

## Chapter 3

# INTIMATE ACTIVISM AND CHINESE POSTFEMINIST SENSIBILITY: FEMALE VIEWERS' RESPONSES TO REALITY DATING SHOWS

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### *Introduction*

In 2016, a new format of dating show called *Chinese Dating with the Parents* (CDWP) premiered, featuring distinctive traditional elements such as family members being present on set and providing parental advice to candidates while evaluating potential matches. Female candidates on CDWP are presented as postfeminist subjects who are already emancipated, characterized by their new independent female identity, glamorous appearance and empowered status. By postfeminism, I am referring to a contradictory set of discourses that depoliticize, disavow and individualize feminist politics (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). It predominantly manifests in media and popular culture spheres, transcending national boundaries.

Drawing upon qualitative interviews with twenty-three female viewers aged between twenty-three and thirty-six years in Xi'an, China, this chapter explains how the performance and representation of female subjectivity are constructed and circumscribed by gender, dating activities and the mechanism inherent in reality TV programmes, and how female viewers deconstruct the gendered texts. Female viewers have expressed common concern, distress and anger on issues of gender equality, female identity and intimate relationships. They were connected in the way that their discontent and struggles resonated powerfully with others. This chapter aims to unveil the intricacies of female subjectivity in post-2010 China and seeks to explore an emerging and distinctive Chinese postfeminist sensibility within the global interrogation of how postfeminism is lived, experienced and represented.

How do young women comprehend female subjectivity within the context of reality dating shows? How are reality dating shows reshaping understandings of gender relations and intimate relationships in China, and how are they contributing to new understandings of female identity? To address these questions, firstly, I propose the notion of intimate activism to articulate a particular form of

feminist activism that is evident in this project, which focuses on the responses of female viewers to dating shows. Subsequently, I introduce the reality dating show *Chinese Dating with the Parents* and the female viewers with whom I did audience reception studies. My argument posits that postfeminism exhibits a distinctive alignment with the Four-Selves Spirits Campaign (*sizi jingshen yundong* 四自精神运动) initiated by the All-China Women's Federation, creating a fertile ground for the germination and proliferation of postfeminist ideas within the Chinese context. The analysis is organized into three sections, each delving deeper into different aspects. The first section explores the emergence of the new independent female subject, while the second section focuses on the evolving perceptions of dating and marriage among young women. The final section examines the female dilemmas portrayed in reality dating shows. In the conclusion, these interconnected themes are brought together, highlighting the defining features of the Chinese postfeminist sensibility. Additionally, this chapter emphasizes how intimate activism serves as both a typical ramification of postfeminism and a means to express feminist activism shaped by and responsive to media in post-2010 China.

### *Intimate activism in post-2010s China*

Reflecting on feminist activism in post-2010s China, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the pervasive surveillance, vigilant censorship and potential criminalization that such activism consistently faces. Despite these formidable challenges, feminist activism in China is thriving, often operating beneath the radar of broader visibility. To capture the enduring struggles and triumphs of this movement, I develop the concept of *intimate activism*. This term encapsulates the idea that feminist activism in China is somehow characterized by its intimate, personal and private nature, while retaining significant and far-reaching impact. Despite the challenges confronted by feminist activists, their efforts to promote gender equality are flourishing and persistently inspire transformative changes within Chinese society.

This project focuses on the feminist sensibility emerging from the audience reception of Chinese reality dating shows during 2020 and 2021. However, it is important to highlight that few audiences had direct experience engaging in public feminist activism. While conducting interviews and analysing transcripts, I was struck not only by the fact that these women did not identify themselves as feminist activists, yet they all expressed concern about similar issues and shared similar anger and distress in daily lives, but also by a pattern of recurring responses and even identical phrases that appeared across different interviews.

Imogen Tyler and Ros Gill (2013) use the term 'intimate activism' to characterize a social media campaign addressing issues related to gendered, racialized and immigrant inequalities. This movement emerged in response to the expulsion of a postcolonial girl from *The X Factor*, a reality TV talent show. Their work highlights the intimate bond between the girl, a celebrity featured on the reality TV show, and her audiences and fans. This connection is both mediated and reinforced by

the show itself, serving as a key aspect of the intimate activism that emerged in response to her ejection. It facilitated the sharing and amplification of personal stories and experiences across social media. Additionally, Cymene Howe uses 'intimate activism' to elaborate on sexual rights activism in Nicaragua, illustrating how activists attempted to 'transform culture through political means, from the inside, out' (Howe 2013, 4). Howe's research stresses the intimacy cultivated between activists and participants, often nurtured through intimate conversations within sexual rights discussion groups. These notions of intimate activism are in tune with each other, resonating with the overarching concept of intimacy and its symbolic power to connect people, evoke emotions and shape reality (Bourdieu 1991).

Intimate activism is notably relevant in characterizing feminist activism within social contexts that lack visible feminist movements or explicit discussions of gender equality in mass media outlets. In such situations, struggles and dissent persist in the private domain. Intimate activism holds the potential to foster a profound comprehension of the mechanism of activism, particularly as an approach for transforming people and culture from within. This form of activism revolves around issues of intimacy, such as sexual rights or domestic violence. It can also involve a more personal and introspective approach that may not involve public display of activism.

The notion of intimate activism holds value and innovation in three ways. Firstly, reality TV has substantially eroded the discursive distinctions between the public and private domains, leading to heightened discussions and narratives around intimacy. Audiences are now more actively engaged in participatory culture that spans various media platforms. However, activist conduct is often curtailed and restricted. According to Henry Jenkins, participatory culture has transformed the experience of media consumption into the production of 'a new culture and a new community' (2012, 46). This transformation holds the potential to convert the act of consuming media, collective emotions and struggles into the emergence of a novel form of activism. Intimate activism broadens the scope of activism beyond the public sphere, highlighting its relevance to intimate and private matters. Furthermore, it provides a distinctive perspective for examining reality TV, allowing exploration into whether such shows have the capacity to instigate activism beyond their content.

Secondly, intimate activism redefines activism by updating its collective characteristics. It introduces a new perspective for conceptualizing collectiveness embedded in social activism. Activism, traditionally understood as the collaborative endeavours of grassroots individuals striving for change, undergoes a transformation through the lens of intimate activism. Whether manifested in physical or online gatherings, the number of people involved indicates a tangible group. Intimate activism presents a unique and somewhat abstract version of collective effort, wherein individuals are dispersed like stars in the sky, with some feeling akin to isolated planets. Unlike the traditional activism, where people unite under a specific cause or banner, these individuals are intrinsically connected by shared concerns and struggles against collective oppressions, even if they remain unaware of each other's existence.

Thirdly, intimate activism underscores the idea that the personal is political and represents an everyday sensibility accessible to everyone (Orgad and Gill 2022). It prompts us to recognize that individual suffering is an ineluctable outcome of wider structural inequalities and social injustices. Intimate activism offers a broader landscape for articulating gendered oppression and the shared suffering experienced by marginalized groups. What cannot be neglected is the powerful resonance between intimate activism and the everyday sensibility generated from social movements such as LGBTQIA activism, anti-racism, anti-war movements, and of course, feminism. In this chapter, I examine the feminist sensibility inherent in female viewers' reception of and response to reality dating shows as a form of intimate activism.

### *A new format of reality dating show*

Dating shows have become a staple of reality television programming in China, garnering huge audiences and attracting enthusiasm and condemnation in equal measure. Prior to 2010, dating shows reflected marketization and de-regulation, and a shift in the perception of marriage as a matter of patrilineal property to an intimate personal relationship (Luo and Sun 2015; P. Wang 2017; Wu 2012). Post-2010 dating shows are different, being shaped by large enterprises, dating websites' financial interests, conspicuous consumerism, celebrity culture and the highly competitive television production marketplace. The format of *Chinese Dating with the Parents* has ushered in a new era for Chinese dating TV (see Figure 3.1). Three dating show programmes that have adopted this new format are *Chinese Dating* (*zhongguo shi xiangqin* 中国式相亲), *New Blind Date Times* (*xin xiangqin shidai* 新相亲时代) and *New Blind Date Conference* (*xin xiangqin dahui* 新相亲大会).<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, these dating shows are collectively referred to as *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. The show format is defined by its traditional features, which include the presence of family members on set and parental advice offered to candidates on how to select or evaluate potential matches. The transformation in dating show formats reflects an interest in reinventing Chinese matchmaking traditions, which have traditionally been a family affair decided jointly by couples and their parents (Song 2020; P. Wang 2017). The new format allows for greater participation from both parties in the decision-making process. Moreover, female candidates featured on the show are primarily from metropolitan areas and are often the only daughter in their family. Many of them mention their experiences of receiving higher education in Euro-American countries and gaining financial independence. They are presented as empowered individuals, unencumbered by the misogynistic culture.

CDWP aims to provide a platform for primarily urban, educated, heterosexual young individuals to find partners, incorporating the unique element of involving their parents or close relatives as witnesses. The dating process has been reframed and marketed in a reality show format, making it both entertaining and culturally relevant. Since the millennium, 'no genre, form, or type of programming has been as actively marketed by producers, or more enthusiastically embraced by viewers



**Figure 3.1** *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, produced by Jiangsu Satellite TV.

Source: China Jiangsu TV Official Channel, YouTube (2019).

than reality-based TV' (Friedman 2002, 6). Reality dating shows feature ordinary people who stage themselves with a self-conscious display in dating situations and interactions, all within the context of highly mediated dating show scripts. Reality dating shows package a specific version of heteronormative romantic love as a highly effective and affective tool to garner interest. Audiences act as both judges and voyeurs, observing the edited dating processes unfold. While claiming to represent reality is a common practice in reality TV, its defining attraction for audiences—'let people see for themselves', in turn has facilitated a predominantly critical viewing position for viewers (Hill 2005, 53; Winston 1995). The proliferation of reality dating shows demonstrates the changing dynamics in the way that intimacy is practised in a shifting social and cultural landscape.

CDWP is tailored for individuals genuinely dedicated to discovering a committed, long-term relationship partner. The show's 'traditional' approach to dating is underscored by its emphasis on sincerity and seriousness, a theme further strengthened by the inclusion of participants' parents on the set. In the context of CDWP, a serious relationship is defined as a monogamous, heterosexual commitment with the goal of marriage. The distinction between dating and marriage becomes somewhat blurred on the show, particularly when viewed from the perspective of participants' parents. In some cases, families have brought their household registration booklets, a crucial document for marriage registration, to demonstrate their commitment to their children's blind date. The popularity of CDWP mirrors a resurgence in parental involvement in the dating and marriage decisions of young individuals in contemporary China. This trend is evident in post-2010 reality dating shows that highlight the presence of parental figures, underscoring the significance of traditional dating practices and family values.

*Methods and research participants*

Twenty-three women, selected through the snowball technique, were invited to watch CDWP and participate in qualitative interviews. The aim was to explore their opinions on female subjectivity portrayed on the show and gain insights into their understanding of gender and intimate relationships. Participants were university educated, aged between twenty-three and thirty-six years, and either grew up and worked in Xi'an, or were in the process of pursuing a postgraduate degree in Xi'an. The choice of Xi'an as the fieldwork site was guided by three key factors: its suitability for achieving research objectives, the feasibility of conducting the research in that context and the personal interest and motivation of the researcher to fully engage with the chosen site (Goodman 2024). Conducting fieldwork in my place of residence proved more feasible than travelling across provinces, particularly given the implementation of the zero-tolerance policy for Covid-19 cases between 2020 and 2021. During a time when fieldwork abroad was marked by inherent uncertainty, tension and contradictions, staying within my local area helped minimize potential disruptions (Jia 2023). Furthermore, previous feminist media studies in China, employing postfeminist lenses, has predominantly concentrated on metropolitan areas and affluent southeast coastal regions, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou (Chang and Ren 2016; Chen 2012; Thornham and Feng 2010). To date, research in feminist media studies in the northwest inland areas of China has been limited, which this project aims to address.

The women interviewed placed great emphasis on their 'new' identities, frequently drawing comparisons with the previous generation. Born and raised under the one-child policy, more than half of the participants were only daughters, and the legacy of the one-child policy held particular significance for these urban women.<sup>2</sup> On one hand, being an only daughter meant they benefited from improved opportunities for higher education, financial investment and inheritance from their birth family. Families with only daughters invested in their education and provided financial support for acquiring property and cars. On the other hand, these women were subject to higher expectations to make achievements and more importantly, to bring honour to the entire family. Both the female participants and contestants on the dating show exhibited a postfeminist sensibility, marked by self-emphasized identities, self-empowerment and the performance of physical femininity, with a notable emphasis on appearance. The figure of the urban only daughter provides a lens through which we can observe the emergence of the postfeminist subject in a Chinese context.

*The Four-Selves Spirits Campaign and a Chinese postfeminist sensibility*

Inspired by scholarship on the state feminist legacy in China's collective past and postfeminism in the English-speaking world, I propose that the Four-Selves Spirits Campaign (*sizi jingshen yundong* 四自精神运动) launched by the All-China

Women's Federation provides a conducive environment for postfeminist ideas to germinate, manifest and operate in a Chinese context (Gill 2007; Hershatter 2011; Z. Wang 2017). The Four-Selves Spirits Campaign encourages Chinese women to cultivate their self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance and self-improvement, which resonate with the themes of self-empowerment and individual agency that are central to postfeminism in the Western literature. Against the backdrop of the reform and opening-up policies in China, women are called upon to strive for self-emancipation, responding to the call made at the 6th National Congress of Chinese Women in 1988. They are expected to enhance their ideological and ethical standards (*suzhi* 素质), as well as their scientific and cultural qualities. The Four-Selves Spirits has been introduced to foster a new female consciousness, encouraging women to cultivate a sense of self. The Four-Selves Spirits Campaign operates as a cultural ethos that shapes female subjectivity and its effects are extensive, powerful and influential.

In this chapter, I explore the Chinese postfeminist sensibility, shaped by the Four-Selves Spirits Campaign and its profound imprint on female identity. The Chinese postfeminist sensibility is illuminated by women who prioritize the values of personal strength and resilience in their quest for self-actualization, placing great importance on personal gratification and aspirations (Jia 2022). In the next section, I analyse young women's perceptions of female subjectivity, intimate relationships and gender relations as portrayed on the dating show *Chinese Dating with the Parents*.

*'I'm a new independent woman': The new female  
subject in post-socialist China*

The interview section about the new female subject on CDWP began with the question, 'Compared to the previous generation, what commonalities do today's young women share? What characteristics did they exhibit on the dating show?' The most common and resonant response centred around young women's self-awareness. According to the respondents, young women are becoming more aware of their potential and asserting their independence as a 'big human' (*daxie de ren* 大写的人), irrespective of gender, sexuality or age. The independent young women hold an anti-traditional attitude towards gender norms, which is reflective of a contemporary 'me-first' era in China. Their willingness to prioritize their own interests and self-awareness sets them apart from the previous generation and represents an awakening of the new female subject.

Young women are increasingly questioning the norms of female identity and asking 'Why?' They raise questions such as, 'Why is marriage a must?' 'Why should I make sacrifices for the family?' 'Why can't my kid have my surname?' and so on. They are eager to practise and promote an active path towards female empowerment and gender equality as evidenced by the answers to the series of questions. These women may not take to the streets with feminist banners, parading and shouting for equal rights. Nevertheless, they are asking radical questions about feminism

and pushing the status quo forward. This is how intimate activism operates—it emerges from an individual's questioning and resistance and has the potential to transform people as well as wider society. The new female identity is reflected in the quotes below:

Young women now have independent opinions and are less constrained by traditional ideas such as breadwinning men and homemaking women. We advocate freedom and the right to choose. We are neither being chosen nor controlled or suppressed by any ideas. As a woman, I'm neither superior nor inferior to men.

(Xue, 24, a state-owned enterprise employee)

Female candidates emphasize their educational background and income—a quite anti-traditional act. Women highlight the independent character, their social viability, and achievements, instead of repeating the subordinate value of being a woman, a wife, a mother or a future mother.

(Yu, 26, a PhD student)

The two interviewees cited above picked out diligently the 'traditional' aspects attached to the female role, consisting of the constraint of staying in the private and family sphere, and the subordinate status of a wife and mother, which plays constantly a key role in shaping perceptions of female subjectivity. Women's mobility and the corresponding norm of their seclusion have been vividly illustrated in a widely used phrase 'No one is home' (*jiali mei ren* 家里没人) from the collective era. When a guest came to knock on a door, the woman inside called out, 'No one is home.' The phrase literally refers to 'There is no person in the house'. Perhaps the woman was simultaneously doing housework or needlework, supporting the family with her own contributions. 'No one' indicates 'the absence of able-bodied male labourers from a household' (Hershatter 2011, 63). 'No one is home' does not signify a woman's neglect of her existence or personhood. It refers to a woman's seclusion in inner chambers and the prohibition of entering the public sphere (Hershatter 2011).

Historical policies from the collective past up to the opening-up era, focused on economic modernization and population planning, have transformed and reshaped gender values. Legalized in 1979 and formally phased out in 2015, effects of the one-child policy are understood to be the popularity of the nuclear 4+2+1 family model in urban areas and liberation for educated urban women and girls (Greenhalgh 2001). 'No one is home' illustrates a social context which has been perceived as a hindrance to women's emancipation and self-fulfilment by female respondents. In response to the gendered obstacles carried over from the past, young women have emphasized their own abilities to fight back. They are assisted by higher education, employment and the support of their families. However, they also acknowledge the hegemony of gendered norms against women and the continuing disciplinary power these norms have.

In post-socialist China, higher education is an indicator of socio-economic status. As one of the three essential mechanisms of social stratification alongside

the economic and occupational status, higher education is a necessary but not necessarily sufficient condition to attain a certain social status (Li 2020). People with a higher educational background stand more chance of securing well-paid jobs and being members of the middle class in post-socialist China. Giddens (1975) also suggests that holding educational and technological certificates is an essential attribute of the middle class in other societies. Higher education plays an irreplaceable role in empowering women as it promotes women's employment and contributes to the erosion of patrilineal and traditional gender values (Hu and Scott 2016).

In a promotional stunt, CDWP also showcases the higher education credentials of dating candidates. A group of highly educated women have been recruited as dating candidates on the show and they highlight their educational backgrounds during the opening self-introduction session in a set format. The dating show uses rubrics to describe them with appealing expressions such as 'learning tyrant girl' (*xueba nv* 学霸女), 'super-high-quality girl' (*youzhi nv* 优质女) and 'brilliant girl' (*youxiu nv* 优秀女). All these expressions contain an affirmative and uplifting tone, indicating that higher education attainment is a symbol of high ethical, scientific and cultural quality (*suzhi* 素质). These values align with the ideals of the Four-Selves Spirits Campaign.

When asked about the social status of women, several respondents mentioned the discrimination faced by daughters, referring to looking up to boys and down on girls (*zhongnan qingnv* 重男轻女). Chinese young women displayed a distinct awareness of the persistent and entrenched sexism within the patriarchal family, contrary to embracing the idea of rejecting or neglecting gender inequality, as posited by Western postfeminist theories (McRobbie 2004). Specifically, young women's awareness of discrimination against girls is often mixed with fleeting moments of relief. Xiyang gave off a sense of self-affirmation when introducing herself as a Xi'an local, compared to her schoolmates who were from the suburbs and rural areas. Urban citizenship denotes a more progressive status that offers Xiyang greater opportunities to escape potential gender-based oppression and unequal treatment resulting from the absence of male siblings in her family. This is in contrast to the experiences of rural women. She said:

Under the one-child policy, a couple is only allowed to have one kid. They have to treat and cultivate the only daughter nicely. Even if the father holds the idea of looking up to boys and down on girls, he has to educate the girl as educating a boy. Girls of the one-child generation are more mature and independent (than male peers).

(Xiyang, 25, a state-owned enterprise employee)

Xiyang's relief highlights the fact that the persistent sexism and misogyny deeply rooted in society may be partially invisible, but this invisibility does not equate to non-existence. Urban families with daughters fight against discrimination by adopting the approach of educating girls as if they were boys. Young women, having benefited from the one-child policy, are emphasizing a new, independent female identity by interrogating and challenging gender norms and

discrimination. However, resistance in the form of familial units appears mainly in urban areas, underscoring the notable imbalance of the one-child policy's effects between urban and rural areas.

*It's no longer an achievement—It's just a choice!':  
Young women's changing perceptions of dating*

When talking about the female candidates' motives for attending the show, Yuan said,

In a group gathering with my classmates, a guy made fun of others by asking, "Who is still single in our class?" I was disgusted with the way that they see having a partner as an achievement. Such thinking belongs to the past. It's just a personal choice for now.

(Yuan, 23, a postgraduate student)

Yuan's attitude reflects the changing perceptions of dating and marriage in contemporary China. The formation of marriage has diverted away from the traditional narrative in a biological sense, as evidenced by the societal expectation that people should get married at an 'appropriate' or 'certain' age. Among the young urban generation, marriage has increasingly become an individual choice based on personal understanding and reflections on the various demands of different life stages. More significantly, dating and marriage are now considered outcomes of carefully weighing and measuring various conflicting dimensions, including personal willingness, economic ability and the attitudes of both the individuals and their families. These decisions have become the result of trade-off considerations, rather than being viewed as something bound to happen at a certain age. The formation of marriage is founded on an individual's own decision along with parental permission. In response to the reduction of social welfare in the post-socialist era, the financial burden of marriage has shifted to individuals and families, with a greater responsibility falling on the male side.

The phrase 'just a personal choice' has often emerged in discussions about women's desire for dating and marriage. Female respondents used this phrase to emphasize that their decision to remain single was also a personal choice. Postfeminist narratives have been focused on the notion of free choice and self-determination, citing how women are encouraged to put on the postfeminist masquerade and be convinced to believe this is for her own good and pleasure (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2007). In this audience reception study of dating shows, female viewers believed that it is for their own good and pleasure to stay single. This perspective provides another layer to make sense of how a woman's choice is regarded as a personal choice. Here, the discourse of personal choice can be seen as a means of resistance against the prevailing societal norms or expectations that dictate what constitutes 'natural' human behaviour. Thus, women find themselves

navigating a narrow path and making careful decisions about their life trajectories. Yet, to exercise personal choice, women must meet certain preconditions. This raises the question: Who has the agency to make choices based on personal will, and who has little or no choice but to defer to societal norm?

Female participants in this research project were relatively privileged having received a higher educational background and holding steady jobs. In response to the question about young women's characteristics, compared to the previous generation, Yue advised:

My mother had already started her family at my age. Back then, marriage often resulted from meeting suitable partners introduced by matchmakers or reaching *a certain age*. Contrastingly, contemporary young women, particularly those highly educated with stable jobs and independent opinions, are less inclined to rush into marriage. In today's context, marriage is less favourable for women. Many single women enjoy high living standards, and entering marriage might compromise their quality of life. We should retain a measured and careful attitude towards marriage, choosing to marry for love rather than solely for reaching a certain age.

(Yue, 28, a university administrator)

The phrases 'a certain age' and 'a proper age' were commonly employed by female participants in conversations about women's decisions regarding dating, marriage and childbirth. The myth of a certain age perpetuates the belief in traditional milestones that prescribe a linear progression of one's life trajectory. These milestones, encompassing birth, marriage, reproduction and death, are often viewed as 'paradigmatic markers of life experience' (Halberstam 2005, 2). The myth of a certain age is in tune with Freeman's term chrononormativity, guided by the notion that the use of time must be productive in order to let an individual's life make sense. Elizabeth Freeman defines chrononormativity as 'the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity' (2010, 3). Consequently, chrononormativity constructs the meaning of time and influences how people manage their time. An individual's life trajectory is endowed with meaning when aligned with a state-sponsored timeline and the prevailing teleological framework in society (Borneman 1992). Furthermore, Julia Kristeva (1981) proposes that female subjectivity is intertwined with a certain conception of time, which she describes as 'women's time'. In this project, young women actively challenge the myth of a certain age as a way of resisting traditional milestones associated with 'women's time' and combating misogynistic attitudes towards ageing. Nevertheless, as Yue argues, young women who are able to challenge the age myth often possess certain privileges, such as a higher educational background, well-paid jobs and property ownership.

The evolving attitudes of young women towards dating and marriage have led to a re-evaluation of the term 'leftover women'. In her 2016 book, *Leftover Women*, Fincher defines this term as unmarried women who are in their late twenties

or older. The book goes on to focus on what is known as the ‘three highs’ for women—high educational background, high professional achievement and high income. The landscape has undergone rapid changes since the rise of feminist online activism in 2016, coinciding with the publication of the book. Chinese feminist activism has effectively challenged the stigma attached to single educated women. While the stigmatization of single women as ‘leftover’ has been eliminated from official media, it still persists in other realms of society. For example, parents may hold expectations for their daughters to marry and have children at a certain age. Companies may display bias towards male executives in recruitment. These factors collectively make women acutely conscious of their situation in their late twenties, irrespective of explicit reminders about their status.

In response to the question, ‘Do you recognize any shifts in the expectations of young women regarding dating and marriage?’ Yue told me, ‘It’s hard to tell how many young girls anticipate marriage, given the decreasing marriage rate in China in recent years.’ Baes on the Chinese Marriage and Families Report 2022 (see Figure 3.2), the marriage rate reached its peak in 2013 and has since steadily declined from 2013 to 2020. In 2020, the marriage rate hit the lowest point in two decades.

Female respondents demonstrated a deliberate and reluctant attitude towards dating and marriage. The reasons behind young women not expecting a partner can be ascribed to two attitudes. On one side, the patriarchal structure for dating and marriage no longer aligns with the needs of young, highly educated

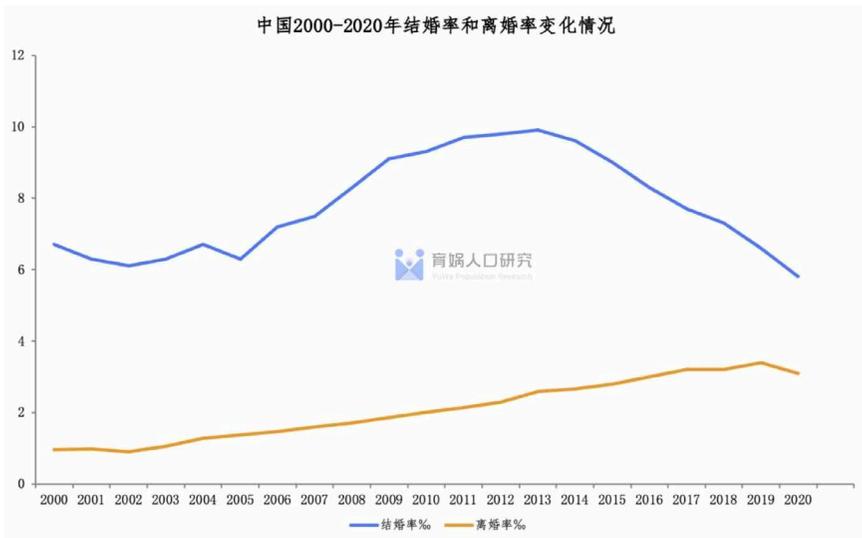


Figure 3.2 The marriage and divorce rate in China 2000–20, where the upper line represents the marriage rate, and the lower line represents the divorce rate.

Source: Liang, et al. (2022).

and financially independent women. On the flip side, young women hold a clear expectation of a  $1+1 > 2$  model in dating and marriage (so do men). This perspective views a successful relationship as a mutually beneficial business deal where both parties gain maximum benefits. Consequently, young women tend to avoid dating someone whom they perceive as not their equal, as it may negatively impact their quality of life.

In response to the question, ‘What attributes of a male partner do you value?’, Xue responded, ‘For me, the most important thing from a man is, “Do you agree with the idea that men and women are equal?” and “Do you support gender equality?”’ Xue’s response highlights the importance young women place on being respected. However, even when a man claims to support gender equality, there may still exist a discrepancy between his perception and that of women. For instance, Xue shared an opinion of gender equality entwined with the phrase ‘harmony of *yin* and *yang*’, a concept prevalent in her parent’s generation. She mentioned how her father described gender equality,

Chinese tradition places significant importance on the balance of *yin* and *yang*. If *yin* and *yang* are in equilibrium, harmony prevails. In our family, I embody the *yang*, and you represent the *yin*. This doesn’t demote a competition between men and women, but rather highlights the harmony of men and women, akin to the harmony of *yin* and *yang*.

(Xue, 24, an employee in a state-owned enterprise)

Xue added, ‘However, the concept of the harmony of *yin* and *yang* is rooted in the belief that men are superior to women.’ In this context, the harmony of *yin* and *yang* can serve as a mechanism for men to assert their gendered privilege and control women. Despite the inherent contradiction between this patriarchal gender dynamic and the aspirations of new independent women to be respected, the expectation of young women for a  $1+1>2$  relationship is noteworthy.

The  $1+1>2$  model reflects the expectations and aspirations of both dating show candidates and female viewers for what they consider an ‘ideal’ heterosexual relationship. It underscores the idea that young people strive to become better selves, lead improved lives and optimize mutually beneficial outcomes through dating or marriage. If reality falls short of their expectations, they are inclined to remain single. The  $1+1>2$  model strongly resembles the neoliberal self—autonomous and calculative—which approaches life with a market and entrepreneurial mindset (Gill and Scharff 2011). The mindset of young women regarding intimate relationships, as demonstrated by their expectation for the  $1+1>2$  dating model, has been strongly influenced by the neoliberal ideas of self-optimization and self-management. Furthermore, the two reasons behind young women’s hesitancy to date are interrelated, requiring them to carefully assess their priorities and make decisions accordingly. Young women prioritize either maintaining their quality of life by staying single or enhancing it through dating someone with greater financial resources.

*'I don't feel secure in relationships': Female dilemmas in reality dating shows*

Female candidates on the show adhered to the contemporary Chinese ideals of female beauty (Ma 2022). This involved maintaining a slim body, wearing glittery dresses and applying makeup to accentuate the eyes while promoting a pale skin tone. On CDWP, young women are constantly under the scrutiny of the patriarchal family gaze, which shapes their gender performance. They are expected to conform to traditional femininity, adhering to conventional norms of being a good wife and daughter-in-law, with the aim of securing acceptance from the male candidate and his family. Yu has drawn attention to the unseen yet pervasive expectations and demands set by parents regarding the criteria for an eligible female partner in a heterosexual relationship.

I still strongly sense that these female candidates are in line with people's expectations. For example, that cool girl with dreadlocks has swiftly passes over, as she did not conform to the expectations of this particular dating show with parents on set. Today's expectations for women are more demanding. Besides expecting beauty, demureness and gentleness, there is also an expectation for them to pursue higher education and well-paying jobs.

(Yu, 26, a PhD student)

Female candidates not only undergo the scrutiny of parents but also contend with competition from other candidates. The show's competition rules exert pressure on contestants to secure a match on the show. Otherwise, they are compelled to leave the stage alone, which is considered a personal failure and disgraces the family. The host and the directorial team use specific techniques to enhance the dramatic effect when a single candidate exits the stage without a match on the dating show. The host offers words of encouragement and best wishes to soften the blow, while the directorial team plays sentimental music and dims the lights to amplify the emotional impact. These techniques effectively convey a clear message to the audience that the individual has lost in the dating competition.

Reality dating shows can be seen as game shows where dating candidates navigate within a set of rules and constraints, improvising their interactions. The amalgamation of patriarchal dating norms and the neoliberal ethos of self-adjustment and self-transformation in the show influences the expectations and behaviours of the candidates, guiding them to interpret their experiences in specific ways. This can create a particular horizon of conceivable thought and behaviour that reinforce certain modes of constraints. On CDWP, there is typically a noticeable shift in women's attitudes towards self-representation between the self-introduction segment and the final competition part. Initially, young women introduced themselves by highlighting their new, independent female identity, marked by the independent personalities and empowered identities free from entrenched misogynistic culture. However, during the final stage, when the male candidate was deliberating his choice and hesitant to make a decision, there was a tendency for women to portray traits of 'childishness', 'insecurities' and 'stupidity'

in an attempt to gain an advantage over competitors. They made claims such as: 'Even though I may seem independent and aggressive to others, deep down, I don't feel secure or confident in relationships.' 'I'm actually quite innocent and always look for someone to guard and guide me.' 'I tend to do silly things in life.' It appears that female candidates tend to present themselves as vulnerable, childlike and less intelligent in the hopes of establishing a connection or rapport with male partners. The reactions of these women resonate with 'the vulnerability turn' described by Orgad and Gill (2022, 4), where women are encouraged to display weakness, self-doubt and vulnerability in media texts. Female dating candidates tried to instil a sense of intimacy with potential partners by confessing their lack of confidence not only in relationships but also in the fashioning of self. As noted, the Four-Selves Spirits Campaign encourages women to work on their self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance and self-improvement, as a means of striving for self-emancipation. However, on dating shows, the act of self-disclosing one's vulnerabilities has been presented as an antidote to the competitive nature among female candidates. Unfortunately, the competition setting of reality dating shows has perpetuated traditional gender roles and reinforced misogyny, which has proved to be a gendered dilemma in this context.

### *Conclusion: The Chinese postfeminist sensibility*

This chapter focuses on a group of young, highly educated women's responses and attitudes towards female subjectivity, intimate relationships and gendered performance represented and invoked by the reality dating show *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. Watching and discussing dating shows has given viewers an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and interrogate traditional norms surrounding female identity and relationships. The key findings of this study centre on the new independent female identity among highly educated young women, their deliberate and cautious approach to dating and marriage, and the challenges and dilemmas they encounter in navigating patriarchal family expectations, traditional gender roles in intimate relationships and the competitive nature of reality dating shows that extends beyond the media sphere and into their daily lives.

Reality dating shows are an iconic aspect of patriarchal society, representing and constructing a norm for heterosexual intimate relationships in which men hold the power. The competitive format and underlying expectations of reality dating shows have prevented female candidates from presenting a more candid and independent representation of female subjectivity. The competitive aspect of reality dating shows has been perpetuated by the long-standing tradition of matchmaking and family member involvement. Thus, there are two competing forces at play: the growing self-awareness and call for gender equality among young women on one hand, and the resurgence of patriarchal traditions driven by neoliberal rhetoric enforced by the market and state on the other hand.

Young women, including female candidates on the reality dating show and female viewers of the project, share similar characteristics of the Chinese

postfeminist sensibility. This can be illustrated in two ways. First, emerging as an unexpected outcome of the one-child policy, the Chinese postfeminist sensibility is characterized by an awareness of entrenched gender inequality, particularly discrimination against girls. This sensibility is exemplified by the precarious nature of gendered welfare for urban only daughters, and the empowerment of only daughters is an unintended consequence of the historical policies on population planning and economic modernization.

Secondly, the Chinese postfeminist sensibility is reflected in young women's expectations for a 1+1>2 model for heterosexual relationships. This model is clearly gendered and classed as young women tend to stay single to maintain a middle-class lifestyle, fearing oppression or depletion by male partners. If they date a man with more financial resources, the need for respect may not be the priority. A 1+1>2 relationship is viewed as an approach towards self-optimization, and young women perceive a good relationship as a business deal directed by the principle of maximizing benefits for both sides. This perspective aligns with the calculating and enterprising subject of neoliberalism.

Furthermore, female viewers are connected by a shared concern and anger towards the persistent sexism and misogyny deeply rooted in society. In this chapter, intimate activism is used to describe how female viewers respond to the feminist dilemma reflected in the project. It is characterized by a lack of public activism, but struggles, dissent and anger are collectively expressed in women's conversations and thoughts. Intimate activism is a typical and inevitable ramification of postfeminism, as female empowerment has shifted towards a depoliticized rhetoric, and feminist activities lack large-scale movements and international alliances. Feminist activism has thus been suppressed to the intimate and private domain. In post-socialist China, intimate activism has emerged as a response to the deeply ingrained gender inequality and misogyny fortified by the intensification of the market-oriented economy and the vogue for consumerist culture. Broad and official narratives promoting gender equality have been muted, and women are expected to strive for self-emancipation according to the Four-Selves Spirits Campaign.

### Notes

- 1 Other Chinese dating shows after 2016 have adapted a similar format of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, but with a twist. For example, *Daughters' Relationships* (*nvermen de lianai* 女儿们的恋爱) showcases young female celebrities' dating process witnessed by their fathers. In some cases, if dating candidates' parents are unavailable, the show will invite a well-known older female celebrity to play the mother's role and assist in evaluating potential matches, as shown in *Hi the Other Half* (*Nihao lingyiban* 你好另一半).
- 2 The one-child policy was implemented in 1979 and phased out in 2015. This was then transitioned to the two-child policy in 2015 and followed by the three-child policy in 2021.

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