

# Individualism vs. collectivism

## Feminist conceptual metaphors in the corpus of American and Chinese magazines

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Women's magazines reflect the notions of gender equality and social justice in society and serve as a catalyst for public debate on these issues. Little is understood about whether feminist conceptual metaphors in magazines are similar to those in magazines published in the United States and China. The study examined feminist conceptual metaphors used in the self-compiled corpus of American magazines *Ms.* and *Bust* (1,617 articles) and Chinese magazines *Women of China* and *Marriage and Family* (5,182 articles). The magazine articles were published between July 1, 2023 and June 30, 2024. The analysis using AntConc 4.2.4 and SegmentAnt 1.0.0 shows that both American and Chinese magazines deploy WAR and JOURNEY metaphors to portray the ongoing struggle and progress toward gender equality. However, we argue that magazines are active constructors, not mere mirrors, of gender ideology, deploying metaphors to naturalize neoliberal individualism in the United States and state-mediated collectivism in China.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Multi-level View of Conceptual Metaphor, the United States, China, women's magazines, individualism, collectivism, gender ideology

### 1. Introduction

The 2023 Gender Inequality Index positions China (rank 41) and the United States (rank 45) within the category of moderate inequality (31–100) (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). The ranking indicates that gender disparities persist in areas such as political representation, income distribution, and access to leadership roles in both countries. Feminism remains a pivotal force in advancing gender equality and social justice globally, yet its reception and representation are shaped by culture and language of the region (Vachhani, 2023).

Metaphors, as cognitive tools embedded in language, play a critical role in constructing societal perceptions of feminism as a struggle, a journey, or even a pathology depending on contextual and ideological factors (Deignan, 2005; Kövecses, 2010).

Studies in Western contexts like US, Spain (Realí & Avellaneda, 2023) and the United Kingdom highlight the role of conceptual metaphors as tools of empowerment and contention. Janusz's (1994) analysis of feminist poetry and historical texts revealed how metaphors historically weaponized to demean women were repurposed by poets like Audre Lorde to challenge patriarchal epistemologies. Critiquing the WAVE metaphor used in feminist historiography for oversimplifying feminist history, Nicholson (2015) proposed a 'kaleidoscope' model to capture its non-linear, intersectional activism, a framing that complements earlier textual analyses. Realí and Avellaneda (2023) found that WAR metaphors (e.g., 'fight for autonomy') in Spanish news enhanced perceptions of feminist agency in abortion discourse among student participants in their experimental design. However, gender-neutral language had minimal impact on these perceptual outcomes. WAR metaphors dominated discourse in newspapers published in the US (e.g., 'battling systemic oppression'), whereas British newspapers favored JOURNEY metaphors (e.g., 'path to equality') (Abu Alrub, 2022). The finding highlights cultural priorities of conflict versus incremental progress. Finally, in Emma Watson's speech delivered at a United Nations meeting, metaphors like 'imprisonment' reframed gender stereotypes as societal maladies but inadvertently reinforced the stigmatization of feminism despite avoiding the term 'feminism' (Batterson, 2016). The studies above show that conceptual metaphors underpinning and mapping feminist discourse across poetry, news, feminist historiography, newspapers, and international speeches mostly structure positive framings of feminist activism (Abu Alrub, 2022; Janusz, 1994; Realí & Avellaneda, 2023). Fewer studies found metaphorical usage casting women and their struggles in a negative light (Batterson, 2016; Janusz, 1994).

In contrast, research in East Asian contexts reveals how collectivist ideologies and cultural norms influence the types of feminist metaphors that are voiced. Jung and Moon (2025) analyzed how South Korean female college students collectively embrace feminism through campus practices, drawing on 40 interviews. They revealed that feminist identity, a communal 'awakening', driven by shared learning and dialogue, framed as a 'light' against systemic inequality and anti-feminist stigma. Meanwhile, a diachronic corpus analysis of *Women of China* magazine, conducted by Chen (2023), identified a shift from WOMEN ARE WAR CHARACTERS (1950S–1960S) to WOMEN ARE FLOWERS (1990S), reflecting state-aligned narratives that prioritized harmony over conflict. Bao (2023) analyzed 206,089 Weibo posts from 2022 using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) and identified six