSF is not a closed or context-bound theory: rooted in Western Marxist feminism, it has continually evolved through localization and praxis. This study applies and extends CSF to the digital sphere of post-socialist China, where platform capitalism and state regulation shape new regimes of visibility. By examining the "call for rest spaces for cleaner aunties" campaign on Xiaohongshu, it interrogates the conditions under which visibility becomes possible and delineates its limits: how the labor of female cleaners who occupy a marginalized and low-status social position (Jing & Susanne Yuk-ping, 2025) is simultaneously illuminated and contained within the intersecting forces of state and platform power.

The analysis contributes to developing CSF in digital media studies. Through the framework of CSF, this study identifies the emergence of the worker's gaze, a form of counter-visuality that transcends sentimental empathy and class hierarchy. In these moments, cleaners are not framed as passive recipients of compassion but recognized as fellow workers. Such

representations suspend the hierarchies of pity and moral superiority, allowing both observers and subjects to be seen as laboring bodies within the same system. The worker's gaze, therefore, restores the dignity of visibility by grounding it in work itself rather than in affective performance.

However, visibility in this context remains a regulated condition of being seen, structured by algorithmic governance and moralized emotion. It produces inclusion through control rather than liberation. Similar dynamics are evident across Asia and the Global South. In India, gig platforms for domestic and caring work grant women visibility through ratings and profiles while deepening gendered precarity and surveillance (Vijayakumar Nair, 2024). In South Korea, neoliberal care programs such as the Philippine Domestic Helper Project amplify migrant women's visibility yet reproduce racialized hierarchies (Hwang et al., 2025). Across these cases, visibility often functions less as empowerment than as a tool of management and moral legitimacy.

Within this activism, even the worker's gaze carries limits. It largely arises from the reflexivity of observers rather than from workers' own voices, leaving the politics of representation fragile under censorship and platform control. Yet, as Sheena J.Vachhani (2024) and Butler et al. (2016) remind us, vulnerability and resistance are not opposites but coexisting conditions of feminist politics. Vulnerability, as Yang and Hu (2025) argue, should not be read solely as deprivation but as a generative force of solidarity. In this study, the fragile solidarity between cleaners and onlookers, anchored in shared labor rather than moral sympathy, embodies this tension. Its power lies not in overcoming constraint but in making constraint visible, where mutual recognition itself becomes a quiet form of resistance that eludes both censorship and commodification.

Notes

1. CCTV News' report: How a cleaner's "Rest Room" Comes to Life: <https://news.cctv.com/2025/04/20/ARTIC15b8JPOfdImKQWsEVRU250420.shtml>
2. Xinhua News Agency's report: Is it really that hard to find a place for janitors to rest?: <http://www.xinhuanet.com/gongyi/20250507/b70f7967e214411ea97c6dbcf22fc600/c.html>

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Notes on the contributor

Zhengyu YANG is a Ph.D. student at Communication and Media Research Institute, University of Westminster, London, UK. Her areas of interest are nationalism and feminism. She is interested in how gender politics are shaped by digital media, state discourse, and forms of collective expression.

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ABSTRACT

本研究以小红书平台上的“呼吁为保洁阿姨建休息室”的运动为案例，探讨在后社会主义中国语境下数字可见性作为认同和规训的双重功能。运用多模态话语分析法，研究揭示了女性保洁劳动在平台资本主义和国家监控体系下的呈现与规训模式，并归纳出两种可见性机制：其一是结构性约束下的道德化共情；其二是一种突破既有可见性框架的介入形式，标志着从感性见证到结构性觉醒的转变。尽管情感叙事可以凝聚团结，却常常通过平台资本使批判去政治化。而一些行动话语呈现出的“劳动者凝视”视角打破了前者的叙事结构，将保洁员重新定位为劳动主体而非道德符号。本文将批判社会主义女性主义视角延伸至数字行动主义领域，指出在中国语境中，可见性更多体现为受规训的被观看状态而非解放途径，但正是在这些约束中，新的团结形式与认同模式悄然萌发。