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Medals and conspiracies: Chinese and Japanese online trans-exclusionary discourses during the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games

The 2020 Summer Olympics (Tokyo 2020 Games) were held amid concerns, protests, and controversies. The Games were postponed for a year owing to the global COVID-19 pandemic (Oi, 2021). It was not only the form of the event, but also political and human rights issues that garnered public attention. For example, despite the International Olympic Committee (IOC) ban of political, religious, and racial protests, US shot-putter Raven Saunders raised her arms in the shape of an X on the podium to show her support for all oppressed people (Wells, 2021). Furthermore, in February 2021, the then president of the Tokyo Organising Committee (TOC), Mori Yoshirō, made a sexist remark about meetings with women “dragging on” because they talk too much, which resulted in his resignation and public concerns about gender issues at the Games (McCurry, 2021; Sieg, 2021).

The Tokyo 2020 Games also saw the first openly trans athlete – weightlifter Laurel Hubbard from Aotearoa New Zealand – competing in Olympic women’s events, which made global headlines. The announcement of her participation immediately triggered heated debates over the fairness of the Olympic Games and trans rights, spreading like wildfire online. These debates, coupled with other incidents such as the Odakyū train stabbing (*Man Out to Kill*, 2021; *Tokyo Train Stabbing*, 2021), contributed to a marked growth in trans-exclusionary discourses online, not only in Japanese, but also in Chinese. As I will argue in this paper, despite the fact that the Chinese government uses its wins in the Olympic Games to showcase its international power and resistance against the ideological West (which includes Japan), the trans-exclusionary discourses in China and Japan actually have similar political implications.

This paper investigates how trans-exclusionary discourses have been framed and mobilized against the geopolitical background of East Asia in the post–Cold War era, focusing on a social media analysis of Japanese-language tweets and Chinese-language Weibo posts during the Tokyo 2020 Games.

The Tokyo 2020 Games were chosen for three primary reasons. First and most obviously, it was the first time a trans woman athlete competed in Olympic wom-

en's events.¹ Second, so-called “sex frauds” have always been under heightened surveillance to sustain the “fairness” of the Games, which rests on protectionist gender politics and the assumption that women's bodies are naturally weaker than their male counterparts (*Laurel Hubbard*, 2021), often citing biology and natural science as evidence (Heggie, 2017; Itani, 2021). Third, as one of the largest and most popular sporting events in the world, the Olympic Games function not only as an avenue for sports competition but also as a space for international politics, thereby providing an ideal case to examine the intersection between gender/sexuality and international politics. In particular, among the many East Asian countries, states, and polities that participate in the Olympics, China is inarguably the most significant competitor in both the sporting and geopolitical arenas. Especially with the impending 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, there was intense competition between China and Japan on which nation would be the better organizer of international events.

Twitter and Weibo were chosen for two reasons:

1. Easy data access: they provide open application programming interfaces (APIs) for collecting data,² unlike other social media platforms such as Facebook and WeChat, and their content is public (except for Twitter profiles that are set to private).
2. Twitter and Weibo are among the most widely used social media platforms in Japan and China, respectively.³

In the following sections, I first review the literature on trans-exclusionary discourses and politics, especially the way they are framed in distinct contexts. Second, I present my research methodologies and a sample of my findings. Third, I analyze how the Twitter and Weibo discourses frame the participation of trans

¹ Although the IOC has allowed trans athletes to compete since the 2000s and the criteria of participation have changed several times, the Tokyo 2020 Games were the first Olympics in which an openly trans athlete competed.

² APIs allow users to access the Twitter and Weibo databases and pull large amounts of data. However, compared to Twitter, which provides researchers with academic accounts that can pull large amounts of data free of charge, Weibo's free service only allows a limited number of requests. Instead, I pulled the source code in “.json” format, which contains all the information on the webpage to filter out useful data such as username, publication date and time, Weibo content, and location.

³ According to Statista (2022), Weibo had approximately 57,300,000 monthly active users by 2022, while Twitter had approximately 43,600,000 monthly active users worldwide. According to StatCounter's (2023) statistics for July 2022, Twitter in Japan occupied 50.34% of the social media market share.

women in sport as a threat to cis women athletes. Finally, I discuss the transnational connections of the trans-exclusionary discourses in East Asia.

1 Trans-exclusionary discourses and politics

Any discussion of trans-exclusionary discourses must inevitably consider the phenomenon of trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). First coined in 2008, the term was used by trans allies to criticize trans-exclusionary discourses and politics, especially those delivered by cis women who claim to be feminists (Pearce et al., 2020, pp. 4–8).

The depiction of cis women as victims of violence by trans women, albeit with little supporting evidence, is a prominent way to rationalize these TERF narratives, which often center around the idea that women-only facilities are intended to protect biologically female bodies. For example, in the debate over trans women's use of public bathrooms, TERF campaigners often claim that trans women, especially those who have not undergone sex reassignment, are males who are potential criminals disguised as women (Pearce et al., 2020, pp. 6–7).

However, the idea that these women-only facilities are “safe spaces” has been carefully examined and critically analyzed. Koyama (2006) examined the trans-exclusionary politics in the 1970s Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, arguing that the safety of these safe spaces is in fact part of a wider protectionist politics, which recognizes only idealized female bodies (i.e., white female bodies), as worthy of protection. She further argued that these politics are widely supported by cis white women activists because they assume that women’s oppression is the most extreme and fundamental of all social inequalities, and all women’s experiences, especially when facing violence, are the same. In other words, these cis white women activists understand violence against women as only coming from biological males, who they essentialize according to the “presence of a penis.” Ignoring decades of efforts by feminist and queer scholars to deconstruct gender and sex, these arguments resurrect the dated binary notion of biological sex and socialized gender.

After the debate over trans issues in feminist theory and activism, these narratives found support among political and religious conservatives (Pearce et al., 2020, p. 7). This trend is most significantly manifested in the use of terms such as “gender critical” and “gender ideology” by TERF campaigners. These terms in English have specific historical and political backgrounds. For example, what prompted the debate in the UK was a plan submitted in 2017 to reform the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) of 2004, while in the US, it was the “Bathroom Bill” in North Carolina proposed in 2016. “Gender ideology” was originally used by far-right ac-

tivists to condemn the coalition of liberals, feminists, and queer activists as a conspiracy of global elites (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018, pp. 807–809). Research has also located the first use of these terms on trans-exclusionary websites, where conservative groups were referred to and then widely shared within the trans-exclusionary online communities (Moore, 2019).

In Japan, feminist theorist Senda Yūki (2020) argued for a redrawing of the women's boundary, igniting heated academic debates over the transphobia manifested in her essay. Philosopher and trans theorist Fujitaka Kazuki (2021) criticized Senda for positioning trans issues as postfeminist, which is a framework that many TERF campaigners adopt. More recently, queer studies scholar Fukunaga Gen'ya (2022) has investigated the adoption of TERF narratives by the young generation of South Korean feminists, who distinguish themselves from the trans-friendly earlier generation of feminists. In China, these debates have not been theorized at the time of writing. But according to my own observations of China's communities of sexual minorities since 2015, there appears to be a clear change after 2020, reflected by an emphasis on biological bodies among feminist online influencers and the creation of various women-only online spaces (*chún nǚ kōng jiān*).

Building on the abovementioned academic studies (Fujitaka, 2021; Fukunaga, 2022), this paper endeavors to provide a contextualized discussion of transnational TERF narratives in East Asia.

2 Methodology and findings

This study examines Japanese tweets and Chinese Weibo posts related to trans athletes' participation in sports within the period of the Tokyo 2020 Games (23 July–7 August 2021). To obtain as much relevant data as possible, I used the method of fuzzy search with the following keywords in Chinese: for Weibo, I searched *kuà xìng bié* (transgender) and *biàn xìng* (meaning “changing sex,” which could appear in other compound words such as *biàn xìng shǒu shù* [sex reassignment surgery] or *biàn xìng rén* [trans people]), as well as the English “trans.” For Twitter, I initially limited the search to Japanese and used *toransu* (trans) in katakana as the keyword, since it covers all words translated from English that contain the affix “trans.” I then searched for the English keyword “trans” as well.⁴ This search elicited 4,123 Weibo posts and 67,344 tweets.

⁴ I added the English term “trans” to the search because the communities in China and Japan use it in their daily speech.

The Chinese keywords elicited more accurate results compared to their Japanese counterparts, since Japanese users are more likely to use the short form *toransu* instead of *toransujendā* (transgender). As Japanese words that contain this katakana prefix are very common, the search elicited not only words such as “trans community” but also irrelevant words such as “transformers” and “transmitters,” which required a dedicated process of data cleaning.

Forwarding is the Weibo equivalent of retweets on Twitter, which allows users to copy and repost other users’ contents on their own timeline. I take this function as an indicator of how widely the content is being disseminated (Fang & Rapnikova, 2018, pp. 6–8). I extracted the most forwarded Weibo posts and retweeted tweets after filtering out the noise data that were irrelevant for my analysis – for example, posts containing keywords such as “transformers,” as well as advertisements and posts sent by bots, which randomly pick up trending hashtags that might contain references to “transgender.”

For Weibo, I filtered out 154 posts from the 200 most forwarded posts (with the maximum number of forwards being 16,113, and the lowest being 4), while for Twitter, I filtered out 156 tweets from the 1,000 most retweeted tweets (with the maximum number of retweets being 2,085, and the lowest being 10). Tables 1 and 2 show the top five most forwarded Weibo posts (25 February 2022) and retweeted tweets (22 February 2022), respectively.

Table 1: Top 5 most forwarded posts on Weibo (as of 18 March 2022).

Weibo posts	No. of times forwarded
1 On the 24th [of July], former US President Trump bombarded #跨性别举重运动员# [#TransWeightlifter# / #kuà xìng bié jǔ zhòng yùn dòng yuán#] participating in women’s sports in a speech. He took aim at the Olympic women’s weightlifting contestant, New Zealand trans weightlifter Hubbard. Trump has claimed that trans athletes can easily “crush” records set by female athletes, and that allowing trans people to compete in women’s games is a violation of women’s rights: “They’re taking your rights, it’s a feminist movement, and we can’t let that happen.” Hubbard turned from male to female in 2012. Many weightlifters have opposed her participation, and some former sports stars have spoken out against male-born athletes competing in elite women’s sports. Despite the criticism, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has backed Hubbard to compete with women, saying she can compete under the current rules. (@观察者网 [guān chá zhě wǎng], 26 July 2021, 13:30)	16,113
2 Today, the Olympic weightlifting competition will be held in the over 87 kg category. Chinese female weightlifter Lǐ Wénwén will compete with New Zealand trans athletes. This Hubbard didn’t even have sex reassignment surgery, he just took medicine to	2,090

Table 1: Top 5 most forwarded posts on Weibo (as of 18 March 2022). *(Continued)*

Weibo posts	No. of times forwarded
keep his hormone levels low. Calling himself a “female athlete” is nothing short of the greatest insult to fairness in sports. I have no issues with trans people but have a big issue with a biological male participating in women’s sports. He is taking advantage of his physiology to violate the rights and interests of all female athletes. I hope Lǐ Wénwén can defeat this New Zealand “trans person” and take revenge for all the women around the world. (@张忆安-龙战于野 [zhāng yì ān-lóng zhàn yú yě], 2 August 2021, 10:12)	
3 New Zealand weightlifter Laurel Hubbard will compete in the women’s weightlifting competition at the Olympics, competing with the young Chinese athlete Lǐ Wénwén. But it is worth mentioning that Hubbard is the first trans athlete in history to compete in the Olympic Games. Before the age of 35, he did not perform well internationally as a male weightlifter, but when he became a trans woman and competed in the women’s games, he became competitive.... (@英国报姐 [yǐng guó bào jiě], 27 July 2021, 14:00)	1,832
4 A New Zealand trans athlete was selected for New Zealand’s Tokyo Olympic team on the 21st [of July 2021]. She will compete in the women’s 87 kg class, becoming the world’s first trans person to participate in the Olympics. Our young athlete Lǐ Wénwén, who holds a high possibility of winning a gold medal, is in this event. (@今日看点 [jīn rì kàn diǎn], 26 July 2021, 13:37)	1,514
5 The Tokyo Olympics women’s 87 kg weightlifting competition has a #跨性别举重运动员# [#TransWeightlifter# / #kuà xìng bié jǔ zhòng yùn dòng yuán#] from New Zealand. In this class, our athlete Lǐ Wénwén would dominate the competition. Lǐ is going to face a trans! Come on! (@娱乐资讯头条 [yú lè zī xùn tóu tiáo], 26 July 2021, 10:56)	1,499

Note: All the posts in this table have been translated from Chinese by the author.

Table 2: Top 5 most retweeted tweets on Twitter (as of 18 March 2022).

Tweets	No. of retweets
1 For the first time in history, transgender women have been allowed to participate in the Tokyo Olympics. Laurel Hubbard (43), a New Zealand weightlifter. However, since she originally had the strength of a man, she might have an advantage over other players. I'm not convinced. Don't use diversity to cheat. (@toshio_tamogami, 2 August 2021, 17:43)	2,085
2 The IOC has decided that even with “male genitalia,” if the testosterone level in the blood is within the range that can extend to 28 times that of a normal girl, it is possible to participate as a “female athlete.” We need to know more about LGBT issues. (@HachimotoKotoe, 30 July 2021, 20:00)	1,121
3 China's best women athletics team are being tested as real women by a professional doctor. There are rumors that they have been modified with hormones to win against the world by the Chinese Communist Party. (@P6AX3Er3HqoQynY, 29 July 2021, 18:40)	865
4 In 2015, the IOC removed sex reassignment surgery from the entry requirements. It seems that there are few people who are brave enough to oppose the trans woman problem for fear of being named a hater, but female athletes are raising their voices. In sports, it is not fair for a person with a female body to compete with a person with a male body. At the end of the day, the true misogynist is the IOC. (@kotamama318, 1 August 2021, 11:18)	640
5 The fact that all nonbinary, female, male, and other self-identified athletes try to compete in the women's games is living proof that competing as women is more advantageous for them. There are physical differences between genders. Please don't cheat. (@traductricemtl, 29 July 2021, 23:13)	491

Note: All the tweets in this table have been translated from Japanese by the author.

I categorized each of these posts/tweets according to whether they were trans-exclusionary, hard to define, or trans-inclusionary. Altogether, 79.19% of the results were trans-exclusionary on Twitter, while Weibo showed a slightly higher rate of 85.52%. Hard-to-define tweets and Weibo posts showed similar proportions: 7.6% and 5.38%, respectively. Conversely, 9.1% on Weibo and 13.21% on Twitter were positive. The result shows an overall similar attitude on both platforms, with Weibo being slightly more trans-exclusionary.

Furthermore, I analyzed the topic models of the text of the posts through natural language processing (NLP). A topic model is a text-mining tool for analyzing the topics of a collection of texts. The algorithm in NLP is based on the frequency of the words that appear in the document. NLP technologies are well developed and more accurate when dealing with the English language but still under development for the Chinese and Japanese languages. Fortunately, I narrowed down the

sample to a scale that I can double-check manually. Therefore, after the NLP calculations, I checked and corrected errors in the results. The program also gives back a proportion of each topic in the collection of the text.

The results from Weibo contained four major topics: “Donald Trump’s opinion” (69.18 %), “China’s national security and pride” (14.44 %), “Debate over the proper female subject” (13.02 %), and “Fairness of the Games” (3.37 %).

The results from Twitter also contained four major topics: “Debate over the proper female subject” (39.26 %), “The leftists and global elites” (24.85 %), “Fairness of the Games” (20.37 %), and “Chinese sex fraud” (15.52 %).

Even though both Weibo and Twitter showed negative attitudes, they were framed in significantly different ways. On Weibo, the most dominant topic was “Donald Trump’s opinion,” as represented by the most forwarded content in table 1, and Chinese netizens were more interested in how trans athletes would affect the number of China’s gold medals rather than the intrusion of trans women into women-only spaces. Conversely, on Twitter, the most dominant topic was the “debate over the proper female subjects,” and Japanese Twitter users framed their criticism of trans women in the typical TERF narratives (e.g., they do not share the female social experience; they are intruders in women-only spaces; or they are potential criminals), clearly mobilizing concerns against the liberalist ideology of gender/sexuality diversity.

Although there are many topics to be discussed, I would like to highlight the way these contents depict cis women athletes as victims and trans women as opportunists demolishing the fairness of the Games. Although the discourses of reverse victimhood are present in both Chinese and Japanese online spaces, the exact power relations are reversed and their geopolitical implications are significantly different, as will be identified in the following sections.

3 Weibo: Gold medals and white leftists

One way in which trans women are framed as a threat on Weibo is the depiction of the Chinese nation-state as the victim of an unfair competitive system. A large number of posts depict the Chinese weightlifting medal contender Lǐ Wénwén as being cheated by Laurel Hubbard, who was taking advantage of the rules, that is, the hypercorrect LGBT-friendly environment in Western countries. For example:

#跨性别举重运动员# [#kuà xìng bié jǔ zhòng yùn dòng yuán# / #TransWeightlifter#] is so unfair. This is obscenity! Letting a male trans [man who is supposedly trans] participate in the women’s 87 kg competition just for a win? This New Zealand weightlifter Hubbard originally participated in the men’s weightlifting competition, and after his 30s he began to participate

in the women's games through a sex change. Due to his physical advantages, he achieved good results of "six golds and one silver" after participating in the women's games. This time in the women's 87 kg weightlifting competition at the Tokyo Olympics, we have Lǐ Wénwén, our favorite to win the championship. That is a typical double standard, where is there any fairness at all? Come on! Lǐ Wénwén! Lǐ Wénwén has competed with this so-called trans athlete in the past and won against him. This time, we must win against him again with our strength to prove our power. Even if you try to set up obstacles and conspiracies, we can still win. #87 公斤举重队员李雯雯# [#87 gōng jīng jǔ zhòng duì yuán lǐ wén wén # / #87kgWeightlifterLiWen-wen#] (@娱乐圈十三妹 [yú quān shí sān méi], 26 July 2021, 14:19)⁵

From this excerpt, it is not hard to identify a narrative that posits trans athletes in opposition to Chinese national achievement in an international competition. First, there is the typical misgendering, where Hubbard was referred to as a male and by the pronouns "he/him." There is also misinformation. The post claimed that Hubbard had "good results" when "he" was a male to emphasize that Hubbard has a strong male body, but it omits the fact that Hubbard had actually been competing as a woman in international competitions since 2017 (Smith, 2021). Behind this misgendering and misinformation is a misogynistic logic that posits women as the perfect victims because female bodies are naturally weaker than male bodies.

This victimhood of the female body is then framed for the incitement of national pride. In the above excerpt, the vulnerability of Lǐ Wénwén's female body is reframed to justify the trans-exclusionary discourse, while Hubbard is positioned as a threat to not only cis women athletes in general, but also those who represent China.

This rhetoric does not stop at naming the threats but emphasizes the destiny of "trans threats" when they are against the Chinese state. The above post refers to Lǐ Wénwén as someone who can win against Hubbard, which then contributes to the imagined bravery of the state in facing injustice.⁶ Even if Lǐ does not win, Hubbard being described as a "cheater," a fake woman with a man's body, gives Lǐ and the Chinese state the power to claim victimhood. Lǐ's gender identity is not questioned, even with her record of having won against Hubbard ("the strong male body") in the past.

This rhetoric manifests a complicated depiction of the female body. First, the power relations between cis and trans women are being reversed. Given that trans

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all Weibo posts have been translated from Chinese to English by the author. This post had been forwarded 60 times as of 4 March 2022, which is comparatively low, but the rhetoric in this excerpt contains the typical patterns of speech related to national pride.

⁶ It is also worth mentioning that in the second most forwarded post in table 1, Li's ability and mightiness in winning against Hubbard is not only linked to the state's bravery, but also to the revenge of all women around the world.

women athletes were excluded from the institution based on the scientifically rejected biological evidence on the sex binary (Fuentes, 2022), cis women's unquestioned eligibility in participating in women's games is itself a privilege. This reversal of victimhood is based on the idea that only biological women without a penis should be considered a legitimate female subject to claim victimhood. However, as Jones and Slater (2020) have stated, this very power of claiming victimhood is the power cis women have over trans women. Second, this victimhood of cis women is reclaimed by the nation-state. Although it might seem like the rhetoric of depicting cis women as victims is lobbying for women's rights in TERF politics, the linkage of Lǐ's victimhood to China's national pride reflects that this rhetoric is not even for women's rights in a TERF sense, but an example of China's unremitting tenacity.

This tendency to link women and sexual minorities to national security needs to be understood against the background of China-US relations. The following excerpt provides a valuable example.

This time I support the king who knows all [*dǒng wáng*]⁷: Trump bombarded trans athletes for participating in women's sports, which infringes on the rights of female athletes! Trump harshly criticized the New Zealand trans athlete in a speech. He claimed that trans athletes can easily "crush" records set by female athletes, and that allowing trans people to compete in women's games is a violation of women's rights. "They're taking your rights, it's a feminist movement, and we can't let that happen." But that's what the IOC agreed to. The IOC is just a brainless white leftist in this matter. A male trans [man who is supposedly trans] can't change his natural muscular advantage. It makes no sense to let him compete with female athletes. This is just messed up. (@HW前HR[HW qián HR], 26 July 2021, 19:44)⁸

Political scholars Yang Tian and Fang Kecheng (2021) have stated that the term "white leftist" (*bái zuō*) is crucial in the narratives of Chinese online nationalist communities (pp. 6–8). "White leftist" literally refers to white liberals. These people are perceived as those who superficially lobby for the rights of minorities for an empty image of progressiveness, which is often waged as a weapon against China. Although the US is considered an ideological enemy, Trump's speech is frequently cited by Chinese online nationalists. In other words, while the US government is depicted as the ultimate enemy dominated by white leftists, Trump is depicted as a savior who really cares about feminism.

Although women's rights is emphasized in the above excerpt, Chinese online nationalists have long criticized feminism for being a hypocritical performance

⁷ This term was originally used ironically by Chinese speakers for Trump's know-it-all attitude, but in this post it is used in a positive way, implying that this time, Trump really understands the truth.

⁸ This post had been forwarded 77 times as of 4 March 2022.

of white leftists. I searched for and calculated the number of Weibo posts containing the keyword “feminism” from 2011 to 2021, and found that the number of posts had grown from 886 in 2011 to 18,788 in 2021. After 2017, there were several drastic ups and downs, with 13,570 in 2019 and 5,124 in 2020. Given the Chinese government’s tendency to censor heated debates online (King et al., 2012, pp. 15–16), it is safe to conclude that the discussion about feminism on Weibo might have drawn the government’s attention and resulted in a huge deletion of Weibo posts in 2020. This matches the emergence of Chinese online nationalist activism in 2016 (Fang & Rapnikova, 2018, pp. 8–11). The term that is often used by the nationalist community to condemn feminism is *nǚ quán* (woman’s fist). It is often used together with the term “white leftist,” indicating that feminists are supposedly calling for gender equality but are attacking men’s rights, that is, punching (men) with their fist. For example, commenting on actor Emma Watson’s refusal to cooperate with author J. K. Rowling again for the latter’s trans-exclusionary attitude, a Chinese Weibo user posted: “White leftist and white left-wing extremist, a good example of magic defeating magic. What can defeat the feminist’s fist? Answer: LGBT” (@Sponge11i, 27 June 2022, 15:51).⁹

In fact, the association of feminism, as well as sexual minority activism, with external threats has a broader historical, political, and institutional context. The economic reform initiated at the end of the 1970s not only stimulated the Chinese market economy, but also vitalized the emergence of diverse gender and sexual identities (Rofel, 2007). The influx of foreign people and capital also inspired the formation of sexual minority communities (Guo, 2021). Despite a growing third sector, the Chinese government placed a double threshold to control and censor its social organizations to eliminate the so-called “external powers” that were thought to overthrow the Chinese Communist Party (Hildebrandt, 2013). Since sexual minorities’ organizations were denied direct access to official support and resources for being morally improper, they survived through support from foreign embassies and foundations, which then made them susceptible as instruments of “external powers” (Guo, 2018).

After Xi Jinping’s ascension to leadership, the Chinese government switched to a more intransigent attitude. The newly issued Charity Law of 2016 restricted the types of NGOs that are allowed in China to those that pass the ideological test.¹⁰ The ideological and economic conflicts between China and the US intensified as

⁹ This post had not been forwarded as of 18 March 2022, but was a response to a post about J. K. Rowling and Emma Watson, which had been forwarded approximately 110,000 times as of 18 March 2022.

¹⁰ Charity Law of the People’s Republic of China (promulgated by the Nat’l People’s Cong., 16 March 2016, effective 1 September 2016), arts. 3–4.

US–China relations worsened after Trump’s ascension to the presidency (Boylan et al., 2021). Despite Trump’s anti-LGBTQ policies and rhetoric, the advocacy of sexual minorities’ rights was depicted as a US value and, more importantly, a weapon wielded against China.¹¹ Compared to the earlier decades of economic reform, when the government took up cooperative strategies in dealing with human rights issues, Xi’s administration clearly adopted more hostile ones through inciting nationalism, where the US is the non-negotiable Other/enemy.

Therefore, the online trans-exclusionary discourses on Weibo manifest complicated power relations and the reverse of those relations in a specific geopolitical context. The debate over the proper female subject is closely associated with the narrative of national ideology and security.

4 Twitter: Women’s safety and the Chinese threat

The trans-exclusionary narratives on Japanese Twitter show similar aspects to the typical TERF narratives. As mentioned above, the most heatedly debated topic on Twitter was in regard to the “proper” female subject. These narratives portrayed trans women as opportunists and potential criminals in women-only spaces. They referred to false scientific evidence to prove that male bodies are ultimately stronger than female bodies, citing women athletes’ concerns about Hubbard’s participation to depict her as being unwelcomed in women’s sports, and even creating conspiracies about her intentionally losing the game to show that trans women do not have physical advantages so that more trans women can compete in women’s events.

However, it is worth mentioning that compared to Weibo, where such TERF narratives are engulfed by nationalist discourses, Japanese Twitter users frame their tweets in a more individualistic way. That is not to say that their online discourses are not connected to Japanese nationalism or political conservatives such as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). In fact, as I argue in this section, they show a clear connection with online nationalists. By using the term individualistic, I em-

¹¹ The ideological opposition between China and the US on sexual minority rights has also been intensified by the promotion of LGBT rights in neighboring areas such as Taiwan, Japan, and Korea, reviving the fault lines between the West and the East during the Cold War. For how China functions as an Other in constructing the progressiveness of Taiwan and Japan through LGBT activism, see Fukunaga (2017).

phasize the way Chinese and Japanese netizens frame their trans-exclusionary arguments in the context of international sports competitions.

Unlike Weibo, where both trans persons and feminists are depicted as external threats, the Japanese tweets posit trans persons as an internal threat to the political right and women's rights. As mentioned above, Japanese trans-exclusionary discourses emphasize the conflict between trans and cis women on an individual level. The references and citations in support of their arguments are often from individual athletes and influencers. For example:

Later in this video, US weightlifter S.E. Robles responded with a simple “No, thank you,” after a few seconds of silence when asked, “It was a historic night competing with Laurel Hubbard, the first transgender player. Please tell us your impressions.” What a strong and eloquent response! (@ddslumber, 4 August 2021, 14:34)¹²

Although both the Chinese and Japanese netizens reverse the power relations between cis and trans women, several distinctions are worth addressing. First, by framing the biological female bodies as individual victims, the image of these threatened bodies is more connected to personal life experiences, which makes it easier to incite the precariousness of cis women. It is also crucial to mention that the trans-exclusionary sentiments are often incited by the perceived intrusion or invasion by trans persons into women-only spaces (Fukunaga, 2022, pp. 76–78). However, sociologist Charlotte Jones and queer studies scholar Jen Slater (2020, pp. 162–164) argued that women-only spaces such as women's toilets are built on the protectionist assumption that violence toward women would only be perpetrated by biological men.¹³

However, by stating that the Chinese online discourses are affected by nationalistic political campaigns, I do not mean to deny the individualistic aspect of the debate over women's victimhood. In East Asian trans-exclusionary politics, the construction and patrolling of the boundary of so-called “women-only spaces” are very important strategies, in which the images of female bodies threatened by male violence serve as an inevitable presumption. As Fukunaga (2020) has argued, the trans-exclusionary narratives in South Korea gained momentum through

¹² Unless otherwise indicated, all Japanese-language tweets have been translated into English by the author. This tweet had been retweeted 465 times as of 4 March 2022.

¹³ According to a report by the US Department of Justice (2022, p. 11), in 2021, 77.4% of the offenders in violent crimes were male, 17.6% were female, and 5.1% were both male and female. However, given the fact that in most cultures, aggression is considered part of masculinity and sometimes even praised, the low proportion of female offenders is insufficient evidence for claiming that women are less violent than men.

the support of younger generations of feminists refusing to align with the previous generation who endeavored to form alliances with sexual minorities. These younger generations were mobilized by the reports of sexual assaults and femicides, such as the femicide incident in Japan on 6 August 2021, during the Tokyo 2020 Games, when a passenger on the Odakyu train line intentionally targeted women who “looked happy” (“Kachigumi no onna,” 2021). Similarly, on 14 June 2022, a group of gangsters attacked three women at midnight in a restaurant in Tang Shan City, China (Gan, 2022). The incident was recorded on CCTV and uploaded online, which shocked many people. After this incident, Weibo became a place to press the government to provide details about the victims and punish the perpetrators harshly, as well as to establish “women-only online spaces” (*chún nǚ kōng jiān*). This stimulated a huge change in online transphobia in China, as daily sexual assaults on women were clearly recorded and disseminated, which would result in a reframing of women’s victimhood as an individual or group experience.

Second, unlike the Chinese netizens who quickly link the threatened female bodies to national pride against the ideological West, the Japanese netizens tend to link them to domestic political debates. The most retweeted content in table 2 manifests this framing. Another example is below:

The Olympics ex-chief Mori has long been calling for the recruitment of excellent women but resigned for being a sexist. Conversely, the IOC who let a trans woman with a man’s body compete against women is in fact the real sexist. We can’t compare discrimination against transgenders and against women. (@kotamama, 3 August 2021, 12:30)¹⁴

This excerpt manifests three key characteristics of Japanese online right-wingers, as identified by Nagayoshi’s (2019) quantitative survey: (1) they are highly motivated to participate in conservative politics (e.g., elections and lobbying events) and support the LDP; (2) they tend to obey traditional authoritarians and attack social minorities; and (3) they uphold traditional family values. The hostility in the tweet is directed at the IOC, which is framed as the hypocritical global liberalist elite protecting minorities at the expense of cis women’s rights. Having resigned under local and international pressure after his sexist remark about women in meetings, Mori continued to make sexist remarks, such as stating that one staffer at a party hosted by LDP lawmaker Kawamura Takeo was “too old to call a woman” (“Disgraced Ex-Olympics Chief,” 2021). Yet he is depicted in the tweet as a gender equality lobbyist compared to the IOC, which allows trans women to compete. Further-

14 This tweet had been retweeted 67 times and liked 235 times as of 4 March 2022.

more, given the fact that Mori was the LDP candidate elected as the Japanese prime minister in 2000, it is clear that this tweet supports the LDP.

Resembling the TERF coalition with conservative politicians and churches, the Japanese online transphobia is manifested through depicting cis women as individual victims and conservative (especially LDP) politicians as saviors and protectors of traditional values. It is also worth mentioning that the target of these LDP supporters' criticisms has changed. According to Fukunaga (2022, pp. 75–76), the gender mainstreaming in Japan from around 2000 faced a backlash from conservative parties and politicians, which targeted women's recruitment, but in 2022 the inclusion of LGBT rights was criticized on the basis of gender identity instead of sexual orientation. In other words, for these conservatives, gays and lesbians are not a big issue, but trans people are.

As this paper has shown, Japanese online right-wingers have appropriated the language of gender equality and mobilized the precariousness of cis women against trans women through an individualistic rhetoric, producing an image of cis women as threatened female bodies being protected by political conservatives. However, it is necessary to mention that these political conservatives have long been sexist and still are.

Putting these narratives in the East Asian geopolitical context allows us to dissect its imbricated implications. As Yamaguchi (2019) concluded, another characteristic of Japanese online right-wingers is their negative attitude toward South Korea and China, which is in fact an example of a broader negative attitude toward diverse minorities. From the data I collected, the trans identity, for online right-wingers, functions as a perfect stage for rationalizing and disseminating these narratives. As evident in the third excerpt in table 2, where misinformation about three Chinese cis women athletes who looked male was disseminated and widely commented upon as evidence for the Chinese Communist Party's cheating strategy to win at the Games by sending trans women to compete in women's games. Associating Chinese cis women athletes with a Chinese Communist Party conspiracy to win the competition and then to the typical TERF narrative that trans athletes have advantages over cis women (table 2) is exactly the embodiment of this complicated narrative. What makes this narrative eye-catching is its combination of Sinophobia – or, to be specific, the fear of communism fighting back – and transphobia, which frames gender-crossing as rule-breaking behavior.

5 Conclusion

This paper examined online trans-exclusionary discourses in Japanese-language tweets and Chinese-language Weibo posts during the Tokyo 2020 Games. It pro-

vides an alternative perspective from East Asia on prior research that has indicated how TERF arguments reverse the power relations between trans and cis women, which find an affinity with political and religious conservatives who have always been against gender equality.

While the Japanese and Chinese online trans-exclusionary discourses share some similarities in framing the biological female body as the victim, they frame their arguments differently. The Chinese netizens rationalize their arguments in terms of an ideologically threatened nation, whereas the Japanese users frame their arguments using individualistic language. Furthermore, these discourses indicate that conservatives are appropriating the language of feminism, as they saw a high level of participation from conservatives, that is, online nationalists in China and online right-wingers in Japan. Furthermore, while Chinese nationalists predominantly attacked white leftists for being brainwashed by the contemporary extremes of Western (mainly US) liberalism, the Japanese online right-wingers created three other targets: the Japanese leftist political parties, the global liberals, and the Chinese Communist Party. The power relations between China, the West, and Japan implied in these trans-exclusionary discourses call for an intersectional interrogation into how trans identity and politics, with all the phobias and patchworks of “truth,” play a part in shaping and linking gender/sexuality politics to broader East Asian geopolitics.

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