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Agenda Intervention Strategies of China's Official Women's Media in Gender-Controversial Advertising: A Multi-case Study of China Women's News (2023-2026)

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Abstract. Gender-controversial commercial advertisements have become a recurring flashpoint of public debate in China, with social media serving as the primary arena for collective contestation. China Women's News (Zhongguo Funübao), the official newspaper of the All-China Women's Federation, has intervened in several such controversies through published commentaries, yet its intervention strategies remain largely unexamined. This paper analyzes the editorial responses of China Women's News to four advertising incidents between 2023 and 2026, focusing on the timing of intervention, attribute framing, and discursive positioning relative to other official actors. A multi-case comparative design with qualitative framework analysis reveals a consistent pattern of post-hoc authoritative framing: the newspaper's commentary typically follows rather than precedes public backlash and regulatory or brand responses, functioning not to prompt remedial action but to supply normative interpretation that recasts isolated incidents as matters of gonggong lunli (public ethics). Across all cases, the newspaper adopts a "normative framework" anchored in public-ethics vocabulary while avoiding explicit gender-discrimination language, a discursive boundary that reflects its dual identity as both a journalistic outlet and a state-mandated gender-equality advocate. These findings extend attribute agenda-setting theory from effect measurement towards analytical application in crisis contexts and introduce the pattern of post-hoc authoritative framing to characterize the shifting agenda function of official media in digitally mediated public spheres.

Keywords: attribute agenda setting, gender-controversial advertising, official women's media, framing analysis, post-hoc authoritative framing

1. Introduction

Public controversies over gender representation in Chinese commercial advertising have grown markedly in recent years. Incidents ranging from elevator ads caricaturing female anxiety to public-transit banners promoting chastity norms have ignited large-scale backlash on Weibo, exemplifying the bottom-up agenda dynamics that digital-media scholarship has increasingly foregrounded [1, 2]. Existing research has examined either the textual politics of such advertisements [3] or brand–public

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interactions, but the role of institutional third parties in defining these controversies has received scant attention.

The omission is consequential. China′s media ecology includes organizations that straddle party-state authority and feminist advocacy [4]. *China Women's News*, the All-China Women′s Federation′s official newspaper, has commented on multiple high-profile advertising disputes, yet when it speaks, what language it deploys, and where its voice sits relative to other actors have not been systematically studied. Prior applications of attribute agenda-setting to Chinese gender-media research have concentrated on routine coverage rather than acute crisis interventions [5].

The present study addresses this lacuna by comparing four gender-controversial advertising cases (2023–2026) in which *China Women's News* published editorial interventions. Guided by attribute agenda-setting theory [6, 7] and the framing-as-selection-and-salience perspective [8], the analysis traces the newspaper′s intervention along three dimensions: timing relative to event lifecycle, attribute framing employed, and discursive positioning within the ensemble of official responses. This study characterizes these strategies and identifies cross-case regularities without claiming causal effects on downstream outcomes.

Two contributions are anticipated. First, attribute agenda-setting is extended from an effect-measurement paradigm to an analytical toolkit for examining institutional attribute construction under contested, fast-moving conditions. Second, this study speaks to how official media negotiate agenda authority when digital publics routinely set the initial terms of debate [2]. This represents a reversal of the classical media-to-public information flow that remains underexplored in the Chinese gender-communication context.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Attribute agenda setting and framing

Agenda-setting research has established that media coverage shapes not only which issues publics consider important but also how those issues are understood [6]. McCombs and Shaw′s foundational work on first-level agenda setting was subsequently extended to what is known as attribute agenda setting, which holds that the attributes media emphasize when covering an issue influence the way audiences evaluate it [7]. Where the first level concerns what people think about, the second concerns how they think about it [9].

A key development in this trajectory was McCombs′s argument that the attributes emphasized by media constitute the building blocks of frames, since both framing and attribute agenda setting involve selection and salience [7]. Entman′s canonical definition of framing, which treats frames as devices for selecting aspects of perceived reality and rendering them more salient to promote a particular interpretation [8], dovetails with this at the conceptual level. This convergence is important for the analysis that follows: it permits the use of attribute agenda setting not merely as an effect-measurement tool but as an analytical lens for identifying and comparing the attribute frames that competing actors bring to the same controversy.

This analytical application has precedent in Chinese gender-communication research. Zhang and Yu′s longitudinal analysis of *China Women's News* coverage of the "leftover women" discourse showed that the newspaper′s shifting attribute emphases tracked with broader changes in state gender policy [5]. That study, however, examined routine coverage over a multi-year arc. The present analysis extends this approach to acute, event-driven crises where multiple actors compete to define a controversy′s salient attributes within a compressed timeframe.

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2.2. Reverse agenda setting and official women's media

The classical agenda-setting model presupposes a flow from the media to the public. Digital platforms have unsettled this assumption. Kim and Lee introduced the concept of "reversed agenda-setting" to describe situations in which online publics generate issue salience independently and subsequently compel traditional media to adopt those issues [10]. In gender-controversial advertising cases in China, this reversal is near-total: backlash on Weibo routinely precedes editorial responses from institutional media [1, 2], creating conditions under which outlets such as *China Women's News* intervene as secondary rather than primary agenda actors.

The character of that secondary intervention reflects the newspaper′s organizational duality. As the official organ of the All-China Women′s Federation, it is simultaneously a journalistic outlet and a state-mandated gender-equality advocate [4, 11]. This dual identity constrains its discursive repertoire: where independent commentators may invoke the language of gender discrimination, the newspaper calibrates its vocabulary to advance its advocacy mandate without exceeding the discursive boundaries of the party-state′s ideological framework. Its attribute framing choices are therefore not only strategic responses to controversy but also expressions of institutional constraint.

Three established research streams thus converge on a gap that none has addressed individually. Attribute agenda setting has been applied to gender-media coverage but not to crisis-mode interventions. Reversed agenda-setting dynamics have been documented in Chinese digital politics but not linked to official women′s media framing, and the organizational identity of *China Women's News* has been acknowledged but not mobilized as an explanatory variable. To integrate these streams, the present study adopts a three-dimensional analytical framework: (1) *timing of intervention*, locating the newspaper′s editorial response within the event lifecycle, (2) *attribute framing*, identifying the normative vocabulary used to define a controversy and comparing it with brand and public frames, and (3) *discursive positioning*, examining the textual relationship between the newspaper′s framing and other official voices to characterize its place in the broader tone-setting process.

3. Research design and case overview

3.1. Case selection and data

This study employs a qualitative multi-case comparative design [12], selecting cases on the principle of maximum variation to capture a range of controversy types, advertiser scales, and regulatory contexts. Four gender-controversial advertising incidents between 2023 and 2026 met the following inclusion criteria: (a) the controversy centered on commercial marketing materials rather than entertainment or personal speech, (b) the dispute was explicitly framed around gender issues by public participants, (c) the incident generated observable public-agenda activity on social media, measured by trending-topic status or large-scale commentary on Weibo, and (d) *China Women's News* published at least one retrievable editorial text in response. Cases involving fictional or entertainment content, individual public statements, and incidents that did not produce an identifiable *China Women's News* text were excluded.

Table 1 summarizes the four cases. They span a spectrum of controversy types, from anxiety-exploiting body-image advertising to the revival of feudal chastity norms, and involve advertisers of markedly different scales, from a national consumer-electronics brand to a locally placed bus-body advertisement. Of particular note, the final column records the timing of the newspaper′s intervention relative to other actors′ responses, a variable that proves central to the findings.

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Table 1. Overview of gender-controversial advertising cases with *China Women's News* (CWN) intervention (2023–2026)

No.	Date	Advertiser and Controversial Content	Controversy Type	CWN Intervention	Timing Relative to Other Responses
1	2023.05	FIVE DOCTORS (oral beauty drink): elevator ads depicting women screaming about aging and marital grievances	Female anxiety exploitation, demeaning portrayal	Weibo commentary + signed editorial: criticized the brand for disrespecting women through sensationalist marketing	Intervened during peak public backlash, brand remained silent, market regulator subsequently opened investigation
2	2026.02–03	Coconut Palm Group: factory-visit promotional materials featuring sexualized descriptions of female employees	Sexual objectification, vulgar marketing	Editorial commentary: argued that vulgarity cannot be treated as a creative formula	Post-positioned after brand′s evasive response, Haikou market regulator had already summoned the company
3	2026.03	Leshan (Sichuan) public bus body ad: slogans promoting female chastity as dowry and condemning abortion	Feudal gender-norm revival, reproductive coercion	(a) Same-day news report (Mar 24), (b) editorial three days later: warned against the resurgence of feudal values in public spaces	News report concurrent with event, editorial post-positioned after administrative removal order (Mar 25)
4	2026.05	OPPO Mother′s Day campaign: copy reading "My mom has two husbands," intended as a fan-culture reference	Maternal-image offence, trivialization of motherhood	Signed editorial (May 10): argued that brand communication must not mistake offence for creativity	Post-positioned after brand apology and material withdrawal (May 8)

Note: CWN = China Women's News. All dates refer to the first publicly accessible version of the relevant text. Advertiser names are transliterated from Chinese originals, and brand names in Latin script are retained as published.

3.2. Analytical method

The primary analytical method is qualitative framework analysis applied to the editorial texts published by *China Women's News* across the four cases, supplemented by brand apology statements, regulatory announcements, and industry-association responses where publicly available. The analytical procedure followed four steps. First, all texts were read closely and key evaluative phrases, meaning terms that characterize, define, or assign normative valence to the controversy, were extracted. Second, these phrases were coded as attribute labels (e.g., "public ethics," "vulgar marketing," "feudal residue") and sorted by issuing actor (brand, public, *China Women's News*, other official voices). Third, the attribute labels were grouped into the three broader frame categories of technical, moral and normative, following the tripartite distinction introduced in the theoretical framework. Fourth, the resulting frame profiles were compared across cases to assess cross-case stability and to identify conditions under which the newspaper′s discursive choices varied.

A methodological caveat is in order. Because multiple official voices, including regulatory agencies, industry bodies, and state-media commentators, typically respond to the same incident within a narrow window, the textual co-occurrence of similar framing language across actors cannot be taken as evidence of directional influence. The analysis therefore confines itself to documenting

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frame distribution and intertextual alignment, without advancing causal claims about one actor′s influence on another.

4. Findings and analysis

4.1. Timing of intervention: the post-positioning pattern

Across all four cases, a basically consistent temporal sequence emerged: public backlash on Weibo peaked first, brands issued responses or regulators took administrative action second, and *China Women's News* published its editorial commentary last. In the OPPO case, the brand apologized and withdrew the campaign materials on May 8, two full days before the newspaper′s signed editorial appeared on May 10. Notably, the editorial′s own argumentation took the apology as a given premise rather than a demanded outcome. In the Leshan case, the local transport bureau ordered the offending bus advertisements removed on March 25, the newspaper′s evaluative commentary followed on March 27. The sole partial exception was the Leshan case′s same-day news dispatch (March 24), but this was a factual report, not an editorial intervention; it carried no evaluative framing and served a newsgathering rather than agenda-defining function.

This pattern is not incidental. It is consistent with the reversed agenda-setting dynamic described in the theoretical framework [10]: public opinion crystallizes the controversy before institutional actors weigh in. What the present findings add is that *China Women's News* does not merely arrive late but appears to *require* prior public mobilization and, in most cases, prior brand or regulatory response as preconditions for its own editorial entry. The newspaper′s function, then, is not to prompt remedial action but to supply what might be termed *post-hoc authoritative framing*: a retrospective normative interpretation that redefines an already-resolved incident as a matter of enduring public-ethical significance.

4.2. Attribute framing: the normative framework and its variations

Framework analysis of the editorial texts reveals a tripartite framing competition among three categories of actors, summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Attribute framing comparison across agenda actors

Agenda Actor	Frame Type	Core Discursive Strategy	Cross-Case Stability
Brand	Technical	Attributes fault to an expressive misstep, foregrounds creative intent, minimizes ethical dimension (e.g., OPPO: "the expression went astray", Coconut Palm: evasive non-denial)	Consistent across three of four cases, Coconut Palm substituted evasion for explicit reframing
Digital public (Weibo)	Moral	Assigns moral blame through affective vocabulary: "offence," "exploitation of motherhood," "disgusting," "insult to women"	Highly stable, earliest frame to emerge in all cases, driven by collective indignation
China Women's News	Normative	Anchors evaluation in normative concepts: gonggong lunli (public ethics), gongxu liangsu (public morals), avoids affective or identity-based language and explicit "gender discrimination" terminology	Highly stable across cases, discourse intensity and vocabulary shift by controversy type (see text)

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Table 2. (continued)

Other official voices (regulators, industry bodies, state media)	Administrative / industry	Market regulators: legal compliance and enforcement, industry associations: professional self-discipline and standards, state-media commentators: general public-interest framing	Division-of-labor alignment with CWN rather than substitution, none adopted gender-specialist vocabulary

Note: CWN = China Women's News. Romanized Chinese terms are glossed in parentheses at first mention. Frame types are analytically constructed from extracted attribute labels, not actor self-descriptions.

What stands out most clearly is the discursive boundary observed in the *China Women's News* editorials. Across all four cases, the newspaper consistently anchored its evaluations in the vocabulary of *gonggong lunli* (public ethics) and *gongxu liangsu* (public morals) while conspicuously avoiding the stronger formulation of *xingbie qishi* (gender discrimination). The OPPO editorial, for instance, argued that brand communication must respect the baseline of public ethics, a framing that locates the transgression in the domain of universally shared norms rather than in the specific politics of gender. The Leshan editorial similarly chose "feudal residue in public spaces" over any explicit charge of sexism, situating the controversy within a modernity-versus-backwardness narrative rather than a feminist one.

Organizational identity offers a ready explanation for this pattern. As a state-mandated gender-equality advocate that simultaneously operates within the party-state′s discursive system [11], the newspaper occupies a position that rewards normative universalism over identity-specific critique. The vocabulary of public ethics achieves a dual function: it satisfies the advocacy mandate by unambiguously condemning the advertisement while remaining within the discursive register acceptable to the broader official media ecology. The choice is strategic, but the strategy is itself a product of institutional constraint.

Cross-case variation, though limited, is revealing. When the controversy involved the revival of traditional gender norms (Leshan), the newspaper deployed the language of *fengjian zaopo* (feudal residue), a term that carries a stronger ideological charge because it invokes the party′s historical self-narrative of emancipation from feudalism. When the controversy was one of commercial tastelessness (OPPO, Coconut Palm), milder corrective formulations prevailed: "Do not mistake offense for creativity," and "vulgarity is not a creative formula." The underlying normative framework remained constant; what shifted was the rhetorical intensity, calibrated to the perceived severity of the transgression.

4.3. Discursive positioning within the official tone-setting process

The analysis now turns from what the newspaper said to where its voice sat relative to other official actors. In none of the four cases did *China Women's News* operate in isolation. The OPPO incident, for example, drew commentary from the state-media account *Zhejiang Xuanchuan* (Zhejiang Propaganda), a statement from the China Advertising Association, and a public declaration from the literature faculty of Wuhan University. All of these were issued within the same 48-hour window. In the Leshan case, national and regional media outlets, like the newspaper, successfully published commentaries following the controversy.

What distinguishes the newspaper′s contribution is not temporal priority, which it lacked entirely, but thematic specificity. Regulatory agencies framed the incidents through the lens of legal compliance, industry associations invoked professional self-discipline, and generalist state-media commentators addressed public interest in broad terms. *China Women's News* alone provided a gender-specialized normative evaluation rooted in the public-ethics vocabulary identified above.

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The relationship among these voices is best characterized as a division of labor rather than hierarchy or substitution: each occupies a distinct functional niche within the broader official tone-setting process, and the newspaper′s niche is that of the actor whose institutional mandate and discursive repertoire best equip it to translate a gender controversy into a normative public-ethics proposition.

This positioning claim rests on four observable grounds: the newspaper′s institutional identity as the ACWF organ, which confers representative authority on gender matters, the breadth of secondary dissemination (its editorials were republished by major commercial news portals in all four cases), the normative rather than merely descriptive character of its language, and its sustained, cross-case engagement with gender-controversial advertising as a recurrent subject.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how *China Women's News* intervened discursively in four gender-controversial advertising incidents between 2023 and 2026. Three principal findings emerged. First, the newspaper′s editorial commentary was consistently post-positioned: it entered the public conversation after digital publics had already crystallized the controversy and, in most cases, after brands or regulators had already responded. The newspaper′s function was not to initiate remedial action but to supply *post-hoc authoritative framing*: retrospective normative interpretation that recasts resolved incidents as matters of enduring public-ethical significance. Second, the newspaper′s attribute framing drew consistently on the vocabulary of public ethics rather than the language of gender discrimination, a discursive choice interpretable as a product of its dual institutional identity as both a journalistic outlet and a state-mandated gender-equality advocate. Third, within the broader official tone-setting process, the newspaper occupied a distinctive functional niche: it was the actor best positioned to translate gender controversies into normative public-ethics propositions, operating in a division-of-labor relationship with regulatory, industry, and generalist state-media voices.

These findings carry two implications for agenda-setting scholarship. The pattern of post-hoc authoritative framing extends the reversed agenda-setting model by specifying the mechanisms through which institutional actors re-enter a public conversation they did not originate, not to set the agenda but to redefine its normative terms after the fact. The analysis also demonstrates that attribute agenda setting can serve as an analytical toolkit for comparative textual analysis, and not only as a framework for measuring media-to-public effects. This application may prove useful in other contexts where multiple actors compete to define the same event.

Several limitations should be noted. The study analyzed only four cases, all drawn from a single national context. The generalizability of the post-positioning pattern to other institutional media environments remains an open question. The analysis was confined to published texts and did not incorporate audience-reception data, which means that the normative framing documented here cannot be linked to downstream shifts in public attitudes or brand behavior. Future research could expand the case base, introduce comparative cross-national designs, and integrate audience-side methods to assess whether post-hoc authoritative framing achieves the evaluative closure it appears to seek.

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