




Discourse and the Incomplete Inversion: Gender, Power, and Emotional Labor in China’s “Fourth Love”

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the construction mechanism of the “Fourth Love” intimate relationship model in the Chinese internet context. Using Foucauldian discourse analysis, it examines how spontaneous narratives in cyberspace transform fluid subjective experiences into normative knowledge objects through naming strategies and emotional grammar. The study reveals that while this discourse superficially inverts traditional heterosexual power relations by constructing gender scripts of male vulnerability and female management roles, it fails to simultaneously dissolve structural inequalities. Instead, power asymmetry is recoded as emotional labor under the guise of “care” and “intimacy,” making the “dominant” position actually bear more responsibility for maintaining relationships. The proposed concept of “incomplete inversion” breaks through the simplistic understanding of gender role substitution in previous studies, pointing out the dialectical tension between subversion and continuation in discourse practice. This research introduces Foucauldian power analysis into the field of digital intimate relationships, providing a theoretical perspective beyond the binary framework of resistance/compliance for observing the transformation of contemporary gender norms. It also deepens the understanding of the political economy implications of emotional labor, possessing significant academic value for understanding gender politics in online subcultures.

Keywords: Fourth Love, Discourse Analysis, Incomplete Inversion, Emotional Labor, Intimate Relationships.

1 Introduction

The practices of contemporary intimate relationships are undergoing a significant shift towards diversification. With the penetration of gender equality awareness and the rise of online subcultures, the traditional heterosexual script of “male-dominant/female-submissive” is facing continuous reconstruction and challenges [1]. Against this backdrop, “Fourth Love” (abbreviated as 4i), an intimate relationship model defined as “female-dominant/male-submissive” in the Chinese Internet context, has gradually entered the public sphere from the margins of discourse [2]. This model attempts to break the power stereotype in traditional heterosexual relationships through deliberate gender role reversal, constructing men as emotionally vulnerable

and needing to be cared for, while women assume the roles of initiative, protection, and management. However, existing research on this phenomenon focuses on identity classification, individual psychological traits, or community organizational forms, with a lack of in-depth examination of its discourse construction mechanism and power operation logic, as well as whether this seemingly radical role reversal truly reconstructs the power asymmetry in intimate relationships. In light of this, this study aims to fill this research gap by exploring how 4i as a discursive practice constructs a new form of governance for intimate relationships amidst the tension between subverting and perpetuating traditional gender norms.

This study employs Michel Foucault's framework of discourse analysis, viewing 4i as a productive knowledge-power mechanism rather than merely a specific group's identity label or emotional preference [3]. By analyzing spontaneous narratives about 4i in Chinese online forums and social media, this paper examines how this relational pattern constructs specific subject positions through discursive strategies (such as ordinal naming, title reshaping, and causal narratives), and how emotional responsibility and relational authority are redistributed under the guise of "inversion." The study argues that the discourse of 4i achieves a partial reconstruction of the gendered emotional script by constructing the male "cared-for" position and the female "emotional manager" role; however, this reconstruction exhibits an "incomplete inversion" characteristic, meaning that the apparent role reversal does not simultaneously lead to the equalization of structural power relations, but may instead reproduce an asymmetrical distribution of emotional labor through intimacy and emotionalization. The contribution of this study lies in applying Foucauldian discourse analysis to contemporary research on online intimate relationships, revealing how discourse operates in the dialectic of "subversion" and "co-optation." At the same time, by proposing the concept of "incomplete inversion," it provides a new analytical perspective for understanding the continuity and rupture in the transformation of gender norms, going beyond the simple binary opposition of resistance or compliance.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Discourse as a Constructive Practice: Foucault's Analytical Approach

The theoretical framework is grounded in Foucault's theoretical analytics of discourse, power and subjectivity. Foucault defines discourse as "a group of statements belonging to the same discursive formations," and his core insight is that discourse is not only a transparent medium reflecting reality, but also a productive practice of constructing social reality [3]. In Foucault's view, power is not a top-down oppressive force, but a capillary operation that continuously produces knowledge, norms and truth through discourse. This study draws on this perspective and regards discussion about 4i as a specific discursive formation, which transforms the fluid intimate relationship experience into a comprehensible, discussable and normative object through mechanisms such as classification, naming and narration.

Particularly significant is Foucault's discussion on subject positioning. Discourse interpellates individuals into specific types of subjects by providing specific positions of enunciation [3]. In the discourse of 4i, systems of appellations such as "wife" (referring to men), sister ("Jiejie", a Chinese term referring to a slightly older woman; in this context it does not indicate any kinship relation, but functions as a naming practice within an intimate relationship), and "little husband" are not neutral labels, but rather constitute mechanisms of subjectification. They dictate who can speak, with what emotional tone, and who is expected to bear what emotional responsibility. This study focuses on how these naming strategies organize power relations through marking of difference, making specific gender expressions either naturalized or problematized.

Furthermore, Foucault's concept of "governmentality" helps to understand the microphysics of power in intimate relationships. When the discourse of 4i transforms relational practices into technologizable and manageable objects (e.g., through online textual norms of interaction such as "tutorials" and "avoidance guides"), it actually constitutes an intersection of self-technologies and biopolitics. Based on this, this study analyzes how emotional expression becomes a means of self-discipline, and how "vulnerability" is constructed by discourse as a resource that needs to be managed while simultaneously being granted moral legitimacy.

2.2 Gender Performativity and the Relationship Script Reinforcement

Following Foucault's deconstruction of traditional identity essentialism, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a tool for analyzing gender role performance in this study. Butler points out that gender is not a pre-given physiological fact, but rather a "real effect" constructed in discourse through repetitive, stylized bodily acts [4]. The practice of 4i embodies this performative logic. It attempts to deconstruct the naturalized connection between gender and physiology by deliberately reversing the binary of "active/passive" and "protector/protected" in the traditional heterosexual script.

However, Butler also emphasizes that performativity is not a freely chosen theatrical performance, but is subject to the intelligibility conditions of existing norms [4]. Based on this, this study examines the paradox of the discourse of 4i: on the one hand, it embeds itself into the existing love classification system through the ordinal naming strategy of "fourth," seeking normative legitimacy; on the other hand, it claims to break the traditional gender order. This position, which is both within the system and attempts to subvert it, embodies what Butler calls "performative paradox." This study will analyze how this performative practice unconsciously reproduces the power logic it attempts to subvert through repetition and citationality.

At the same time, this study introduces the concept of "relational scripts" to understand the emotional grammar in intimate interactions. Script theory points out that intimate relationships follow socially learned situational definitions and interaction sequences [5]. In the context of 4i, traditional scripts (such as male pursuit and female reserve) are consciously rewritten into new scripts of "female-led pursuit" and "male weakness." This study focuses on how this script transformation not only

changes surface behavior but also reconstructs the distribution pattern of emotional labor—who is responsible for emotional regulation, who bears the cognitive load of relationship maintenance, and how these responsibilities are naturalized through the semantic field of “love” and “care.”

2.3 Emotional Labor, Moral Responsibility, and the Power Mechanism of “Care”

To analyze the intertwining of power and emotion in the 4i relationship, this study cites Arlie Russell Hochschild’s classic discussion of “emotional labor” and extends it to “emotion work” in the intimate sphere. Hochschild distinguishes between the commodification dimension of emotional labor (in the public sphere) and the private dimension of emotional work, but both share the same core mechanism: the management of feeling to conform to social norms [6]. In the 4i relationship, women are constructed by discourse as “emotional managers,” bearing the cognitive and emotional burden of regulating the atmosphere of the relationship, comforting the vulnerability of their partners, and maintaining the order of interaction. Although this labor is renamed “dominance” or “care,” its structural characteristics of uncompensated, consuming, and gendered distribution are continuous with women’s emotional labor in traditional heterosexual relationships.

More importantly, this study draws on the political and economic analysis of “care” from psychoanalysis and feminist theory to examine how “care” becomes a power technique [7]. When the discourse of 4i constructs men as “children in need of care” or “sensitive trauma subjects,” it effectively activates the cultural motif of motherhood/caregiver, thereby limiting women’s authority to the realm of emotional nurturance rather than the acquisition of institutional power. This “emotionalized authority” manifests as a soft, depoliticized form of domination: it operates through the ethics of care rather than violence or coercion, recoding power asymmetry as a “sweet burden” or “proof of love” in intimate relationships. In summary, this study’s theoretical framework integrates Foucauldian discourse analysis, gender performativity theory, and the sociology of emotion, aiming to transcend the superficial impression of 4i (i.e., simple gender role reversal) and delve into the complexity of its discourse construction.

3 Methodology

This study adopts discourse analysis as its primary methodological framework, aiming to examine how intimate relationships are articulated, organized, and endowed with meaning through discourse, and how such articulations continuously produce specific gender positions and structures of emotional responsibility. The dataset includes approximately 40 narrative posts collected during 2025. All materials are drawn from publicly accessible online platforms where posts are openly visible without registration or special permission. As such, the data belong to open-access online discussions rather than private communications. These narratives include

personal accounts of romantic experiences, emotional interactions, gender roles, and relational patterns. As they are largely produced in everyday communicative contexts, the texts exhibit a high degree of naturalness and contextual embeddedness. To enhance coherence and readability, pseudonyms are used for some speakers, and their gender and relational background are indicated where necessary. The posts are grouped according to recurring themes emerging from the narratives, such as emotional interaction, gender role expectations, relational authority, and patterns of care or dependency. This thematic grouping allows the study to compare how similar relational dynamics are articulated across different narratives, while also identifying recurring discursive patterns.

Analytically, discourse is treated not merely as a mirror reflecting pre-existing relationships, but as a productive practice in its own right. Specifically, in examining 4i relationships, this study focuses on the following discursive dimensions: first, it analyzes how men and women are positioned within narratives in terms of emotional and practical roles, such as “the one who is cared for,” “the manager,” or “the bearer of emotional responsibility”; second, it examines how vulnerability, dependency, or controlling behaviors are naturalized and legitimized through specific narrative chains (e.g., trauma → insecurity → need for care); third, it analyzes how terms of address (such as “wife,” “henpecked husband,” or “Jiejie”) and key expressions reorganize gender roles and power relations at the semantic level; finally, it examines how affective expressions such as care, concern, and communication obscure or reconfigure asymmetries within relationships, allowing norms, regulation, and control to operate in the name of love. Through this approach, the study does not primarily aim to judge whether 4i relationships are equal or healthy. Rather, it examines how discourse operates as a productive practice: simultaneously inverting traditional gendered emotional positioning while extending and reorganizing existing power logics. The analysis specifically investigates whether such discursive inversion produces parallel structural transformations, or rather generates a condition of “incomplete inversion” where surface-level role reversal coexists with persistent asymmetries in emotional labor, economic responsibility, and relational authority.

4 Data Analysis

4.1 Naming “Fourth Love”: Classification, Legitimacy, and Discursive Construction

4i is not a neutral label for existing intimate practices, but a highly self-conscious act of discursive naming. This naming strategy first embeds itself into an established classificatory system through ordinal numbering (“the fourth”). In the context of the Chinese internet, “First Love,” “Second Love,” and “Third Love” are retrospectively aligned with heterosexual relationships (bg), male homosexuality (bl), and female homosexuality (gl), while “Fourth Love” (gb) emerges as a later category that is explicitly highlighted, named, and discussed [2]. Notably, prior to the circulation of the concept “Fourth Love,” the first three categories were not commonly referred to

using ordinal terms in everyday discourse. It is precisely the emergence of “the fourth” that retroactively activates and stabilizes this classificatory framework.

Thus, “the fourth” is not simply the result of numerical ordering, but a classificatory practice that combines creativity with emphasis. By positioning itself within the sequence rather than outside it, a relational pattern that might otherwise be regarded as deviant or exceptional is repackaged as a “new addition” within the system. This naming strategy carries a strong normative and legitimizing function. Rather than overturning the classificatory system, it expands and supplements it, thereby granting 4i intelligibility, discussability, and moral legitimacy. In this process, intimate relationships are further scientized and technologized: relationships are no longer merely private experiences, but are abstracted into objects that can be named, categorized, and compared.

At the same time, the term 4i deliberately avoids labels centered on sexual practices or explicit power structures, instead foregrounding “love.” Unlike its predecessor term “female-dominant/male-submissive,” this naming choice clearly distinguishes sex, relationship, and love as an affective–ethical category. 4i is thus defined as a mode of romantic relationship rather than a sexual preference or role-play practice. By emphasizing “love,” the concept situates itself within the semantic field of “normal romance,” thereby accomplishing a moral positioning: 4i is not presented as abnormal, pathological, or marginal, but as sharing ethical equivalence with other socially recognized forms of intimacy, and even as a potential exploration of gender equality. This naming strategy not only responds to external skepticism and stigma, but also provides insiders with a linguistic resource for self-understanding and self-justification.

The constructive power of this naming extends beyond the conceptual level and is continuously reinforced and internalized through concrete community practices. As 4i circulates repeatedly on platforms such as *Fourth Love Bar* and Fourth Love apps, it gradually becomes an interpretive framework that guides what kinds of emotional experiences can be understood as “legitimate 4i,” which confusions are worth discussing, and which life choices (such as whether to have children or how to understand gender equality) are considered appropriate topics within this relational model. Within this discursive structure, naming not only helps individuals interpret their own experiences, but also consolidates dispersed private practices into an identifiable community through shared language and emotional narratives. As Whitenight, the founder of *Fourth Love Bar*, states: “Before coming to this bar, we were all lonely and awkward children, longing for warmth but unable to find it... Here, I finally understood what I truly wanted. We define this place as home, and on January 23, 2009, Whitenight—the child who had wandered for many years—came home [8].” This statement is not merely an expression of emotion; through narrative resources such as “child,” “home,” and “returning home,” it performs an affective legitimation and moral elevation of the 4i community. In this sense, 4i is not only a concept, but a discursive apparatus that continuously generates relational meaning and community order.

In public discourse, 4i is often simplified as a “reversal of gender relations,” in which women occupy the active position and men the passive one. Such

interpretations, however, tend to remain at the level of surface impressions, equating inversion with role exchange while overlooking the multi-layered complexity of intimate relationships. Accordingly, the following analysis does not presume that inversion has already occurred. Instead, it examines whether gender roles are inverted in 4i relationships, at which levels such inversion takes place, and whether it is complete or selective. The analysis focuses on dimensions such as emotional labor, interactional patterns, and responsibility allocation, exploring whether these discursive practices reinforce existing gender values or reorganize and displace them.

Having established how the category itself is discursively constructed, the following sections examine how this categorical logic is enacted within intimate interactions. Specifically, the paper analyzes how the abstract classification of “female-dominant/male-submissive” translates into concrete practices of subject positioning, emotional labor allocation, and semantic reappropriation.

4.2 Produced Vulnerability: The Discursive Construction of Men’s “Subordinate Position”

Within 4i discourse, male vulnerability is repeatedly constructed and intensified through specific narrative strategies. Kyrin, a 23-year-old female college student, met her current partner through an online dating group. She refers to him as “wife” and describes him as “a sensitive child,” explicitly tracing his insecurity to experiences such as “his father’s domestic violence during childhood” and “trauma from his family of origin [9].” These descriptions are not neutral factual accounts, but a typical strategy of subject positioning: through the causal chain of trauma → insecurity → sensitivity, the male partner is discursively placed in a position that requires understanding, tolerance, and care. Here, trauma functions not merely as the recollection of past experience, but as a discursive legitimizing mechanism—it provides moral justification for male passivity, translating it from a potential deficiency in competence or responsibility into a natural outcome that “deserves care.”

Beyond trauma-based vulnerability, male subject positioning also operates through age-stratified relational scripts and the professionalization of emotional care. Mubai, a male college student, recounts expressing direct emotional needs in his relationship with his ex-partner, saying things like “There’s been so much going on lately, I’m really tired, Jiejie,” a form of emotional appeal rarely seen in traditional heterosexual discourse [10]. “Jiejie,” referring to a slightly older woman, conveys intimacy and vulnerability while presupposing a caregiving role on the part of the partner—a pattern common in Fourth Love relationships. In contrast, Mubai evaluates his partner by stating that “her way of dealing with my clinginess and my pain was completely unqualified [10].” Here, male emotional expression is presupposed as a legitimate relational need, while emotional care is framed as a skill that must meet certain standards. When the narrative culminates in the outcome—“in the end... it made me depressed”—the failure of emotional response is directly casualized as psychological harm. As a result, male vulnerability is not only presented as a factual condition, but

stabilized as a legitimate position that requires continuous response within the relationship, laying the groundwork for a reallocation of power and responsibility.

4.3 Emotionalized Authority: Women's "Dominant Position" and Managerial Role

However, this reallocation does not create an egalitarian void where traditional masculinity simply dissolves. Instead, the very production of male vulnerability necessitates a corresponding subject position capable of containing, interpreting, and responding to such vulnerability. The following analysis examines how women are interpellated into this complementary role—not as passive recipients of male submission, but as active managers of the emotional order that 4i discourse constructs.

4.3.1 Symbolic Inversion and Affective Play. In contrast to men's persistent positioning as those in need of care, women in 4i discourse are constructed as emotional managers and maintainers of relational order. Starflag (female) met her former partner several years ago through a friend and describes their daily interactions as follows: "I really love calling him 'wife,' and I also have a bit of a twisted sense of fun—I like teasing him until he cries, and then slowly comforting him [10]." Here, the term "wife" is assigned to the male partner, completing a clear symbolic inversion and re-naming of gender and relational roles. This inversion is not merely a playful linguistic rebellion, but a redefinition of who is loved, cared for, and emotionally responded to within the relationship. "Teasing him until he cries" is not described as an accidental act, but as a form of "twisted fun"—a consciously enjoyed and repeatedly practiced interactional mode. Language thus transforms the induction of vulnerability into a pleasurable element of intimacy, rendering emotional breakdown not a risk to be avoided, but a component of relational closeness. This narrative implicitly secures emotional initiative in the speaker's position. Finally, "comforting him afterward" performs a moral repair of the preceding emotional manipulation. Inducing vulnerability and providing comfort are combined into a self-legitimizing emotional cycle: first generating dependency, then offering care. "Care" here is not a correction of imbalance, but part of its constitution. Through the softening expression "slowly comforting," prior emotional control is rebranded as tenderness and love, foreclosing discursive space for questioning power asymmetry. Yet when such playful induction of vulnerability becomes a repeated pattern rather than an isolated incident, it begins to constitute a structural demand rather than merely a playful reversal.

4.3.2 Emotional Labor and the Management of Masculine Dependency. As the relationship further develops into what Starflag describes as "every night is spent comforting him," "after two hours of handing in my phone during class, there'd be at least 200 messages... all kinds of calls," and "he calls no matter whether I'm in class or not," discourse does not directly present women as controllers [10]. Instead, by framing these interactions as responses to men's continuous demands for emotional

reassurance, women are positioned as caregivers and regulators. Although female subjects do not initiate these interactions, they are discursively placed in the role of absorbing, regulating, and processing emotional volatility. Their authority is not exercised through commands or surveillance, but emerges from a structure of perpetual state of “being needed,” granting them a form of emotionalized authority.

4.4 The Semantic Completion of Inversion: Intimacy and the Depoliticization of Power Asymmetry

The affective authority examined above does not merely constitute an isolated reversal of individual roles; rather, it participates in a broader semantic restructuring that reconfigures the very vocabulary through which 4i relationships are comprehended and legitimized. Traditional gendered emotional positioning is significantly rearranged within Fourth Love discourse, making “inversion” one of its most visible and recognizable features. Kyrin characterizes her relationship as a “Northeastern henpecked-husband-type 4i,” noting that “if a man says he’s afraid of his wife, people think you’re just showing off your affection [9].” In traditional heterosexual contexts, the term “henpecked husband” implicitly reflects power asymmetry under patriarchy; “fear” here does not indicate real violence, but a depoliticized and intimate expression of power. 4i discourse does not alter this semantic structure, but directly inherits and extends it by embedding the same expression within a “female-dominant/male-submissive” framework, completing an imagined inversion of gender positioning. Power relations are once again repackaged as evidence of emotional investment through humor and intimacy.

This inversion extends beyond labels and evaluations to shape the script of “initiative versus passivity” within intimate relationships. Cocoon2Butterfly (male) describes his relational experience as follows: “I clearly wanted to confess, and it seemed like I liked her first, but I always felt that it had to look like she liked me first. Instinctively, I needed her to pursue me. I kept telling myself that I’m a guy and I should be more proactive, that girls might feel shy, but no matter how many hints I gave, nothing worked. In the end, I really held it in until she confessed to me [10].” Within this discourse, two conflicting logics operate simultaneously: on the one hand, the narrator has internalized the traditional heterosexual norm that men should initiate; on the other hand, his emotional need for relational security requires this norm to be suspended or reversed in practice. Statements such as “it had to look like she liked me first” and “it had to be her pursuing me” are not framed as idiosyncratic preferences, but as “instinctive demands,” naturalized through expressions such as “holding it in until she confessed.” Thus, initiative and passivity are inverted through emotional tension and silent expectation.

5 Conclusion

This study follows the academic tradition where Foucauldian discourse analysis is adopted to investigate the power relations in, especially, the minoritized or the

marginalized subject groups. Specifically, this study demonstrates that emotional gender positioning in traditional heterosexual intimacy is indeed significantly rearranged within 4i discourse. Men are consistently positioned as vulnerable and in need of care, while women are constructed as managers and emotional regulators. This inversion is repeatedly produced through naming strategies, reconfiguration of terms of address, and affective narratives. Discourse here does not merely describe relationships, but actively defines which interactional patterns, emotional needs, and responsibility allocations can be recognized as “legitimate 4i.”

However, this inversion is incomplete. Women labeled as the “dominant” party often bear greater emotional labor and responsibility for maintaining the relationship, rather than acquiring substantive power. Their disadvantaged position is not fundamentally dismantled, but repackaged in more intimate, gentle, and less contestable forms. Discursive reversal does not bring about parallel changes in structural conditions. On the one hand, some 4i women voluntarily assume greater financial responsibility, justified by the idea that “the dominant party should contribute more”; on the other hand, others point out that “men still earn more in society overall,” leading to the continued practice of splitting expenses equally. This contradiction is not individual indecision, but a direct outcome of tension between inverted discourse and social structure: role reversal within intimacy cannot offset gendered inequalities in broader resource distribution. Moreover, the frequent appearance of labels such as “men who exploit relationships for sex,” and “kept men” within 4i communities further illustrates how some men may evade traditional expectations of economic responsibility under the cover of “female-dominant/male-submissive” discourse, without assuming the risks and constraints typically associated with subordinate positions. Thus, inversion is strongly emphasized at the level of emotion and identity, but selectively applied at material and social levels.

In this sense, 4i exhibits a condition of “incomplete inversion.” While it challenges gender stereotypes discursively, it does not fundamentally disrupt the gendered logic of power. Nonetheless, 4i practices retain a certain positive significance for the pursuit of gender equality. By contrasting with the traditional “male-dominant/female-submissive” heterosexual model, they loosen rigid gender expectations, expand discursive space for male emotional expression and female initiative, and demonstrate possible alternative pathways for romantic relationships. This study is primarily based on online texts and self-narratives, which allows for close examination of discursive self-construction, but is inevitably limited by what textual data can capture. Since the analysis relies on narrators’ own accounts, the study necessarily takes these narratives as they are presented in discourse, and the authenticity of particular experiences cannot be independently verified. However, given that individuals involved in less visible or non-mainstream intimate relationship forms are often difficult to access through conventional research methods, publicly available online narratives provide a practical and valuable entry point for data collection. Future research could incorporate in-depth interviews or longitudinal relationship studies to explore how discursive structures are enacted, modified, or resisted in actual interaction and decision-making. Further investigation is also

warranted into whether 4i discourse varies across class, age, and sexual orientation, and what broader implications such variations may hold.

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