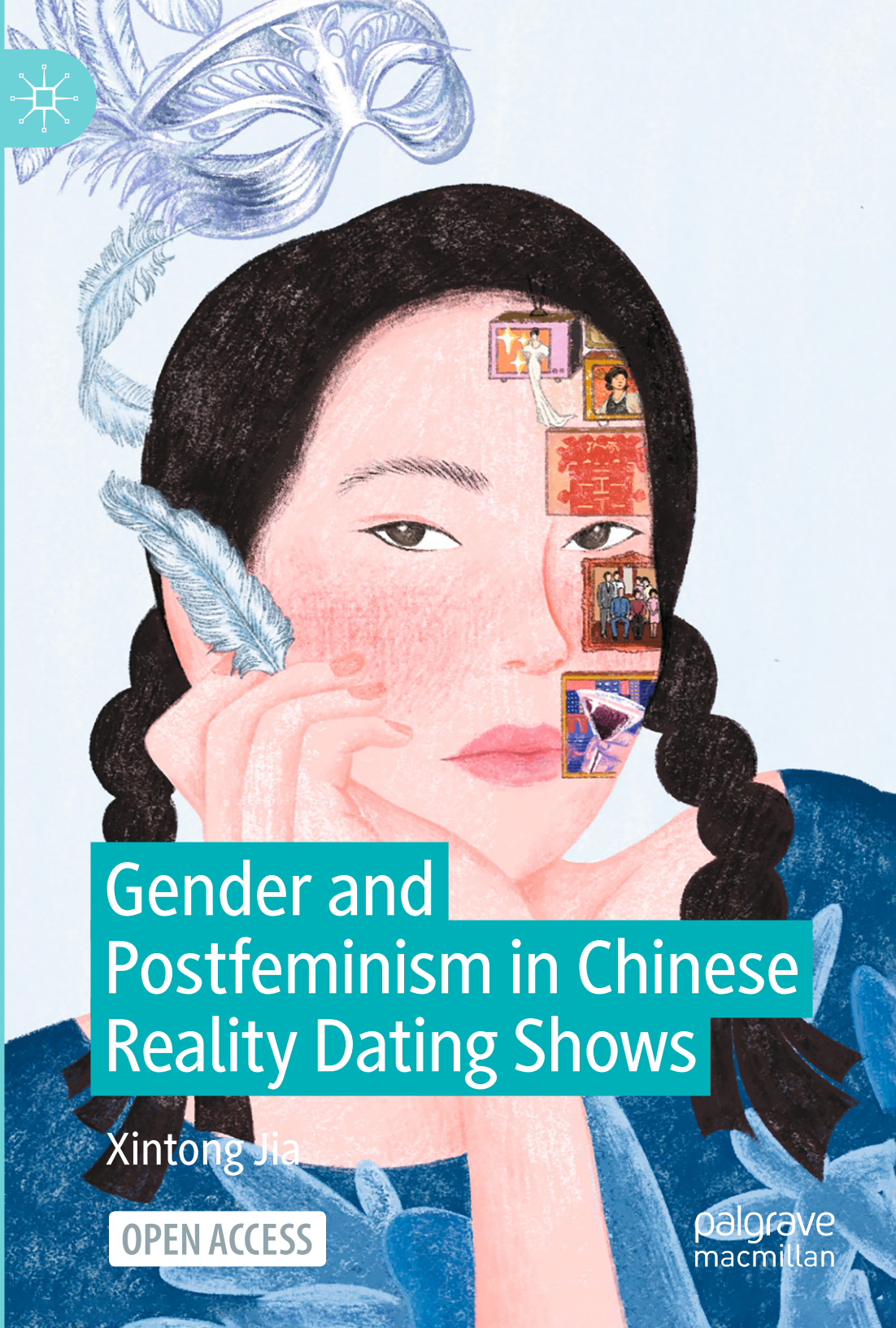

# Gender and Postfeminism in Chinese Reality Dating Shows

Xintong Jia

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*To my parents*

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CHAPTER 1

# Introduction: New Femininities and Reality Television Dating

Female contestant Wang Tong stands at the centre of the stage of the reality dating television show, *New Blind Date Conference* (*xin xiangqindahui*), wearing a slim-fitting gold dress with her well-groomed long hair styled in loose curls. She tall, with a round face that radiates both poise and confidence, smiling at the audience with quiet assurance. At the side of the stage, her parents watch her with proud, gentle smiles. A year has passed since she returned from the UK, where she completed a Master's degree in Finance. She now works as a client manager at a consulting firm in Shanghai, China.

Wang Tong has grown up surrounded by love and support. Her father, a man of old customs as she describes him, never engages in housework but is devoted to his wife and daughter with loyalty and care. Within this nurturing environment, Wang Tong has internalised values of diligence and perseverance—qualities that later manifest in her entrepreneurial drive. During her undergraduate years, she saves £100,000 through side hustles to independently finance her studies in the UK.

Despite her accomplishments, Wang Tong longs for a devoted partner. Yet the male contestants on the dating show perceived her as a challenge. They struggle to articulate their discomfort: "She is exactly a 'big woman.' She doesn't give off the vibe of a 'little woman' at all." "She is like my elder sister. I don't feel the sense of falling in love in front of her." "She doesn't make me feel passion or the impulse to date her." "She is a boss lady. I'm not into this type." As these words echoed through the

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studio, several men quit the blind date process. The stage lights dim, and the sound of a dying battery fills the space.

The guest celebrity Annie Shizuka Inou comments, "She is independent financially, spiritually, intellectually, and in personality. She is very powerful, which makes men feel that they cannot handle her." Indeed, Wang Tong's strength and independence are both a gift and a shield, guiding and guarding her through life's challenges. The dating show's presenter, Meng Fei, adds a reflection: "When encountering women with higher educational attainment and high income, who are assertive, cosmopolitan, and have experience living abroad, some men feel pressured. But if a man is brilliant enough, he will feel more relaxed when dating women of this kind."

Having witnessed male candidates drop out of the blind date process, Wang Tong confesses with a mischievous yet uneasy smile, "I can be very sweet and clingy when I fall in love." Yet the reality dating show cuts to highlights of men declaring, "I can't handle her," abruptly interrupted by advertisements from the title sponsor.

The scenes described above are drawn from the reality dating show, *New Blind Date Conference*. Premiering in 2019 on Jiangsu Satellite Television, the programme is defined and identifiable by its 'traditional' features, such as the presence of family members on set and the parental advice offered when selecting or evaluating potential matches. As a new dating show format centred on heterosexual blind date, the programme provides a venue primarily for urban, middle-class young people to seek potential partners under the observation of close family members and friends in the studio. The setting delivers the idea that, in contemporary China, marriage is not merely a matter between two individuals but a union between two families. This is further reflected in the dating show's tagline, "There is more love when parents are around." ( *fumu zai, geng you ai*), which underscores the significance of parental involvement in young people's blind-date experiences. The phrase is adapted from an influential saying in *The Analects of Confucius*: "When parents are still alive, one shall not travel far" ( *fumu zai, bu yuanyou*). *The Analects* is a compilation of ancient knowledge, morality, and ethics dating back over two thousand years. Although contemporary socio-economic circumstances differ significantly from those of ancient times, the centrality of parental authority remains a prominent feature of Chinese culture. By inviting parents into young people's mate-selection processes, *New Blind Date Conference* reflects an ongoing interest in reinventing traditional

matchmaking practices, in which mate selection is considered a family affair jointly negotiated by the couple and their parents (Song, 2020; P. Wang, 2017).

The book examines the emergent femininities and subjectivities of urban, only-child generation young women in China, and their friction with the dating and marriage norms of an entrenched patrilocal and patrilineal family system. Taking the reality dating show as a prism, the book explores new femininities as presented and embodied by female contestants and received by female viewers. Dating show contestants constitute an iconic cohort of relatively privileged and highly visible young women, rendering them especially amenable to media representation. On the dating programme, female contestants are showcased in a celebratory and exceptional manner, characterised by slender physiques, flamboyant attire, and meticulously applied makeup. Many of these women have received higher education in Euro-American countries, a marker of cultural capital and socio-economic status. They are either born or based in major urban centres, hold well-paid and/or steady employment, and frequently present themselves as financially independent.

Most contestants are in their twenties and were born under the One-Child Policy. As only children in urban families, they have benefited from substantial parental investment, while simultaneously facing expectations to excel and bring honour to their families. A defining characteristic of these women is their pronounced self-awareness. They actively seek to embody the traits of the contemporary young woman, underpinned by an emerging consciousness of the "new woman." In this book, I argue that this group of women exemplifies a Chinese postfeminist sensibility, marked by their commitment to female empowerment and self-actualisation, and characterised by a focus on personal gratification and individual aspirations.

## 1.1 Television Dating in China

In traditional Chinese culture, *xiangqin* is the prominent means by which couples meet. It refers to matchmaking or setting up blind dates—specifically, the process by which a female and a male are introduced to each other by a third party with a view to make a match. *Xiangqin* is historically and traditionally regarded as a "prelude to marriage" (Wang, 2022: 547). Western dating culture is a product of modernity, typically understood as a stage in which individuals participate in shared social activities

before deciding whether to commit to a future intimate relationship. Historically, Chinese dating culture has placed emphasis on family involvement in matchmaking and courtship, although this is evolving among younger generations. In contemporary society, *xiangqin* practices have been incorporated into various dating formats, including matchmaking agencies, online dating platforms, and television dating programmes. Dating shows have been a fixture of Chinese television for over three decades, and through the prism of their evolution, we can observe shifting ideologies surrounding gender and intimacy. In this section, I trace the history and development of television dating programmes and examine how perceptions of matchmaking and intimate relationships have transformed over time.

In 1988, there were 140 million televisions in China, with fewer than ten people per set (He & Tian, 1989). Owning a television was considered a luxury, a motif frequently depicted in contemporary films that nostalgically recall the highlight of family life in the 1980s. The idea of finding a partner on television was entirely unprecedented. Premiered in 1988 and produced by Shanxi TV Station, *Television Red Bride* (*dianshi hongniang*) was the first Chinese television dating programme, marking the advent of television as a medium for matchmaking. The programme was innovative in bringing the topic of matchmaking to television, thereby blurring the boundaries between public and private spheres. As an embryonic form of dating TV, *Television Red Bride* resembled more of a mate-selection advertisement than an entertainment programme. Its title references the red bride (*hong niang*), a typical matchmaker character in Chinese classical opera, who assists by exchanging information between protagonists to facilitate their unions. In this context, both the dating programme and its presenter assume the role of the matchmaker. *Television Red Bride* provided a platform primarily for bachelors in Shanxi province to share dating information and attract potential partners among the audience. Rigid in format and reserved in nature, it consisted of one-sided introductions without interactive activities or entertainment elements. Participants delivered prepared speeches and shared basic personal information, including age, occupation, place of residence, and family background. The gender disparity among participants is noteworthy, as the majority were men. The appearance of a very limited number of women provoked public controversy and was criticised as shameful. This reaction reflected the social discipline of female sexuality, wherein women were expected to be more sexually passive

than men, highlighting the double moral standards that characterised the conservative dating culture at that time.

In the 1990s, television was the centre of people's entertainment life in China. Population coverage of television signals increased from 79.4% in 1990 to 93.65% in 2000 (China Radio and Television Yearbook, 1991, 1996, 2001). Three decades of media marketisation fostered a dual system, comprising state organs such as China Central Television (CCTV) and *People's Daily*, alongside commercial media industries exemplified by the South-East provincial satellite television stations. As television became a primary resource for capital accumulation, orientating content towards entertainment vendors became a common strategy within the industry. Scholars have suggested that an "entertainment storm" swept television programming schedules in the 1990s (Bai, 2005; Keane, 2002; Zhao, 2008: 220). Entertainment television in the form of game shows, dating shows, sitcoms, reality television, and a continuous stream of emperors and empresses in costume dramas dominated television screens (Zhao & Guo, 2005).

In the second half of the 1990s, provincial TV stations in China experienced a proliferation of dating shows that combined matchmaking functions with entertainment, often adopting a collectivist match-off format. Notable examples include *Dating on Saturday* (*xiangyue xingqiliu*) produced by Shanghai Oriental Broadcast TV in 1998; *Rose Date* (*meigui zhiyue*) (1998–2005) produced by Hunan Satellite TV in 1998; *Square of Kindred Spirits* (*xinxin guangchang*) by Hebei Satellite TV in 1998; and *Love at the First Sight* (*yijian qingxin*) by Liaoning Satellite TV in 1999. Specifically, *Rose Date* adopted the format of *Special Men and Women* ( *feichang nannnü*), which had been screened in Taiwan in 1996, and combined group matchmaking activities with a game show structure. Participants on *Rose Date* were carefully selected, attractive, and well-mannered young adults. Each episode featured six men and six women seated opposite each other, engaging in lively discussions based on dating topics introduced by the host. They also participated in thoughtfully designed matchmaking activities outside the studio, such as sightseeing at an aquarium or watching a film, with the programme capturing their interactions both inside and outside the studio. Due to an elimination mechanism, participants perceived as less attractive were required to leave the show after a single episode.

Building on these examples, dating shows in the 1990s shared several characteristics. They emphasised group-based and bi-directional

matchmaking formats, incorporated elements of talent and game shows and exercised careful selection of participants. Contestants, although presented as ordinary, were chosen according to appearance, personality, and skills, with a preference for those who were good-looking and possessed talkative or performative dispositions. Over time, dating shows began to cultivate celebrity culture, with contestants increasingly seeking their "fifteen minutes of fame" on television.

Dating shows that premiered in the 2010s were shaped by the influence of large enterprises, the financial interests of dating websites, and the selective adaptation of Western dating show formats. In cooperation with matchmaking agencies, these programmes expanded their audience and the pool of potential participants. By forming partnerships with commercial enterprises, reality dating shows generated advertising revenue from a range of sponsors, including mobile phone companies, electronics and homeware retailers, and women's health and sanitary product brands.

Premiering in 2010 and produced by Jiangsu Satellite TV, *If You Are the One* ( *feicheng wurao*) (2010–present) is the most extensively studied example of Chinese reality dating shows. Inspired by the format of the Australian television dating game show *Taken Out*, *If You Are the One* adapted the content to reflect the dynamics and nuances of China's dating and marriage market. In the original *Taken Out*, a single participant is introduced to thirty contestants in the arena. The host presents basic information and pre-recorded videos about the participant. Referring to this information, the 30 contestants periodically decide whether to continue engaging with the participant by keeping their light on or exit the game by turning their light off. *If You Are the One* modified this format by presenting sone single man to 24 single women. Unlike its Western counterparts, the show does not feature actual date in real-life settings. Instead, the focus is on conversations between contestants within the studio.

During the initial selection process, female contestants stand in a semicircle, each behind a podium equipped with a light they can control to signal interest or disinterest in the man. Accompanied by stirring music and flashing lights, each male contestant descends slowly onto the stage via a lift and then is required to choose a 'heartbeat girl' before all rounds begin. Three pre-recorded video clips are then broadcast, introducing his age and profession, hobbies, criteria and preferences regarding mate selection, previous relationship experiences, and friends' commentaries on him. The 24 women independently decide whether to leave their lights on or

off. If all lights are turned off, the man has to leave. If one light remains on, he gets a chance to choose that girl. If more than two lights remain on, he can turn off the extras, leaving two lights on. In this scenario, he needs to select one girl out of three: the two women who have chosen him and the 'heartbeat girl' he selected at the beginning. The final round is conducted through a question-and-answer session, and the 'heartbeat girl' can either accept or reject the man.

The disparity in numbers between male and female contestants on *If You Are the One* is notable, as men occupy the active role in mate selection, while women wait to be approached due to the one-versus-twenty-four setting. Meanwhile, the 24 female contestants functions as a jury, interrogating each male contestant and determining whether he may remain on stage. Alongside the host Meng Fei, *If You Are the One* invites two psychologists, Le Jia and Huang Han, as guest discussants. They sit to the side of the arena and provide authoritative commentary on matchmaking and contestants' personalities from a psychological perspective.

Research on *If You Are the One* has been predominantly concentrated on debates surrounding gender roles and the evolving understanding of dating and marriage, as well as the intersecting dimensions of social class, educational background, income, and sexuality. These debates emerged during a period of significant ideological transition in China, as the country moved from socialism to postsocialism. The framing and reception of the television dating show have been shaped by rapid capital accumulation, globalisation, widening wealth gaps, an expanding rural-urban divide, and heightened attention to gender issues.

The dichotomy between love and money in intimate relationships was a prevalent topic in China's mass media in the early 2010s,[1] reflecting new ideologies and gender relations generating from economic reforms. The caustic exchanges between dating contestants on *If You Are the One* caused a sensation. One of the most memorable moments occurred when a female contestant, Ma Nuo, rejected a man's invitation for a bicycle ride with the remark: "I'd rather weep in a BMW than smile on the backseat of a bicycle." This comment sparked unprecedented public discussion and

[1] *Luo hun* was a neologism and popular catchphrase in the early 2010s. It literally means 'naked marriage,' referring to a type of marriage where couples do not own accommodation, a car, a ring, or have a wedding or honeymoon. This concept was associated with people born in the 1980s.

uproar, catapulting Ma Nuo, a twenty-two-year-old model, to overnight fame. She became a gendered symbol of materialism, representing the so-called "money worshippers" and "gold diggers" among the generation born in the 1980s. Her infamous remark encapsulated two typical images of dating and romance drawn from both socialist and postsocialist contexts. In socialist China, a man riding a bike carrying a woman was an idealised image of courtship, evoking nostalgia for a simpler and purer time. Ma Nuo's comment shattered this image by foregrounding material considerations. Similarly, another female contestant, Zhu Zhenfang, refused to shake hands with a potential suitor, claiming that she only held hands with her boyfriend and that others would have to pay 200,000 RMB for this privilege. The public outcry over these materialistic statements reflects widespread anxiety and ambivalence regarding the norms and expectations of intimate relationships in postsocialist China.

Accentuating men's material affluence as a decisive factor in the dating market, Siyu Chen (2017) identifies three dimensions of the materialistic discourse on masculinity presented in *If You Are the One*: the possession of houses and cars as essential assets, discussions of money and income, and discrimination based on men's talents and hobbies. In a patriarchal society where men hold power over women and control the majority of wealth, it is understandable that women are compelled to seek upward mobility through dating and marriage. Discussions of men's material conditions are a consistent feature of the programme. Although the dating show incorporates elements of a talent show, amateur performances such as singing, dancing, and other artistic skills were largely downplayed. This reflects a pragmatic evaluation system that prioritizes the ability to generate wealth over artistic talent, as the latter does not contribute to securing a match with female contestants on *If You Are the One*.

The controversial values presented in *If You Are the One* and other TV dating shows prompted censorship by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) in June 2010. These programmes were criticised for deviating from the socialist core value system and undermining the image of broadcast media (*People's Daily*, 2010). In response, SARFT issued two formal documents: "Notice on Further Regulating TV Dating and Matchmaking Programmes" and "Notice on Enhancing the Management of TV Programmes on Affect and Romance." These notices prohibited discussions of vulgar or sex-related topics and the dissemination of unhealthy and incorrect values regarding dating and marriage,

particularly money worship. Following these ideological restrictions, TV dating shows promptly adjusted their content to comply with the new regulatory guidelines.

Jing Wu (2012) situates the over-proliferation of materialistic discourse in *If You Are the One* within the broader context of China's transition to a market economy and its rapid economic development following the Reform and Opening Up policy of the late 1970s. During this transitional period, average income and living standards rose dramatically, but income inequality and social class disparities also widened (Khan & Riskin, 2001). Consequently, the ethos surrounding gender identity, dating, and marriage have undergone profound transformation. Nevertheless, *If You Are the One* has unevenly and deliberately portrayed female candidates as pathological, a phenomenon Jing Wu describes as "a symptom of the social disease that is shameless materialism and a loss of belief" (Wu, 2012: 232). Women were subjected to constant moral judgment, and their choices were placed under intense scrutiny. The moral judgment was highly gendered. Although women were depicted as autonomous subjects free to make their own choices, their decisions were repeatedly questioned and policed. For instance, the invited discussant Le Jia posed a question to the female contestant Zhu Zhenfang: "Which would you choose, an optimistic boyfriend or a villa?" As an expert and adviser on dating, Le Jia's confrontational questioning and sharp commentary carried considerable authority. The rationale behind his question and the irrational dichotomy it constructed went unchallenged. It is not surprising, then, that Zhu's choice of the villa led to her being labelled a "gold digger." An article on China's TV dating shows published in *Time* similarly stigmatised Chinese women as having lost the ability to embrace true love, claiming that "true love is all about numbers" (Bergman, 2010). The criticism is overwhelmingly directed at women, who are perceived as the root of moral decline due to their supposed insatiable greed. Jing Wu accurately argues that women have been made scapegoats for the "unsettling spiritual crisis of modernity" in postsocialist China (Wu, 2012: 232).

## 1.2 Chinese Dating with the Parents

As the buzz surrounding *If You Are the One* fades, a new dating TV format has begun to dominate China's television screens. The emerging format highlights the role of parents in young people's matchmaking by featuring them on set to evaluate potential partners for their children.

Reality dating shows adopting this format include *Chinese Style Blind Date* (*zhongguo shi xiangqin*), produced by Dragon TV and premiering at the end of 2016, *New Chinese Blind Date* (*zhongguo xin xiangqin*), also produced by Dragon TV and premiering in 2018, *New Blind Date Times* (*xin xiangqin shidai*), produced by Jiangsu Satellite TV and Yuanjing Film & Television Co., Ltd. in 2018, *New Blind Date Conference* (*xin xiangqin dahui*), produced by Jiangsu Satellite TV in 2019. In this book, I refer to these dating shows collectively as *Chinese Dating with the Parents*.

Take *New Blind Date Conference* as an example to clarify the general process of dating on reality TV. It is hosted by Meng Fei and Zhang Chunye and has completed six seasons. The show airs on Jiangsu Satellite TV every Sunday at 21:10 and is also available on the online video platform, *Youku*. Each episode has a runtime of nighty minutes. *New Blind Date Conference* has achieved remarkable ratings, consistently securing the top spot among Sunday programmes and dating shows. On *Youku*, the dating show boasts an impressive rating of 9.1 out of 10. Moreover, the #newblinddateconference hashtag has garnered over 520 million views on Sina Weibo, frequently trending on the platform's hot topic list.

The dating process in *New Blind Date Conference* operates across two main areas: the main studio (see Fig. 1.1), which includes the presenters, one dating contestant, their parents, six pairs of parents of potential matches, the studio audience, and a dedicated waiting room for six contestants. Contestants in the waiting room can observe the proceedings in the main studio via a screen. Before and throughout the show, female and male candidates are kept in separate areas and to prevent face-to-face contact. They can only communicate with potential matches and consult with their own parents via telephone to decide whether to remain or withdraw. This separation enhances the show's sense of intrigue and suspense. In the main studio, each contestant presents personal information, including background, occupation, interests, and desired partner characteristics, supplemented by carefully crafted self-introduction videos. The matching process in the main studio involves interactions, Q&A sessions, and discussions between contestants and the parents of potential matches, all facilitated by the presenters. After several rounds of mutual selection, two contestants from the waiting room are invited to the main studio to meet the featured contestant. Before the final selection is made, the contestant's parents are asked to state their preference as a reference.

**Fig. 1.1** The main studio of *New Blind Date Conference* (*xin xiangqindahui*)

The format of featuring parents on set gained popularity in China's TV dating programmes during the second half of the 2010s. Several other TV dating shows of this time period adapted this format with variations, yet all continued to foreground the presence and evaluative role of parents. Examples include *Daughters' Relationships* (*nüermen de lianai*), produced by Mango TV in 2019; and *Mr & Mrs* (*wojia xiao liangkou*), produced by Hunan Satellite TV Chen Xinyu Studio in 2019; *Hi, The Other Half* (*nihao ling yiban*), produced by iQIYI in 2021; and *Heartbeat Again* (*pengran zai xindong*), produced by Hunan Satellite TV Xu Qing Studio in 2021. *Daughters' Relationships* centres on fathers' perspectives on their daughters' dating experiences. The show features female celebrities whose fathers, together with host Zhang Shaogang and a panel of invited commentators, monitor and interpret their daughters' dating trajectories. *Mr & Mrs* documents the quotidian lives of young married celebrity couples under the gaze of their parents and parents-in-law. By combining elements of reality TV with an observational format, the show underscores the increasingly prominent role of parents as immediate spectators and moral adjudicators of their adult children's dating and relationships. In instances where biological parents are unable to participate, dating shows such as *Heartbeat Again* introduce a well-known older

female celebrity to perform a surrogate maternal role, guiding younger participants in the selection and assessment of potential matches.

The incorporation of parents into televised blind dates serves as a strategic promotional device for contemporary Chinese reality dating shows that emerged in the 2010s and 2020s. *Chinese Dating with the Parents* features two key dimensions. First, it reasserts parental authority within the context of traditional Chinese matchmaking, now repurposed within the framework of reality TV. As noted in the historical text *Meng Zi*, an anthology of dialogues and anecdotes attributed to the Confucian philosopher Mencius, marriage used to be decided by parents in consultation with matchmakers ( *fumu zhiming, meishuo zhiyan*). Arranged marriages, defined as a union where the parents or guardians exercise significant influence in spouse selection, was a dominant practice in China and substantially declined during the twentieth century, notwithstanding variation in the extent of parental involvement (Lu, 2021). Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Marriage Law of 1950 sought to safeguard women's rights and enhance individual autonomy by outlawing arranged marriages and forced marriages, practices closely associated with the feudal marriage system. Despite these legal reforms, scholars argue that marriage matchmaking has remained "an institutionalised and entrenched practice" in contemporary China (Wang, 2017: 505). The visibility of parents in reality dating shows thus reflects not only a televisual innovation but also the enduring cultural salience of parental participation in the regulation of young people's intimate lives.

Despite transformations in dating and marriage practices since the economic reforms, Chinese matchmaking traditions have been continually reimagined in film and television series, becoming deeply embedded as cultural norms. In contrast to *If You Are the One*, which is a adaption of the Australian TV dating game show *Taken Out*, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* is an original format that consciously integrates Chinese cultural elements into the genre. The sense of "Chineseness" constructed through the dating show readily resonates with its audience. As Lin Song (2020: 7) argues, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* contributes to the reproduction of "state-sanctioned Confucian subjects." Both the dating show and Confucian ideology foreground the centrality of the family, highlighting dating entails the union of two families rather than merely two individuals.

This emphasis is articulated directly in the show's mission and slogans: "Rest assured when you bring your parents on a date" (*you bama, geng fangxin*) and "When a single person finds a partner, it brings joy and

pride to the entire family" (*yiren tuodan, quanjia guangrong*). The incorporation of parents into the dating process is framed as a mechanism that reinforces accountability, seriousness, and efficiency in matchmaking. At the same time, it consolidates parental authority within the family and promotes norms of filial piety by prioritising parental evaluations and preferences. The revival and reconfiguration of traditional matchmaking practices within the format of a dating game show in the late 2010s is therefore noteworthy.

Second, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* minimises the entertaining and game show dimension and instead foreground the aim of serving people's needs and authenticity. The slogan "Serve the People," a foundational political motto of the Chinese Communist Party, also operates as a guiding principle for state-owned broadcasters. Within this ideological framework, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* promotes a marriage-oriented model of matchmaking that resonates with Mao Zedong's dictum: "Relationships that are not intended for marriage are just fooling around." This perspective reflects a consequentialist logic in which the legitimacy of engagement is assessed by its outcome—marriage—rather than by the experiential process of dating itself. Consistent with reality TV conventions, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* claims that they recruit contestants from the general population who are portrayed as earnest seekers of serious, marriage-bound relationships. The inclusion of parents on set further reinforces the programme's claim to authenticity, positioning parental oversight as a guarantor of sincerity and moral credibility within the mediated matchmaking process.

## 1.3 Parental Authority and the Resurgence of 'Marriage Between Matching Doors'

Parental involvement in young people's dating and marriage not only reflects the historical origins and deep-rooted influence of traditional matchmaking practices, but also signals the contemporary resurgence of 'marriage between matching doors' (*men dang hu dui*) in postsocialist China. As a longstanding tenet of marital practice, marriage between matching doors prescribes unions between two families of comparable social and economic standing, encapsulating a normative vision of what constitutes an appropriate or 'ideal' match. Although the concept originates in the feudal and imperial eras, it continues to have profound implications for contemporary society (Croll, 1981; Xu & Whyte, 1990).

The idiom itself derives from architectural metaphors: *men dang* is a pair of stone pillars or stone drums placed symmetrically at the entrances of traditional Chinese architecture. *Hu dui* refers to the paired brick or wood carvings securing door frames above the lintel. Together, these architectural features symbolised household status, wealth, and hierarchical position. As such, the metaphor underscores how family background and material resources historically shaped, and continue to shape, marital decision-making. The persistence of marriage between matching doors in contemporary China is sustained by structural mechanisms, including ongoing parental participation in spouse selection and the enduring strength of intergenerational family ties (Whyte & Parish, 1984). Through these mechanisms, traditional logics of social hierarchy remain embedded within contemporary matchmaking practices.

In *Under the Ancestors' Shadow: Chinese Culture and Personality*, Francis L. K. Hsu (1948) identified five cultural elements that bear on individual personality. These are: the centrality of father–son identification; the estrangement between male and female; the ideal of the large, extended family; an educational pattern that socialises children as though they were adults; and the ancestor worship. The five elements share a unifying thread: authority. Authority is embodied in the father–son relationship, expressed in gender relations, reflected in the ideal of the extended family, embedded in child-rearing and educational practices, and reinforced through the cult of ancestors (Hsu, 1948). Although Hsu's fieldwork was conducted in a rural market town in southwest China in the 1940s, traditional cultural logics deeply rooted in everyday social life undeniably continue to shape contemporary Chinese society (Fei, 1992).

Parental authority and the ideal of the extended family create both the cultural foundation and social rationale for the match-door marriages. Specifically, the estrangement between male and female, as described by Hsu (1948), not only reinforces gender inequality but also discourages public displays of erotic expression. In traditional arranged marriages, spouses typically had little interaction or emotional attachment prior to the wedding. As a patrilineal institution, marriage was structured to integrate a woman into her husband's family, thereby perpetuating the father–son lineage and supporting the ideal of the extended family. The suppression of public gestures of intimacy served to constrain romantic relationships based solely on personal attachment. In this context, marriage between matching doors chimes in with arranged marriages and

stands in contrast to unions formed through romantic love. In contemporary society, although arranged marriages are no longer legally sanctioned, parents remain actively involved in their children's mate-selection process (Riley, 1994). Marriage between matching doors is still widely regarded as a practice that can enhance marital satisfaction and promote the well-being of all parties involved (Hu, 2016).

According to literature on relationships and marriage, marriage between matching doors shares similarities with assortative mating by status (Becker, 1974; Kalmijn, 1991). Assortative mating refers to as positive assortative mating or homogamy, is a "non-random matching of individuals into a relationship" (Schwartz, 2013: 452). Becker coined the term 'positive assortative mating' referring to a positive correlation between the values of the traits of couples (Becker, 1973). Among research on assortative mating, the matching hypothesis suggests that people prefer marital partners with similar status. The persistence of social hierarchy has been reinforced through assortative mating and mitigated by intermarriage. Additionally, patterns of mate selection and marriage formation are deeply entwined with contextual backgrounds, reflecting the intersection of pre-existing gender norms and socio-political transformations that contribute to the stratification of contemporary societies.

As a form of assortative mating, marriage between matching doors not only serves to the ideal of the extended patriarchal family but, more importantly, plays a crucial role in reinforcing social stratification. In *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, this principle operates both as a guide for contestants and their parents in selecting potential mates and as a framework for the production team in grouping family units for each episode. Contestants on the show predominantly represent the emerging middle class in postsocialist China, a social category that is relatively new.[2] The modern conception of the middle class began to take shape in the 1990s, following the Reform and Opening Up policy (Li, 2020). As a contested concept, the middle class in China reflects not only changes in income distribution but also shifts in occupational structure. Qiang Li (2020: 273) argues that an individual's social status is determined

[2] During the socialist era, the most recognised social strata included workers, peasants, cadres, intellectuals, national bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, and a very small number of so-called 'landlords' (*dizhu*) and 'rich peasants' ( *fu nong*) who were subjected to reform in rural areas (Li, 2020).

by three dimensions: the economic status, occupation status, and educational status. According to these criteria, the middle class is defined as follows: economically, their income, assets, consumption and living standards are at or above a moderately well-off level (*xiao kang).* Occupationally, they occupy a middle tier of professional status, often aligning with the white-collar positions. Educationally, they have completed at least secondary education or more than thirteen years of schooling. Educational attainment is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for becoming middle-class in postsocialist China.

Marriage between matching doors has become an implicit norm in *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, as matched pairs on the show are generally comparable in terms of family background, education, and occupational achievements (Shao, 2023). Contestants frequently invoke the concept of marriage between matching doors to justify a suitable match while drawing the attention of preferred families and distinguishing themselves from competitors. For instance, contestants with experience studying abroad often prefer partners with similar educational or cultural backgrounds. Beyond socio-economic alignment, the directorial team also groups families based on shared experiences, such as reconstituted households or common hobbies, within a single episode. In one episode, a male candidate who teaches calligraphy and operates a calligraphy studio encounters a female candidate whose father identifies himself as a calligraphy enthusiast. This shared interest facilitates rapport, demonstrating how both family background and curated similarities are leveraged to enhance compatibility on the dating stage.

## 1.4 From *zhao di* to *sheng nan*: The Empowered Only Daughters in Urban China

We live in a society saturated with patriarchal bias, in which knowledge is gendered and partial. Historically, women were relegated to a marginal position within the family and were burdened by the cult of chastity in relationships. Before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, wealthy men could take one or more concubines and frequently visited brothels before and after marriage. By contrast, society valued the virginity of unmarried women and the chastity of married women, and those who committed adultery were punished (Hershatter, 1997). Women were not regarded as permanent members of their parents' family, as they were expected to leave and join their husband's family

after marriage (Hu, 2017). They were not entitled to inherit property from their parents. In terms of filial piety, their duty was to care for their parents-in-law rather than their own parents. Within marriage, women were primarily responsible for reproduction, domestic labour, and child-rearing, while men served as the family's primary providers.

China has followed a unique path toward modernisation. During the economic reform era, Deng Xiaoping, the Paramount Leader of the PRC, focussed on four key areas for national development: agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology. Rather than relying on social or cultural transformations to reduce fertility, China implemented the One-Child Policy as a population control measure, making reproduction an area of explicit state intervention. The policy was legalised in 1979 and formally phased out in 2015 (Hu & Shi, 2018).[3] Introduced in response to Malthusian concerns that unchecked population growth would outpace food supply and lead to widespread famine, the One-Child Policy was accompanied by campaigns encouraging the postponement of marriage and childbearing as additional strategies to mitigate shortages of natural resources and consumer goods.

During the implementation of the One-Child Policy, the skewed sex ratio at birth and its potential social consequences attracted considerable attention. The sex ratio, which had been within the biologically normal range of around 106 boys per 100 girls in 1979, rose to 111.4 by 1990 and peaked at 121.2 in 2010 (Banister, 2004; Hesketh, 2009; Jiang et al., 2018). The imbalance has been linked to entrenched son preference (*zhong nan qing nü*), improved access to technologies that enable prenatal sex identification, sex-selective abortions, female infanticide, and the underreporting of girls' births to ensure male heirs (Hull, 1990; Zeng et al., 1993). Son preference is a cultural bias favouring sons over daughters. It historically emerged from the agricultural economy, where male labour was more highly valued, and it remains the cultural foundation for the patrilineal surname system.

Originally implemented as a population control strategy, the One-Child Policy inadvertently empowered a generation of women, particularly urban only daughters (Fong, 2002; Hu & Shi, 2018; Lee, 2012; Liu, 2017). By undermining the traditional foundations of patriarchal kinship,

[3] Starting on January 1, 2016, all Chinese couples are allowed to have two children, which marks an end of the One-Child Policy and the transition to Two-Child Policy. On May 31, 2021, the Three-Child Policy was announced.

the policy created conditions in which women of the one-child generation could challenge and renegotiate established gender norms. Although the primary aim of the policy was neither to promote women's empowerment nor to address gender inequality, the emergence of the '4–2–1' family structure (four grandparents, two parents, and one child) produced unintended benefits for daughters. They gained expanded access to higher education, employment opportunities, financial resources, and inheritance. Unlike previous generations, they no longer had to compete with brothers for parental attention or family assets.

Daughters and their parents have formed a united front against the patrilineal structures that have long disadvantaged women. Gender discrimination against women has been challenged through the strategy of 'raising a daughter as a son,' a practice adopted by parents of only daughters. The name *sheng nan* has gradually appeared among only daughters born after 1980 in urban households. In Chinese, *nan* means 'male,' and *sheng* means 'to defeat.' Thus, *sheng nan* implies the idea that girls can outperform boys in all endeavours and bring honour to the entire family. This name stands in stark contrast to *zhao di*, a name commonly given to daughters in families desiring a male child. *Zhao di* literally means 'bringing about a younger brother,' reflecting parental hopes for a son following the birth of a daughter. *Sheng nan* and *zhao di* thus represents two sides of the same coin, both rooted in the enduring tradition of son preference. In families with only daughters, girls are held to elevated expectations. They are metaphorically positioned on an unbalanced scale, tasked with challenging patriarchal norms through their accomplishments. The name *sheng nan* is a metaphor for these expectations.

The One-Child Policy had its greatest impact on urban families employed in state-owned enterprises and public institutions—often described as holding 'iron rice bowls' (*tie fanwan*). Couples in these positions who exceeded the child limit risked job loss or expulsion from the party. In contrast, rural families with a first-born daughter were often permitted to have a second child after several years, reflecting the persistence of entrenched son preference and the perception of females as secondary. Compared to their urban counterparts, daughters in rural households gained relatively few benefits from the policy. The empowered status of urban only daughters, however, has had a profound influence on their gender identity, understandings of femininity, and expectations regarding dating and marriage. This book, therefore, focuses on the

subjectivity of this generation of young women, using reality dating TV as a prism through which to examine these dynamics.

## 1.5 Research Methods and Reflections on Feminist Fieldwork

The book aims to address the following questions: How do the processes and practices of reality dating shows construct and signify what it means to be a woman in postsocialist China? How do female viewers interpret and respond to representations of female subjectivity in dating shows? In what ways are reality dating shows reshaping understandings of heterosexual relationships and contributing to new conceptions of gender and female subjectivity? To respond to the questions, I conducted a textual analysis of the dating show *Chinese Dating with the Parents* (Season 1–5), complemented by audience reception research, which included texts-in-action viewing sessions and qualitative interviews with 23 viewers in Xi'an, China. Each meeting with a participant lasted between 90 and 150 minutes and was audio-recorded with each participant's signed consent.

Data collection took place between 2020 and 2021. I recruited a sample of female participants who were university-educated, aged between twenty-three and thirty-six, and either had grown up, worked, or were pursuing postgraduate studies in Xi'an. The sample included five postgraduate students and PhD candidates from prestigious universities. Five participants were employed by state-owned enterprises in sectors such as electrical systems, urban construction, and sports. The group also comprised five teachers: two in kindergartens, one in a secondary school, one in a senior high school, and one at a university. Additionally, participants included two college administrators, an employee in the media and publicity department of a public institution, a TV station reporter, a banking professional, a private hospital administrator, an employee at a local British translation company, and one member of the All-China Women's Local Government Federation. Demographic characteristics were self-identified. Participants' relationship statuses varied, including single, in a relationship, married, divorced, remarried, and those with children. One participant was of Hui ethnicity, while the remaining participants were Han. The age distribution was as follows: 23–25 years: 17.39% ($n = 4$); 26–28 years: 43.48% ($n = 10$); 29–31 years: 13.04% ($n = 3$); 32–34 years: 8.70% ($n = 2$); and 35–37 years: 17.39% ($n = 4$).

All participants had prior experience viewing reality dating shows, though their attitudes toward them varied considerably. Some women were avid, knowledgeable viewers with extensive experience watching such programmes. They offered detailed insights into the production logic of reality dating shows, including the director team's rationale for selecting contestants and the phrasing of episode titles. Others were not particularly interested in dating shows but watched them occasionally with relatives; in these instances, dating shows functioned as forms of "domestic communication technology" and were experienced as part of family routine (Gill, 2007c: 22). For some participants, their attitudes shifted in accordance with their changing social roles—such as being single, married, or becoming mothers. Still others engaged with dating shows only incidentally, encountering clips of them while scrolling through short-video applications such as TikTok.

Research involving human beings raises ethical, legal, and political considerations. Consequently, research should adhere to the principles of protecting participants from potential harm, ensure informed consent, safeguard privacy and confidentiality, and avoid deception (Diener & Crandall, 1978). This study was approved by the Department of Sociology Research Ethics Committee (Ref: ETH1920-052) at City, University of London. I followed standard ethical procedures, which included providing participants with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the research and instructions for participation. I emphasised that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at a given time. Participants were informed that meetings would be audio-recorded and that all personal information would be treated confidentially and anonymised. Written consent was obtained from all participants. I also ensured that all data were securely stored on a password-protected laptop and would be used solely for the purposes of this research.

With these ethical considerations in place, the study proceeded to examine audience reception of *Chinese Dating with the Parents* through texts-in-action viewing sessions and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twenty-three women audiences. Drawing on Helen Wood's work, I adopted texts-in-action viewing sessions to access participants' real-time interpretations of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. Wood originally developed texts-in-action method as a lively and engaging approach to observing and capturing the dynamic interactions that occur during television viewing, conceptualised as "an event taking place in a particular

moment in time" (Wood, 2007; Skeggs et al., 2008: 12). Earlier audience reception studies primarily relied on ethnographic approaches in which participants were invited to focus groups or one-to-one interviews (Morley, 1986). The texts-in-action method resembles conducting ethnography in the living room with the television on, in which the researcher watches alongside participants and records the process of television viewing in its everyday, real-time settings. This data collection method addresses a key limitation in audience reception studies, which have tended to rely on viewers' retrospective accounts of television texts in interviews or focus groups and have been structured around the tripartite model of text, readers, and contexts (Moores, 1990). By situating viewers' engagement both in real time and within the "sequencing of texts," Wood (2007: 493) brings the dimension of temporality into the everydayness of television viewing. This approach reconceptualises the relationship between television shows and female viewers, shifting from a straightforward text–reader or encode–decode framework to a more nuanced and multidimensional set of interactions embedded in ethnographic contexts. It provides a productive lens through which to understand audiences as active interpreters rather than passive recipients of media content. The texts-in-action method enables researchers to conceptualise television viewing as "a mediated communicative exchange" and "a dialogical encounter," acknowledging the ways in which viewers articulate responses and talk back to the screen (ibid., 2007: 494).

Semi-structured interviews, like any research method, are not free from bias. The interviewer–interviewee relationship is often characterised as "intrinsically socially unequal," hierarchical, and asymmetrical, with the interviewer typically setting the agenda and structure of the encounter and retaining the authority to initiate and guide the questioning (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Harding, 2012: 52). Conducting interviews is therefore understood as "a search-and-discovery mission" designed to elicit and extract information from participants, and is consequently a complex and dynamic activity (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995: 2). Oakley (1981) argues that a good interview relies both on minimising hierarchical dynamics between interviewer and interviewee and on the interviewer's willingness to exercise subjective initiative by investing aspects of their own identity into the relationship.

Nevertheless, whether a non-hierarchical relationship can exist in interview settings remains open to debate. Feminist researchers have long acknowledged the persistent power differential that privileges the

researcher, who also occupies a position of epistemic authority (Acker et al., 1983; Bar On, 1993). Feminists therefore advocate for "a non-exploitative relationship," one in which interviewees are not treated merely as sources of data or providers of raw material for research (Maynard, 1994: 16). In addition, they reject to engage in acting as "emotionally detached and calculating" interviewers who view participants as "passive givers of information" (Maynard & Purvis, 1994: 15). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) further argue, in *The Active Interview*, that both interviewee and interviewer are active participants in a collaborative process of meaning-making. Interviewees are not "repositories of knowledge—treasures of information awaiting excavation—so much as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995: 4).

For this research, it was therefore essential for me to practise reflexivity in ways that extended toward participants, rather than remaining confined within a researcher-centre perspective. The purpose of conducting feminist research is not to interrogate participants for data but to understand women's experiences through dialogic engagement. Given the inherently asymmetrical relationship between researcher and researched, my overarching aim was to foster a reciprocal and non-exploitative relationship—particularly through interviews that were interactive, communicative, and genuinely dialogic.

When conducting interviews, I found that participants were often conscious of disclosing personal or sensitive, discomforting experiences to a researcher, which in turn made them feel insecure and anxious, worrying that the information might "fall into the wrong hands" (Maynard & Purvis, 1994: 5). Participants tended to restrict interviews to "a certain level of generality" (Peritore, 1990: 360), reflecting their hesitancy to reveal private information and personal aspects of their identity. In some cases, interviews represent the only space for in-depth conversations between participants and the researcher, who often meet for the first time during these sessions. To mitigate concerns about privacy and potential discomfort, I assured participants that all personal information would remain confidential and anonymous (Bryman, 2016).

In designing the interview questions, I used open-ended prompts to encourage reflective and narrative responses. I avoided leading, judgmental, or ambiguous questions, such as, "Do you think candidates are signed actresses/actors performing on dating shows? Are they sincere about their participation?" I also avoided terminology and jargon that

might confuse or alienate participants, such as "How do you understand female subjectivity represented on dating shows?" Participants were invited to choose meeting venues, raise their own questions, and suggest additional topics for discussion. This flexible approach facilitated the collection of detailed and relevant insights into their perspectives and experiences while remaining open to new information.

In interviews, I observed that participants were often curious about how others, and I, responded to questions on female subjectivity, feminisms in China, and social norms surrounding relationships and marriage. They would like to compare their own experiences with those of other women and gain insight into the general arguments of my project from a researcher's perspective. This interaction exemplified Oakley's (1981) observation that when the interviewers invest aspects of their own identity in the process, they can gain deeper understanding of participants. Examples of questions raised by participants included, "What is your opinion about the match-door marriage norm?", "Why does misogyny appear before misandry?", and "Do you think men understand what feminism is advocating for but pretend they do not?" These exchanges fostered an interactive dialogue and contributed to more candid and in-depth interviews.

In semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a common challenge lies in the blurring boundary between questioning and interrogation, which is closely linked to the researcher's attitude and position. Participants' reluctance to share more information often stems from concerns about privacy and the subtle pressures embedded within hierarchical social networks. To address this, I adopted a careful approach, stepping back and remaining silent whenever my questions seemed intrusive, rather than attempting to uncover "hidden truths" through intensive probing (Bryman, 2016: 131). This helped to prevent participants from feeling exposed or exploited, avoiding the sense of being subjected to an "interrogation." In her research on women's magazines, Rosalind Gill outlines an approach of critical respect, which involves "attentive, respectful listening" while maintaining the right to question or interrogate (Gill, 2007a: 78). She highlights that while providing essential support to participants, researchers are supposed to engage critically, rather than act as "a mute supporter" (Gill, 2007a: 78). I concur that respect constitutes a fundamental ethical principle. Showing respect to participants, while remaining critical as a researcher, fosters a research relationship that is both ethically

responsible and intellectually rigorous. At the same time, successful fieldwork requires demonstrating trustworthiness by respecting participants' boundaries and consciously leaving certain matters unexplored. During my fieldwork, I avoided probing into participants' private lives where my presence was not welcome and did not pressure anyone to answer questions they preferred to keep private. Equally important was the careful balance of raising questions while listening attentively to participants' responses.

My approach of stepping back from confronting difficult conversations in fieldwork align with the constructionist stance of qualitative research. Qualitative research is grounded in an ontological position that understanding the social world depends on people's interpretations and reflective understandings, rather than on the direct study of "out there" phenomena (Bryman, 2016: 375). As Edley and Litosseliti (2018) note, constructivist researchers treat conversations in fieldwork as indicative or illustrative data that offers insights into what participants claim to think or believe. From this perspective, it is unhelpful to assume that participants will engage in completely open or heart-to-heart discussions with the researcher. Silence, or what remains unspoken, is equally a meaningful part of the interaction. What matters for a constructivist researcher is understanding why participants express particular opinions in specific ways and within particular contexts.[4]

## 1.6 Xi'an as a Field Side

Fieldwork for this book was conducted in Xi'an, China, the capital of Shaanxi Province in Northwest China (see Fig. 1.2). Xi'an is located at 34°16′N 108°56′E on the Guanzhong Plain, a floodplain formed by eight surrounding rivers and streams. The city is bordered to the south by the Qin Mountains, a major east–west range that forms a natural divide between North and South China, and to the north by the Wei River.

[4] I discussed reflections on conducting qualitative interviews in an earlier article, "Co-existing with Uncomfortable Reflexivity: Feminist Fieldwork During the Pandemic" (Jia, 2023). Rather than focussing on the concept of "uncomfortable reflexivity" arising from interview-based research, the present version is reoriented to the structure of the book and foregrounds the advantages of conducting texts-in-action viewing sessions with the same group of viewers. This approach addresses a key limitation in audience reception studies, which have tended to rely on viewers' retrospective accounts of television texts elicited through interviews.

About 100 km east of the city lies Mount Huashan, one of China's five sacred Taoist mountains, while the Loess Plateau extends to the north. As the starting point of the Silk Road and the site of Emperor Qin Shi Huang's Terracotta Army, Xi'an is among China's oldest cities. Having served as the ancient capital for thirteen dynasties, the city maintains a strong cultural identity rooted in imperial history. In 1981, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) designated Xi'an as a World Heritage city.

Since the 1980s, with the economic growth of inland China, Xi'an has re-emerged as a major cultural, industrial, political, and tourist hub in the central–northwest region. The city is also an education centre, home to many universities. Administratively, Xi'an comprises twelve districts and two counties. According to Xi'an Statistical Bulletin on National Economic and Social Development (Xi'an Statistics, 2024), the city's regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2024 was approximately 1.33 trillion yuan. The estimated population of Xi'an in 2024 was about 13.17

**Fig. 1.2** Xi'an on the map of China

million, of whom 10.59 million were classified as urban residents under the household registration system. Women accounted for 49.04 per cent of the population and men for 50.86 per cent, resulting in a gender ratio of 104.5 males for every 100 females.

The rationale for choosing Xi'an is informed by Goodman's (2024) criteria for selecting single case studies, which include the suitability of the site for research objectives, the feasibility of conducting the research, and the researcher's interest and motivation. First, the unique blend of antiquity and modernity makes Xi'an a compelling site for examining reinvented traditions of parental involvement in young people's dating and the emergence of the new female subject in Chinese reality dating shows. Renowned for its rich historical and cultural heritage, Xi'an embodies the nostalgic essence of an ancient capital, often captured in the saying: "One can see thirty years of China in Shenzhen, two hundred years of China in Beijing, and a millennium of China in Xi'an." This combination of historical depth and contemporary relevance positions Xi'an as a representative case. As such, the discussions and findings drawn from Xi'an can offer valuable insights into similar phenomena elsewhere and contribute to a broader understanding of these issues.

Second, the selection of Xi'an as a research site seeks to decentre research beyond China's first-tier cities and southeast coastal regions, such as Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai, where the majority of earlier feminist media studies have been concentrated (Chang & Ren, 2016; Chen, 2012; Thorham & Feng, 2010; Zhong, 2006). In contrast, scholarly attention to second- and third-tier cities, as well as northwestern inland regions, remains comparatively limited. These areas are frequently portrayed as socially conservative and shaped by agrarian or land-centred cultural perspectives (Huang & Sun, 2021). This book examines local women's reception and interpretations of female subjectivity both in reality dating shows and beyond the media sphere. In doing so, it illuminates how new femininities and female subjectivity are understood and embodied outside China's major metropolitan centres, thereby making theoretical and empirical contribution to scholarship on gender and postfeminism.

Third, the feasibility of conducting fieldwork in Xi'an is enhanced by my positionality, which grants me access to specific communities. As a local resident, I share similar life experiences with prospective participants, facilitating deeper understanding and rapport. My personal network in

Xi'an further provides advantages for participant engagement. In addition, the fieldwork took place during the global Covid-19 pandemic, when China's Zero-Tolerance policy imposed strict travel restrictions and unpredictable lockdowns. Under these conditions, focussing on a single research site was practical and manageable.

## 1.7 Structure of the Book

Chapter 2 provides an overview of gender politics in socialist and postsocialist China, introducing the essential historical and social context with a particular focus on the rationale for transplanting postfeminism into contemporary China. It begins by examining the androgynous figure of the 'iron girl' (*tie guniang*) from the socialist era, an iconic representation of socialist state feminism during the 1960s and 1970s. The 'iron girl' embodied the socialist ideals of female liberation and gender equality, epitomised by the slogan 'Women hold up half the sky.' This figure reflects the state's efforts to mobilise women into the workforce while simultaneously redefining female subjectivity. Drawing on the historical legacy of socialist state feminism and postfeminism in the Western literature (Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009; Wang, 2017), this chapter then examines the social, economic, historical, and cultural backdrop in which postfeminism has gained relevance in postsocialist China. Understanding postfeminism as a distinctive sensibility and transnational culture that disseminates easily and readily through globalisation and consumer culture (Dosekun, 2020; Gill, 2007b), the chapter suggests that it aligns closely with the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign (*sizi jingshen yundong*) launched by the All-China Women's Federation in 1983. By promoting self-esteem (*zizun*), self-confidence (*zixin*), self-reliance (*zili*), and self-improvement (*ziqiang*) as foundational elements of new female identity, the campaign's emphasis on women's personal responsibility in self-making resonates strongly with postfeminist discourses of individual agency, self-empowerment, and self-transformation. The widespread influence of the Four-Selves Spirit on the construction of Chinese female subjectivity has created a conducive environment for postfeminist ideas to emerge, manifest, and operate within the Chinese context. More specifically, the emergence of the postfeminist subject in China, with cosmopolitanism as its defining feature, is situated within the synergistic effects of the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign, the One-Child Policy, and the rise of consumer culture in urban China since the 1990s. By articulating the concepts of "postfeminism with Chinese

characteristics" and the "Chinese postfeminist sensibility," the chapter examines how postfeminism and neoliberalism are negotiated, enacted, and embodied in postsocialist China.

Chapter 3 examines the construction and reception of female subjectivities on *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, focussing on urban young women born under China's One-Child Policy. It analyses how contestants and viewers negotiate emerging femininities and heterosexual relationships within the intersecting contexts of familial expectations, state policy, and neoliberal values. Central to the discussion is the figure of the 'new independent woman' (*xin duli nüxing*), whose autonomy is shaped by higher educational and financial independence, yet constrained by entrenched gender inequalities and postfeminist logics. The chapter further interrogates young women's engagement with feminist ideas, including resisting patrilineal naming, reframing dating as a personal choice rather than an achievement, and challenging age-based milestones that regulate women's life trajectories. The chapter theorises the postfeminist entrepreneurial subject, exemplified by the pursuit of a $1 + 1 > 2$ relationship and self-branding strategies on reality dating shows. Finally, it addresses the dilemmas faced by female contestants, including the patriarchal family gaze, beauty norms, and competition with other contestants, which compel them to alternate between empowered self-presentation and displays of obedience and vulnerability in order to gain approval and succeed in the dating 'game.' Overall, the chapter demonstrates the tension between young women's self-awareness and persistent patriarchal norms, showing how Chinese postfeminist sensibilities generate both empowerment and precarity for women.

Chapter 4 examines in detail the mechanisms of reality dating TV, scrutinising how it works to produce the 'little woman' in dating scenarios via managing and evaluating female contestants' gender performance on the show. It investigates how reality dating shows convey a pedagogy of femininity by presenting it as a form of public education. Young women are expected to exhibit traits such as confidence and independence to survive in a highly competitive society and to be selected by reality dating TV. Simultaneously, they are compelled to adopt the 'little woman' masquerade, concealing their intellectual prowess, rebellious nature, and assertiveness to appear vulnerable and docile, making them more appealing and approachable to male candidates and their families. The implicit rules and expectations for young women to present themselves as eligible dating partners are treated as a moral imperative within

the realm of reality TV dating. The chapter contends that postfeminist and neoliberal governmentality has extended its reach from disciplining women's bodies to their minds, exemplified by the transformation of the 'big woman' to the 'little woman' on reality dating shows. The discourse of empowerment becomes deeply entangled with consumerism, as female self-worth is reframed through practices of self-transformation, aesthetic labour, and the commodified rhetoric of 'investing in oneself.'

Chapter 5 presents empirical findings from audience reception of *Chinese Dating with the Parents* through texts-in-action viewing sessions. By examining female viewers' engagements with the reality dating show, three types of involvement are identified: judgmental viewers, self-involving viewers, and viewers as dating professionals. Judgmental viewers focus on contestants' appearance, age, and self-presentation, reflecting postfeminist notions of femininity as a bodily property and a mode of cosmetic vigilance in spectatorship, especially in the context of the booming beauty economy and the normalisation of plastic surgery. Self-involving viewers oscillate between identifying with female contestants and adopting a generalised male perspective, demonstrating both feminist self-expression and complicity in patriarchal frameworks. This duality highlights the ambivalent position of female spectatorship, constrained by heteronormative scripts and competitive show formats. Finally, viewers acting as dating professionals integrate personal experiences and preferences into their evaluations, providing candid and individualised commentary that intersects with broader social and cultural norms. Findings further indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified desires for security, stability, and reliability, influencing both dating behaviours and career decisions.

Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, synthesizes the findings of the book, restates the central argument, and highlights its theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions. It conceptualises a Chinese postfeminist sensibility, understood as a hybrid formation shaped by the historical legacy of state feminism, the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign, and the transnational circulation of postfeminist and cosmopolitan discourses alongside neoliberalism and consumerism in postsocialist China. The chapter emphasises that gender performance and representation on reality dating television are highly gendered and that these shows are reshaping understandings of intimacy in postsocialist China. It also reflects on limitations, including pandemic-related constraints and the relative homogeneity of the participant group. By considering the ongoing impact of

audience engagement with these shows on shaping feminist futures, the chapter reveals nuanced ways in which feminist media studies can challenge patriarchal ideologies. It underscores the importance of a feminist standpoint in both perceiving the world and producing knowledge.

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CHAPTER 2

# Gender and (Post)feminism in China

## 2.1 Nation First, Woman Second: 'Iron Girl' in Socialist China[1]

What it means to be a woman is a highly politicised topic. Chinese women's liberation evolved along a distinct pathway from liberal and Western-style feminism in the 1920s to revolutionary feminism in the 1930s. Since the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, women's liberation shifted to a state-sponsored socialist feminism that lasted until the late 1970s (Shih, 2002).

Gender roles under the Confucian ethos depicting men as dominant and women as subordinate were challenged by the political aspirations of the People's Republic of China. After nearly a century of disunity, civil war, and foreign invasion, the establishment of the PRC in 1949 dismantled the old class order and liberated the country from the yoke of semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism. Founded in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) conducted revolution by explicitly mobilising and advocating for the interests of Chinese workers and peasants. When the Party came to power in 1949, its legitimacy derived from the anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist revolution that it led on behalf of the Chinese people. The CCP viewed gender inequality as antithetical to the new socio-political order it aimed to establish (Chen, 2003). Any

[1] The section title is inspired by Chen et al.'s (2021) article "Chinese first, woman second: Social media and the cultural identity of female immigrants."

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restoration of biases and practices against women from the feudal and imperial era was deemed impermissible, as women's liberation had been safeguarded by the socialist state. According to the Common Programme 1949,[2]

> The People's Republic of China shall abolish the feudal system which holds women in bondage. Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational and social life.

In Maoist China (1949–1976), PRC implemented a series of strategies and programmes to promote gender equality, guided by top-down, state-sponsored socialist feminism. Following the Communist Party's rise to power, legal provisions like the Marriage Law (1950) and the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1954) were enacted to guarantee women equal rights in both social and political spheres. Chinese women were granted equal political rights, including suffrage and the right to stand for election, through the 1947 Constitution of the PRC. However, it was not until 1954 that women exercised these rights. According to the 1950 Marriage Law, prostitution and concubinage became subjects of legal and public censure, and individuals who committed sexual infidelity were punished as class enemies in the context of political campaigns (Davis, 2014; Kang, 2007). The abolition of polygamy, arranged and mercenary marriages facilitated the emergence of 'romantic love' (*ziyou lianai*), characterised by the free choice of (heterosexual) partners and monogamy (Pan, 2015).

Although the law formally guaranteed equal divorce rights for men and women, such equality was largely confined to legal provisions. Yan Yunxiang characterised the increased autonomy of youth in mate selection as a "romantic revolution" in courtship practices, which has partially eroded patriarchal authority (Yan, 2003: 83). This legal and social transformation in marriage and gender relations unfolded alongside the establishment of key state institutions aimed at advancing women's rights and mobilising female participation in socialist construction.

As China's first nationwide women's organisation, All-China Democratic Women's Federation—the predecessor of the All-China Women's

[2] The Common Programme 1949 was an interim Constitution, specifying the structure of the new government, and determining the name and symbols of the new state.

Federation (ACWF)—was established in 1949. All-China Women's Federation (*quanguo fulian*) is a state-affiliated mass organisation that unites women from all ethnic groups and social sectors across the country in the pursuit of further emancipation and development. As a state-sponsored institutional conduit, the ACWF mediates between the Chinese Communist Party, the government, and the broader female population. It also functions as the official leadership body of the women's movement in China. The ACWF has capillary extensions from the provincial and municipal levels down to village organisations, each responsible for discussing and overseeing women-related work within their respective jurisdictions. The main responsibilities of the ACWF include developing and implementing Party policies related to women, representing and protecting women's rights, liberating women from traditional gender norms, and promoting gender equality. Specifically, *fulian* acts as a mediator in family disputes and divorce, steps in to protect women facing domestic violence, inheritance conflicts, and unjust work demands in the workplaces. During the Maoist era, the ACWF concentrated on educating, mobilising, and organising women to participate in industrial and agricultural production, as well as the broader socialist revolution (Tsui, 1998). Women were mobilised to become patriotic subjects, expected to serve and sacrifice for socialist construction.

Mao Zedong (1955a) believed that genuine gender equality (*zhenzheng de nannü pingdeng*) could only be achieved through the socialist transformation of society as a whole. In an inscription for the inaugural issue of *Women of New China* (*xin zhongguo funü*), published in July 1949, he called on women to "unite and take part in production and political activity to improve the economic and political status of women" (Mao, 1967: 555). In response to the labour shortages in agricultural co-operatives—the predecessors of the People's Communes—he asserted that China's women constituted a 'vast reserve of labour power' (*weida de renli ziyuan*), and therefore it was necessary to mobilise women who had not yet engaged in agricultural work to participate in field labour (Mao, 1955a). In *Women Have Gone to the Labour Front*, Mao (1955b) asserted that the active participation of women in productive labour is essential for building a great socialist country. Guided by the principle of equal pay for equal work, every woman capable of working was expected to take her place on the labour front (Mao, 1955c). To fully harness women's potential as a labour force, they were encouraged to engage actively in industrial and agricultural production, thereby breaking free from the confines of

the domestic scene. During the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), large numbers of urban women joined the ranks of waged labour (Yang, 1999). Maoist egalitarian politics promoted near-universal participation in the Chinese workforce (Xu, 2009). At the same time, inspirational declarations addressing gender issues were widely disseminated, with slogans such as "Women hold up half the sky" and "Times have changed—men and women are the same. What male comrades can do, female comrades can do as well." As one of the most influential revolutionary discourses, the neologism 'half the sky' emerged during Maoist China to describe women. It emphasised women's contributions to socialist construction and signified a shift in the status of Chinese women within the public sphere (Zhong, 2009). Women were explicitly told to regard themselves as the same as men, capable of holding up half the sky.

The vigorous and androgynous 'iron girl' (*tie gu niang*) was constructed as an icon of female emancipation and socialist modernity. She represented a relatively new female figure emerging in Maoist China, one that partially subverted traditional gender ideals emphasising female gentleness and domestic virtue. The iron girl later became an enduring imprint and symbol of Chinese (socialist) feminisms. Characterised by a sturdy posture, a confident facial expression, bronze-toned skin, and the capacity to perform agricultural labour and operate heavy machinery, the iron girl redefined the visual and ideological boundaries of womanhood in revolutionary China. The iron girl served as a metaphor for the socialist androgynous subject, embodying a proletarian-based femininity and symbolising the masculinisation of the reformed female body.[3] By engaging in traditionally male-dominated and physically demanding labour, women were encouraged to "hold up half the sky" by

[3] Women are often invoked in situations where the majority of the population is expected to contribute to the workforce. The iron girl has its Western counterpart 'Rosie the Riveter.' 'Rosie the Riveter' was an iconic figure in America, embodying women employed in factories and shipyards during World War II. The term and image gained popularity in the 1940s, especially through the famous "We Can Do It!" poster. This wartime propaganda poster depicts a strong woman in a blue work shirt with her sleeves rolled up, flexing her arm, and it later became an emblem of second-wave feminism and women's empowerment in the 1970s. 'Rosie the Riveter' symbolises women's contributions to both the war effort and the workforce. As women were encouraged to fill wartime positions in defence industries, they emerged as a symbol of female patriotism, reflecting a departure from traditional gender roles due to wartime necessity.

contributing to socialist construction. Within Maoist discourse on gender egalitarianism, they occupied a vanguard position.

The brightly coloured propaganda poster *Awake in the Middle of the Night* by Zhigui Liu (1974) illustrates an 'iron girl' figure in Maoist era (see Fig. 2.1). Rich in historical references, the image portrays a woman with a bronze skin tone and an androgynous appearance, seated at a desk and working late into the night while her child sleeps nearby. She appears focussed and diligent, engaged in writing or studying from an open book. The surrounding objects suggest both domestic and educational settings: red books on *Mao Zedong Thought*, official documents, and a pen rest on her desk, while bedding and cushions are arranged around the sleeping child.

The room is adorned with award certificates and a poster of an 'iron girl' with a sturdy posture standing in a field, along with paper cuttings of 'iron girls' driving tractors displayed in the window—each element conveying the socialist ideals of the Maoist era. A clock on the windowsill and the nighttime scene outside indicate a specific late evening hour. In front of the bed are two farm tools—likely a spade and a hoe—and a straw hat used for agricultural work. Behind the woman are a quilt and several pieces of needlework placed in a basket. The child sleeps beside a model aircraft, suggesting a connection to the expectation that the next generation will contribute to industrial and military development. The overall theme of the poster appears to celebrate the virtues of hard work, sacrifice, and dedication to both family and the nation.

The poster employs warm, bright colours to evoke a sense of optimism and ideological fervour. The visual signifiers represent both industrial (e.g. the model aircraft and the tractor) and agricultural (e.g. the peasant woman and farm tools) aspects of socialist construction in Maoist China. Within this context, the woman is portrayed as an omnipotent all-rounder—capable of performing agricultural labour, managing household responsibilities, and fulfilling her role as a mother. Her excellence is sanctioned by the state, yet she continues to work diligently and embody Maoist ideals. The poster exemplifies the "double oppression" borne by women at the time: one rooted in the gendered division of labour within the family, and the other imposed by the state and political apparatus (Li, 1996: 89). It also reflects the scarcity of productivity and the underdeveloped economy of the Maoist era, which justified the mobilisation of women for socialist construction. Meanwhile, the image prompts critical questions: How is the woman expected to endure demanding farm work

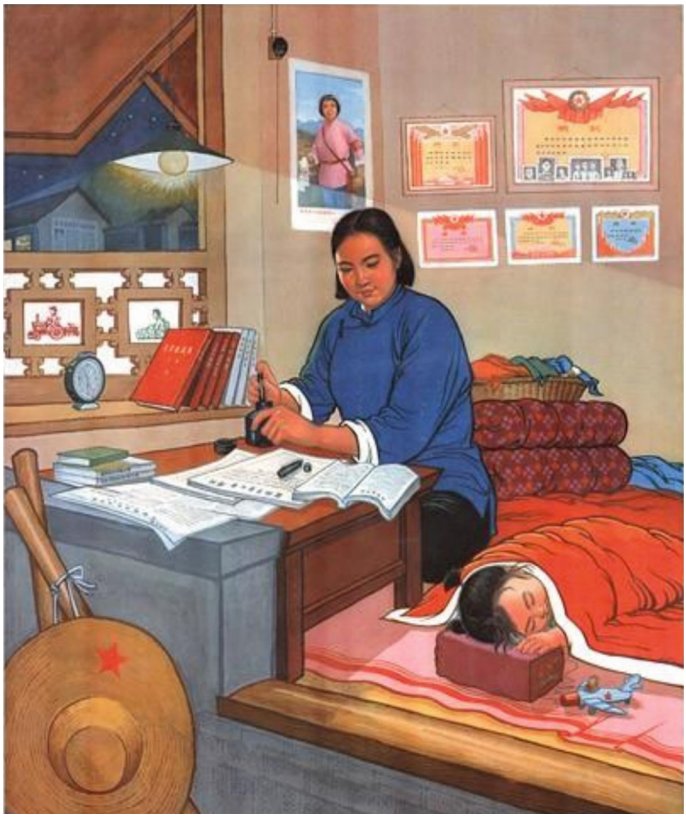

**Fig. 2.1** Awake in the Middle of the Night (*Data source* Zhigui Liu [1974])

by day while sacrificing rest at night? The absence of men in the domestic space foregrounds the erasure of male responsibility and underscores the gendered expectations placed on women. What roles, if any, do men play in domestic labour such as needlework and child-rearing? These questions resonate with broader scholarly debates on socialist state feminism and socialist gender ideologies, which next section will examine.

## 2.2 Socialist State Feminism: Gender Erasure in the Name of Equality

A growing body of scholars has explored Chinese socialist state feminism, with an emphasis on consolidating and re-evaluating the socialist past as a historical legacy and a distinctive resource for guiding feminist movements in postsocialist China (Barlow, 2004; Song, 2012; Spakowski, 2018; Wang, 2017). Chinese feminisms remain linked to state feminism administered by the Chinese Communist Party and have the potential to generate critical discourses from this historical connection (Yang, 1999). *State feminism* was originally a Scandinavian concept, coined and developed in the 1960s (Hernes, 1987). It referred to government efforts to dismantle the structural foundations of gender inequality by shifting women's reproduction a public matter rather than a private one and by increasing women's employment in the state sector in positions of power (Hatem, 1992). As a historical strategy and a term circulating across welfare states and socialist orders, state feminism refers to the process through which feminism becomes institutionalised within state agencies across diverse political and economic contexts.

In *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1964*, Wang Zheng (2017) provides definitions for both socialist feminists and state feminists. Socialist feminists refer to "feminists identified with theories of women's liberation developed by socialists globally since the nineteenth century, specifically to those feminists who joined the CCP" (2017: 5). Feminists with the CCP believed that women's emancipation could only be realised under a socialist regime that abolishes private property and eradicates social hierarchies. Meanwhile, state feminists refer to "feminists in the CCP who took on various official posts after the CCP gained control of the state in 1949" (2017: 7). According to Wang, the term 'socialist feminists' emphasises the socialist regime, while 'state feminists' highlights feminists who held official positions of power within the state.

Nicola Spakowski coined the term critical socialist feminism to emphasise "the socialist past as a distinctive feature of China in global comparison," while acknowledging its drawbacks (Spakowski, 2018: 581). Spakowski situates the concept within both Chinese national and transnational scholarship on gender and feminism, as well as within its ideological context, aiming to integrate ongoing discussions of socialist feminism in postsocialist China and to enrich research on international socialist feminism by taking socialist history as a point of departure. The CCP did

not use the term feminism (*nüquan zhuyi*) in official discourse; instead, it referred to socialist women's liberation to emphasise Chinese particularity and to foreground a distinctly socialist approach to women's issues (Song, 2011; Spakowski, 2018). Critical socialist feminism "recognises the complexities, ambiguities, and deficiencies of the socialist experience" (Spakowski, 2018: 581). The notion of postsocialism underscores the significance of socialism in contemporary China, regarding history as a key factor that continues to influence the institutional and discursive aspects of present-day China. It also signifies an intricate interplay of "continuities and ruptures between the socialist past and the present" (Spakowski, 2018: 564), reflecting the transformations brought about by the Reform and Opening Up policy of the 1980s and the neoliberal turn of the 1990s (Harvey, 2005).

The re-evaluation (*chong gu*) of socialism—viewing it as a historical legacy and a resource—can be attributed to the collective memory and representations of socialism in postsocialist times (Song, 2012). In Katja Guenther's article on feminist organisations in postsocialist Eastern Europe, Guenther (2011) contended that collective memories evolve in response to recent events, sometimes generating strong anti-socialist sentiments, while at other times and in different contexts, they stimulate nostalgia for the socialist past. Nevertheless, the various calls for a reappraisal of socialist feminism do not imply an uncritical acceptance of the socialist past. As Spakowski suggests, socialist feminism in China is more "retrospective rather than prospective" (2018: 578). Viewing socialist feminism as a historical legacy is a valuable reference for contemporary feminist thought and is more a point to departure (Min & Liu, 2010: 10). Highlighting the socialist feminist historical legacy denotes that 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (*zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi*) continues to play an essential role in contemporary China.

In socialist China, the most oppressed groups—namely workers, peasants, and women—were selected to embody the egalitarian ideals of the new socialist order and were mobilised as the revolutionary base. Women were not recognised as a distinct social class, and few explicit gendered references appeared in the discourse of women's liberation. Biological differences between women and men were downplayed in order to emphasise that women's physical capacity could contribute equally to economic and productive labour (Yang, 2011). Although women were mobilised into agricultural and industrial production, they remained largely excluded from the sphere of public discourse, which was

controlled by the state (Min & Liu, 2010). Rather, women's oppression was subsumed within the dominant narrative of class struggle. Women were constructed as a national subject and collective political agent, primarily defined through class and political labels (Evans, 2008a; Kloet, 2008). The socialist state prioritised class struggle over gender issues. Women's emancipation was contingent upon the recognition of their identities as members of the working class and peasantry. The discourse of women's liberation, integral to the communist gender programme since the early 1920s, was largely a top-down initiative promulgated by the socialist patriarchal state, rather than an autonomous, progressive, and participatory movement (Yang, 2007). Maoist gender ideology drew on Marxist theory, which identified women's liberation as a crucial element in the transition to socialism. Gender equality was conceptualised as "a component of a broad program of social transformation oriented toward the eradication of class and socio-economic differentials" (Evans, 2008b: 12).

In Maoist era, social and economic policies were oriented towards egalitarianism, aiming to eliminate 'three major distinctions' (*sanda chayi)*. The distinctions were between rural and urban, industry and agriculture, and physical and mental labour. The state framed gender hierarchy primarily as an economic and class issue, while largely neglecting the cultural dimensions of gender inequality. Within this context, gender was instrumentalised as a resource for nation-building. Women's emancipation was subordinated to "state policy," and any notion of "autonomy" was constrained by its inseparability from hegemonic politics (Barlow, 2001: 1288). The concept of "proletarian-based socialist female subjectivity" (Chen, 2003: 268) rendered women as asexual "national resources" (Zhong, 2006: 654). This entailed a form of "situated agency" (Chen, 2003: 268) and a multi-layered liberation at the intersections of national, international, and citizenship spheres, which were constructed to advance socialist modernity rather than to foreground women's independent decision-making.

Furthermore, women's liberation was closely linked to the structural transformations brought about by collectivisation; however, domestic and household labour remained excluded from collectivisation efforts. The slogan "Women hold up half the sky" affirmed the principle of gender equality in a literal sense and primarily served to mobilise women into manual labour in public sphere but did not prompt men to share responsibilities for domestic work and child-rearing in the private sphere (Meng &

Huang, 2017). Consequently, the dual burden of unpaid domestic labour alongside waged work in the People's Communes meant that women earned approximately one-half to one-third fewer work points than their male counterparts for comparable labour (Tsai, 1996). In Maoist era, the gender wage gap and structural inequalities within the household were largely overlooked and, to some extent, sanctioned by the state.[4] Housework was predominantly carried out by women and remained "unrecognised and uncompensated" (Meng & Huang, 2017: 26). As Zhang Yue, the host of the talk show *Half the Sky*, stated, "Women laboured outside the home, just like men, but when they got home, they had to do everything… Women discovered that equality meant a double burden" (International Herald Tribune, 2012). Despite official rhetoric promoting gender equality, the persistence of the gendered division of labour within private realms remained unchallenged.

Finally, the androgynous 'iron girls' portrayed in state propaganda—as icons of socialist state feminism—challenged the legitimacy of exemplary Confucian women from the feudal era, who were defined by their obedience to patriarchal authority, restricted mobility, lack of education, and confinement to the domestic sphere (Chen, 2003: 272). However, 'iron girls' were often understood as requiring "a reformed body," conventionally interpreted as a masculinised body (Chen, 2003: 271). The notion of gender equality masked the yearning for true gender equality through the processes of "degendering and neutralising" (*zhongxinghua*) women (Shih, 2002: 100) and "masculinising the feminine" (Min, 2007: 180). The state established a hegemonic view of women as gender neutral. The state-sanctioned notion of gender equality "hid an implicit male norm" (Shih, 2002: 100); that is, it was framed from a male reference point and lacked consideration for the differences among women, both as a collective and as individuals. Women's liberation implied that women were equal to men only when they acted as socialist constructors deployed for state-building, not when women were 'women' (Li, quoted by Shih, 2002). The so-called liberation was operated through male standards and initiated by male politicians within a male-dominated political system (Li & Zhang, 1994). Meanwhile, femininity and sexual

[4] According to the article 'Safeguard the Health of Women and Children in Rural Areas' in *People's Daily* (1956), women's participation in agricultural production and their responsibility for childcare were regarded as inherent duties and obligations that distinguished them from men.

intimacy, especially premarital sexual intimacy, were regarded as frivolous, decadent, and detrimental to socialist values (Godfrey, 2004). Maoist gender ideology foreclosed the recognition of gendered differences by constructing women as subjects analogous to men, a process that frequently resulted in female self-sacrifice and self-negation (Yang, 2007). Women were "granted equality by fiat by the state" and gender equality was 'achieved' through the denial of women as a distinct and collective gender (Dai, 2002; Shih, 2002: 105). Consequently, women's rights to gender equality were passively received as state-granted entitlements rather than actively pursued through autonomous activism. In this framework, it was the state—not women themselves—that liberated women.

As noted at the beginning of this section, the question of what it means to be a woman is a deeply politicised issue. In tandem with China's transition from socialism to postsocialism, constructions of womanhood and femininity have also undergone significant transformation. The following section will focus on women's processes of self-discovery, self-awareness, and seemingly autonomous choice within the context of postsocialist and neoliberal China. I will examine how the Reform and Opening Up (*gaige kaifang*) policy and neoliberal transformations have contributed to the regendering of women and the renewed emphasis on the gender binary in this period. During the post-revolutionary and reform era, the project of women's liberation was increasingly overshadowed by the predominant imperative of modernisation.

## 2.3 Refeminisation of Women in Postsocialist China

The vicissitude from socialist to postsocialist China was a complex and multifaceted process, involving fundamental economic reforms, ideological shifts, the rise of consumer culture in urban contexts, and increasing integration into global and transnational capitalist markets. This transition transformed the social construction of femininity, moving from the erasure of gender under socialism to the resurgence of sexual difference, the refeminisation and the further sexualisation of women. It underscores the provisionality and instability of socialist state feminism, as a more overt patriarchal culture rapidly and effortlessly gained renewed dominance with the embrace of a market-oriented economy and the influx of transnational capital in the postsocialist era (Yang, 1999).

During the Dengist era (1976–1989), the Chinese Communist Party shifted its priorities from large-scale class struggle to economic reform, under the banners of "experimentation" and "transformation" (Heilman & Perry, 2011: 7). In 1978, amid political uncertainty following Mao's death in 1976 and years of economic stagnation, PRC Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping launched the Opening-Up policy and a market-oriented reform agenda that transformed China from "a closed backwater to an open centre of capitalist dynamism" (Harvey, 2005: 1). The previously small-scale, self-sufficient agricultural economy gave way to one increasingly focussed on manufacturing and services. China began to embrace international trade and cultural exchange, albeit under continued state supervision. However, the economic transformation was accompanied by growing social inequality, as the reforms signalled a retreat from the state's collective responsibilities in areas such as housing, healthcare, and job allocation.

In 1982, at the opening ceremony of the Chinese Communist Party's 12th National Congress, Deng Xiaoping highlighted China's peculiar project of building "socialism with Chinese characteristics." China managed to combine a market economy with centralised control. The term provides the rationale for China's economic and political path, as well as its ideological justification in response to globalisation (Huang, 2023). However, ideological debates were largely set aside in favour of prioritising economic development through deepening reforms. Deng Xiaoping proposed the "cat theory" and coined the dictum, "development is the hard truth" (*fazhan cai shi ying daoli*). The cat theory suggests that it does not matter whether a cat is black or white—if it can catch mice, it is a good cat. Cats of different colours metaphorically represent different political regimes, while the ability to catch mice symbolises a pragmatic approach to marketisation.

The reforms can be broadly divided into two major phases: the rural reform phase (1978–1984) and the urban reform phase, which began in 1984 (Wang, 2004). The rural reform phase aimed to address rural issues and narrow the income gap between rural and urban residents. It focussed on two key areas: the dismantling of the People's Communes through state-led land redistribution and the implementation of the household responsibility system; and the increase in agricultural product prices alongside the promotion of rural industrial development. These measures resulted in the de-collectivisation of the People's Communes—completed by 1983—and stimulated a wave of rural industrialisation (Rofel, 2007).

Urban reform encompassed various societal aspects, centring on the principle of decentralising power and resources by transferring certain state-controlled social assets to private enterprises. A major focus of urban reform in the mid-1990s was the large-scale restructuring of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which resulted in the layoff of millions of factory workers. This SOE reform marked a significant turning point in China's economic trajectory, fundamentally transforming the urban labour market. Under socialism, SOEs had been the primary employers of urban residents, shaping much of the urban workforce landscape. As key sectors of the economy, SOEs guaranteed employees job security, welfare, and pension benefits. The restructuring involved expanding their autonomy, allowing some to "close, freeze, combine, transfer, or redistribute," thereby fundamentally shifting both management practices and productive relations (Wang, 2004: 13). The share of SOEs and urban collectives in total urban employment dropped significantly, from 75.7% in 1995 to 33.4% in 2002 (China's National Bureau of Statistics, 2005). Privatisation and public-sector downsising led to massive layoffs in the state sector and a surge in unemployment (Yang, 2007). In Maoist China, the working class was glorified and celebrated as 'working-class big brothers,' as the CCP closely aligned itself with the interests of workers and peasants. Nevertheless, the restructuring of SOEs dismantled the 'iron rice bowl' (*tie fan wan*), the state's guarantee of job security and livelihood, long valued under socialism.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union marked the end of the Cold War and signalled the onset of neoliberalism's global dominance in economic and political structures (Wang, 2004). Unlike the Soviet Bloc, China did not adopt the shock therapy approach of rapid privatisation in its transition from a planned to a market economy. Instead, under the continued authority of its political system, China had already embarked on radical economic reforms. Reform and Opening Up generated significant economic growth and enabled the Chinese Communist Party to remain the only ruling Communist party while overseeing one of the world's largest capitalist economies.

In the postsocialist and post–Cold War era, the (re)introduction of gender difference, sexuality, and desire has been central to constituting new subjectivities within China's neoliberal transformations (Rofel, 2007). Neoliberalism is not merely a political and economic regime that governs individuals to fulfil its interests. Rather, it encompasses "the messy

dynamics of attachment, self-continuity, and the reproduction of life that are the material scenes of living on in the present" (Berlant, 2011: 15). Maoist era witnessed an erasure of gender and sexuality through an ostensibly gender-neutral political discourse, in which women were encouraged to embody traditionally masculine qualities, epitomised by the figure of the 'iron girl.' The shortage of commodities was also a contributing factor to the plain, unisex style of dress worn by both women and men in Maoist China. The political discourse of gender equality positioned the male gender as the normative standard to which women were expected to conform, assimilating femininity into masculinity (Yang, 1999). Meanwhile, during the period when class struggle was prioritised, a feminine appearance was interpreted as indicative of petit bourgeois tendencies and associated with a capitalist, decadent lifestyle.

China has entered a postsocialist phase. This does not mean the disappearance of the socialist regime, as socialist legacies continue to endure. Nevertheless, the state no longer wields the same power it once had to dominate popular imagination and shape horizons of aspiration. Economic reforms have granted people greater economic independence, while the rise of consumer culture in the 1990s has provided new, non-political avenues for pursuing social status (Link et al., 2002). China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 marked a critical step in its integration into the global economy, ushering in a deeper phase of opening-up that required compliance with international trade rules, tariff reductions, and further market liberalisation. At the same time, new media and technologies have broken the government's monopoly over information. The transition from socialism to postsocialism has given rise to what Lisa Rofel terms "desiring China" (2007: 13) and to the formation of "desiring subjects" (2007: 23). Economic reforms have reconfigured social classes and stimulated a diverse array of desires. These desiring individuals articulate new subjectivities shaped by individualism, cosmopolitanism, consumerism, and emerging forms of sexual identity.

In the postsocialist era, processes of refeminisation have increasingly shaped both media representations and the lived experiences of women. In their research on "The New Chinese Woman and Lifestyle Magazines in the Late 1990s," Andrews and Shen (2002) detail the qualities that represented the ideal of the new woman at that time. The cover girls of women-targeted pictorial magazines such as *Elle, Cosmopolitan, and Metropolis* displayed "an attractive, regular face, a pleasant smile, and

sparkling eyes" (2002: 149), wore makeup and feminine attire such as miniskirts and designer suits, and were surrounded by a seemingly endless array of desirable consumables and imported goods. They are typically portrayed as elegant and educated women, often holding upscale white-collar positions or succeeding as female entrepreneurs, and presented as aspirational role models. While the aspirations promoted by these women's magazines were likely beyond the reach of most Chinese people in the 1990s, they were historically and contextually influential in shaping the imagination and expectations of idealised femininity and modern living at that time.

## 2.4 Postfeminism in Western Literature

The notion and language of postfeminism is contested and intriguing. Originating in the West, it nonetheless retains theoretical vitality that transcends national boundaries within the lexicon of feminist media and cultural analysis. It first appeared in Susan Bolotin's article "Voices from the post-feminist generation," published in *The New York Times* on October 17, 1982. The article presents personal reflections of a university-educated feminist woman on her evolving understanding of feminism, alongside her critical observations of people's attitudes toward feminism in the United States during the 1980s. In the article, the postfeminist generation refers to the group of people—predominantly women—who no longer label themselves as feminists. This disavowal arises from selectively defined and potentially subjective conceptions of feminism, coupled with the stigmatisation of feminists as unhappy, shrill, and tortured. The repudiation of feminism signified a rejection not only of the anger and resentment associated with feminism but also of the stereotype held by the man next door, who viewed feminists as lesbians and man-haters. Identifying as a feminist was seen as a throwback and "the anomalies of a radical decade" (Bolotin, 1982). Here, postfeminism can be conceived as a backlash against feminism, despite its ambiguous and often contradictory constitution of both feminist and anti-feminist discourses. The 'post' in postfeminist generation carries connotations of both 'after' and 'repudiation.'

Since the early 1980s, postfeminism has gradually emerged as both a discursive phenomenon and a journalistic buzzword to describe the social and cultural milieu in the English-speaking world, wherein young women often eschew the feminist label, perceiving themselves as beneficiaries of the battles fought by earlier feminist generations (McRobbie,

2009; Tasker & Negra, 2007). Feminism is deemed obsolete and unnecessary and is thus dismissed or negated. Postfeminism captures intricate dynamics that extend beyond the binary opposition of pro-feminist versus anti-feminist positions, intertwining attitudes toward feminism's past with the incorporation of sex-positive femininity into popular culture; rather than adhering to the more familiar framing concept of 'backlash' commonly associated with second-wave feminism (Faludi, 1992; Tasker & Negra, 2007: 1). In feminist cultural studies, postfeminism indicates a set of contradictory discourses that simultaneously "respond to, disavow, and individualise feminist politics" (McDermott, 2022: 3).

To some extent, postfeminist culture is predicated on the rejection and neglect of gender inequality, alongside notions asserting that efforts to promote gender equality have become "a spent force" and are no longer needed (McRobbie, 2009: 12). Under the banner of emancipation and empowerment, women are encouraged to believe that they are entitled to 'have it all' and are thereby positively incited to embrace commercialised forms of femininity and to celebrate seemingly autonomous pleasures through consumer engagement (Lazar, 2009; McRobbie, 2009). Commercialised expressions of sexuality and the assertion of 'girl power' or 'grrrl style' constitute central elements of postfeminist narratives (Garrison, 2000). By incorporating and naturalising a feminist agenda within consumer capitalist culture (Tasker & Negra, 2007), discourses of women's liberation and agency become closely linked to consumption and aspiration. The emphatic emphasis on individualism, self-empowerment, and personal choice—framed within a depoliticised rhetoric—implies a retreat of gender politics from political and collective endeavour.

A prominent characteristic of postfeminism lies in its conceptual ambiguity and inherent contradictions. This is partly due to the interpretation of the prefix 'post.' The use of a hyphen in postfeminism is controversial, reflecting the debate surrounding the adoption of the term postfeminism or postfeminism and the various attempts to demonstrate how the notion of postfeminism transforms across historical phases and national borders. The spelling of 'postfeminism' varies among scholars and writers; some prefer the closed form 'postfeminism' (Gill, 2007; Tasker & Negra, 2007), whereas others use the hyphenated form 'post-feminism' (McRobbie, 2009). Some researchers alternate the formatting of the term over time (Dosekun, 2015, 2020). Postfeminism stresses the historical progression or temporal aspect, while postfeminism focuses more on describing cultural or theoretical phenomenon.

Postfeminism has been commonly theorised through three interrelated conceptual dimensions. First, postfeminism indicates an epistemological shift within feminism expressing intersections with other 'posts'—post-modernism, post-civil-rights discourse, and post-structuralism (Brooks, 1997: 113; Tasker & Negra, 2007). In this sense, postfeminism engages directly with feminism—at times adopting a celebratory tone, while at other times attributing contemporary anxieties to a past politics now regarded as misconceived (Projansky, 2001). Postfeminism chimes with postmodernism in several ways. Both, being highly contested, are often described as buzzwords that capture a general mood or Zeitgeist. Post-modernism can be understood as a renunciation of all preceding epochs of thought, particularly modernism and the legacy of the Enlightenment project (Lyotard, 1984). Similarly, postfeminism entails the disavowal of feminism, while nevertheless retaining it within its discursive frame. More significantly, both are closely associated with late capitalism and with emerging configurations of work, leisure, and consumption that flourish within contemporary culture (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Second, postfeminism can function as a backlash against feminism, marked by anti-feminist sentiment—a retreat from collective feminist ideals, premised on the notion that the old battles have been won and that it is now time for celebration (Anderson, 2015; Faludi, 1992; Sommers, 1994; Whittier, 1995; Wolf, 1991). This provides the rationale for an entire repertoire of consumerist practices that appeal to and target women as consumers oriented toward leisure and hedonism. Third, postfeminism is understood as a historical shift—a time after the second-wave feminism—emerging as a more individualistic and commercially oriented substitute (Dow, 1996; Roiphe, 1993). Postfeminism as a social and cultural phenomenon is inseparable from the broader context of the 1990s, marked by the rise of the free market and neoliberalism in Western societies. Judith Butler suggests that "perhaps there is an opportunity at this juncture of cultural politics, a period that some would call 'postfeminist,' to reflect from within a feminist perspective on the injunction to construct a subject of feminism" (1990: 7). The provisional status of postfeminism means it does not simply signify the demise of feminism. Rather, postfeminism signifies an ongoing transformation in feminist theory (Gill, 2007). Given the persistent gender inequalities contemporary women continue to face, a feminist perspective remains essential both when interrogating postfeminism and when delineating other gendered projects. Rosalind Gill has explicitly stated that she is a feminist analyst of postfeminist culture, not

a postfeminist analyst (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill, 2017). I align with Gill's position regarding postfeminism, viewing it as an object of critical analysis rather than as an analytical perspective or "a theoretical orientation, new moment of feminism or straightforward backlash" (Gill & Scharff, 2011: 4).

The three approaches outlined above capture the essential elements of postfeminism identified over the past three decades. Nevertheless, they fall short when confronted with a more complex landscape—particularly in understanding postfeminism within contemporary media culture, its transnational dimensions amid globalisation and neoliberalism, and its manifestations in post-pandemic recessionary contexts. Despite the variations in time and context, the inherently contradictory nature of postfeminism endures. Postfeminist discourses involve a "double entanglement" of both feminist and anti-feminist ideas (McRobbie, 2004: 255). Within such discourses, feminist ideas are simultaneously acknowledged while being "articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed" (Gill, 2007: 163). By recognising feminist achievements, this paradoxical "taking into account" facilitates the process through which feminist politics are undermined or dismantled (McRobbie, 2009: 12).

Apart from its intrinsic connection to feminism, postfeminism also has an intimate relation with neoliberalism. Rosalind Gill introduces the concept of the postfeminist sensibility and highlights its synergies with neoliberalism, proposing that postfeminism "is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas" (2007: 164). Gill outlines the postfeminist sensibility as marked by integral elements consisting of notions that "femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference" (2007: 147). Understanding postfeminism as a sensibility highlights postfeminism as "a circulating set of ideas, images and meanings" and provides a more open psychologic approach to explore affect and psychological construction in popular culture (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020: 5). It also shows that the sentiment of postfeminism has the potential to break through the constraint of specific geographic locations and is not necessarily exclusive to the "white and middle class by default" (Tasker & Negra, 2007: 3). The concept of the postfeminist sensibility has since shaped how scholars across the world engage with postfeminism.

The "ever-growing cultural ubiquity" of postfeminism has facilitated a wide range of scholarly examinations (McDermott, 2022: 4). At the same time, it has generated "a growing sense of frustration" due to its "dubious utility" (McDermott, 2022: 5). The "interrelated themes" that constitute Gill's notion of the postfeminist sensibility have, in practice, become something of a checklist through which researchers classify texts that correspond to them (Gill, 2007: 147). Handyside and Taylor-Jones further argue that this tendency risks a "tautological approach" (2016: 5), in which media texts are selected largely on the basis of how closely they reflect the very elements used to define the postfeminist sensibility. This approach can be limiting, as it tends to produce predetermined outcomes and overlook contextual differences (Jia, 2023). It risks leading scholarship on postfeminism into an "echo chamber of repetition and reinforcement" (Negra, 2009: 9), while also perpetuating the lack of critical and contextual specificity (McDermott, 2022). Given the pervasiveness of postfeminist narratives in cultural and media texts, the task of collecting and analysing relevant discourses from a critical perspective can become tedious and frustrating, since "its message requires little unpacking and lies prominently on the surface of these narratives" (Whelehan, 2010: 159).

The sense of fatigue surrounding research on postfeminism is widespread, particularly as feminism has (re)gained popularity and grown more visible and accessible to a broad public following the transnational #MeToo movement of the late 2010s. With the resurgence of interest in feminism and its spectacular visibility in the media, understandings of postfeminism have become increasingly fragmented. Gill (2016) therefore introduces the notion of post-postfeminism—with a question mark—as an attempt to explore the new visibility of popular feminism and the diverse feminist voices circulating in the media. In response to Gill's inquiry, Banet-Weiser contends that postfeminism, alongside other forms of gender activism, constitutes the historical antecedent of popular feminism. According to her, postfeminism has provided "necessary conditions for a popular feminism to flourish in the current moment" (2018: 18), and "popular feminism emerges within the ongoing ethos and sensibility of postfeminism" (2018: 19). Consequently, labelling the present stage as merely "post-postfeminist" risks producing a sense of "boredom and ennui which trouble a feminist cultural critic attempting to make sense of the postfeminist distractions of popular culture" (Whelehan, 2010: 159).

Reacting to the growing frustration in research on postfeminism, scholars have gradually turned to exploring its affective configurations and implications (Gill, 2017; Jia, 2022; McDermott, 2022). Ten years after the publication of "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of A Sensibility," Gill suggests that the interrelated elements of postfeminist sensibility continue to resonate, yet have become the hegemonic "new normal," intensifying their hold on contemporary society (2017: 606). Postfeminism is not merely "a novel and distinctive sensibility," but "instantiates a common sense that operates as a kind of gendered neoliberalism" (2017: 606). Conceiving postfeminism as the new normal, Gill (2017) outlines the distinctiveness of its contemporary dynamics. First, like neoliberalism, postfeminism has strengthened its grip on society, becoming an almost ubiquitous hegemonic presence. Influenced by globalisation and neo-globalisation, postfeminism has crossed borders, making its "edges or borders" increasingly difficult to discern (2017: 609). Second, it marks an important shift toward research on the affective life of postfeminism, emphasising how it "sets up norms and polices the kinds of feelings and emotions that are permissible, indeed intelligible" (Gill, 2017: 610). The postfeminist sensibility increasingly relies not only on "an individualised register," but also on a psychological discursive strategy that cultivates the 'right' dispositions for navigating neoliberal society—such as aspiration, confidence, resilience, and positivity (Gill, 2017: 610). Gill further explores the affective and psychic dimensions of postfeminism, arguing that "postfeminist culture calls forth a subject incited to work on her character and psychic dispositions; it also works by attempting to shape what and how women are enabled to feel and how their emotional states should be presented" (2017: 618). Furthermore, drawing on Williams' concept of structure of feeling, sensibility is an underdeveloped term used to highlight how notions are produced in interaction with the less coherent, affective, and 'feeling' qualities that shape the experience of a particular cultural moment (Riley et al., 2017). The concept of sensibility thus emphasises the affective dimensions of postfeminism, accommodating a more fluid and experiential understanding of femininity.

Responding to the growing research interest in the "affective, cultural and psychic life" of postfeminism (Gill, 2017: 606), McDermott (2022) in *Feel-Bad Postfeminism* examines the affective dimensions of postfeminism that shape female subjectivity in girlhood coming-of-age genres within Anglo-American contexts. She investigates postfeminism's affective

enactments—the ways it provides women with "conceptual structuring principles for how to live, think and feel" (McDermott, 2022: 29). McDermott offers a nuanced analysis of the affective contract of postfeminism, generated through recurrent themes of happiness, fulfilment, and self-actualisation, framed under the ideals of empowerment and the fantasy of a good life. *Feel-Bad Postfeminism* provides incisive insights into gendered subject-making strategies in post-pandemic neoliberal society, where personal resilience and positive dispositions are promoted as remedies for individual hardships and as tools for navigating unforeseen challenges.

While the postfeminist sensibility remains relevant and pervasive in popular media, the broader cultural climate and ethos of postfeminism require recalibration and reassessment in the wake of the boom-and-bust economic model (Genz, 2017). Research on postfeminism in the early 2000s was characterised by "optimism, entitlement and the opportunities of prosperity" (Genz, 2017: 18). In the post-2008 recessionary context, discourses of self-choice, consumerism, and empowerment remain widespread and influential, yet postfeminist narratives increasingly emphasise "the experiences of precarity, risk, and the insistence on self-responsibilisation" (Genz, 2017: 18). Following the post-2008 recession, "neoliberalism's commercial logic appears less as an individual entitlement and more a corporate obligation and institutionalised compulsion, requiring austerity-weary citizens to climb the ladder of social mobility" (Genz, 2017: 20). This intensified neoliberalism has heightened competition across society, driven by the fear of being left behind, and has reshaped the ways in which individuals understand themselves and navigate their lives.

The neoliberal subject is conceived as "a self-sufficient and entrepreneurial agent, responsible for their own performance within the market and empowered by the expectation of self-governance" (Genz, 2017: 19). There has been a shift from the discourse of 'top girls'—who 'have it all' in the 1990s and early 2000s—to the 'can't do' girls, or recessionary neoliberal girls. The figure of the top girl embodies "capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility and participation" (McRobbie, 2009: 56). In contrast, the 'can't do' girl is characterised by high self-esteem and self-worship, embracing a life of "justified aimlessness" (Fuller & Driscoll, 2015: 257) with the looming threat of being relegated to "the new precariat" (Bauman, 2004: 76). Within the context of intensified neoliberalism, recessionary neoliberal

girls have little choice but to conform to "a more productive and lucrative brand of individualism" under the guise of self-responsibility (Genz, 2017: 28). In this environment, postfeminist empowerment functions as a transformative imperative, emphasising resilience alongside qualities such as flexibility and self-reliance (McDermott, 2022). These traits become the idealised capacities that future girls are expected to cultivate to avoid marginalisation in a recessionary society.

## 2.5 Conceptualising Postfeminism Transnationally

It is widely argued that the *proper* female subject at the centre of postfeminist discourse is young, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and middle-class (Projansky, 2001; Tasker & Negra, 2007). In her article "For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion" (2013), Jess Butler proposes an intersectional approach to postfeminism to examine how postfeminist narratives reinstate and reinforce white Western superiority while reproducing inequalities of race, gender, and sexuality. Rather than conceiving postfeminism as merely linear, a backlash, a sex-positive celebration of female empowerment, or "a quasi-politicised subjectivity," Jess Butler suggests that it is more productive to conceptualise postfeminism as "a complex, broad, and increasingly hegemonic ethos, sensibility, or discursive formation" (2013: 45). The versatile, pervasive, and adaptable feature of postfeminism enables it to traverse diverse and complex social terrains while safeguarding its central ideals of individualism, personal choice, and empowerment. This flexibility allows postfeminist discourse to appeal to women across racial backgrounds, encouraging them to engage with media representations under the assumption that they are all "assimilated 'equal' beneficiaries of the 'same' rights that feminism supposedly provided white women" (Projansky, 2001: 87). Yet, such discourses often function to obscure and erase the intersecting oppressions of gender, race, sexuality, and class that continue to shape many women's lived experiences.

To examine how non-white women in the United States "adopt, internalise, negotiate, and challenge" the hegemonic ideas about race, gender, sexuality, and class that postfeminist discourse reproduces and reinforces, Butler proposes rethinking postfeminism in terms of "cultural ownership" and questioning "what kinds of claims and boundaries are constructed by different social groups across a variety of social contexts" (2013: 49).

Similarly, Projansky (2001: 89) advocates understanding postfeminism as "a versatile cultural discourse" or "a cultural discursive strategy," which avoids framing it within a linear historical trajectory that depicts postfeminism as the death of feminism. Indeed, Projansky resists defining postfeminism as "the natural updated progeny of (a no-longer needed) feminism along an evolutionary continuum" (2001: 88). It can be argued that the emergence of the term postfeminism is directly tied to the early 1980s as a particular historical moment. However, framing postfeminism solely in relation to that moment risks obscuring the complex and ongoing relationships between feminism and postfeminism. Approaching postfeminism discursively—as "a cultural discourse, an attitude, a reaction formation, [and] an always available hegemonic response to feminism"—makes it possible to interrogate how postfeminism engages with and reacts to feminist narratives. As Projansky contends, postfeminism aims "to steal rather than to supersede feminism" (2001: 88).

In *Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture*, Simidele Dosekun (2020) examines the female subjectivity of class-privileged young Nigerian women who habitually dress and present themselves in spectacularly feminine styles, analysing this through the lens of postfeminism. While acknowledging that postfeminism is predominantly understood as an authentic, distinctly Western concept—and that most existing scholarship on the topic is situated in the West—Dosekun highlights the dominant blind spots in postfeminist literature that render Black African women, who are neither white nor Western, virtually invisible. She poses two fundamental and interrelated questions: Is postfeminism really for white girls? And is it only for Western girls? In response, Dosekun suggests the racial hierarchy within feminisms, in which Western feminists can invoke 'Other feminists' for "self-referential and self-confirmatory purposes" (Mohanty, 1988, as cited in Dosekun, 2020: 6). The central argument of Dosekun's work is that "postfeminism is transnationalised or rendered transnational culture readily and easily via the media, commodity, consumer, migratory, and other connectivities that today crisscross the world more widely, more densely, and more rapidly than ever before" (2020: 14). The transnational understanding of postfeminism functions as a mediated and commodified discourse that intersects with migration issues and women-oriented material practices. Through pervasive discourses of consumerism and individualism, postfeminism circulates and travels across national boundaries.

A transnational understanding of postfeminism is noteworthy in three ways. First, it challenges the rigid binary division of "the West and the Rest" (Hall, 1996: 185), thereby enabling researchers to move beyond and traverse these boundaries. Grewal explains that the division between 'the West' and 'the non-West' was "produced through European colonialism [and] rearticulated continually to inform the inequalities that demarcated wealthy nations from 'developing' countries" (2005: 25). These divisions—West/Global North and non-West/Global South—not only denote geographical locations but are also hegemonically and "dialectically constituted and differentiated by historicised discourses, imaginaries, and material inequalities" (Dosekun, 2015: 961). It is important to note the uneven and asymmetric power relations produced by these divisions, as the dissemination of cultural knowledge tends to flow predominantly in one direction. Second, this approach reflects a postmodern sensibility characterised by the dissolution of cultural boundaries. In the postmodern context, distinctions between cultures blur, and hierarchies of cultural value are increasingly destabilised. The boundaries of nation-states have become far more permeable than in the past, signalling the emergence of alternative forms of cultural interaction and exchange (Long et al., 2022). Dosekun emphasises that the divisions between the West and the non-West are discursively produced and hegemonically sustained. Adopting a transnational perspective enables the critical interrogation of previously taken-for-granted categories within postfeminism and constructions of femininity. The politics embedded in this perspective carry significant cultural resonance and echo popular sentiments about gender and femininity across cultures and nations. Finally, the transnational approach complicates the meaning of 'post' in postfeminism, thereby contesting the historical linearity that frames postfeminism as "the natural updated progeny of feminism" within a predetermined sequence (Projansky, 2001: 88). Such a linear framing is analytically limiting, as it precludes the possibility of feminism and postfeminism coexisting in a more complex, overlapping temporal and ideological configuration.

While acknowledging that extending postfeminism beyond its original contexts may seem "ahistorical and paradoxical," Dosekun (2015: 972) underscores the need to recognise that countries do not share the same feminist histories—such as first- and second-wave feminism—and that, in some contexts, feminism itself is regarded as an exclusively Western cultural import. Understanding postfeminism as a transnational culture in the global South is therefore not an uncritical adoption of foreign

ideas, but rather a purposeful and theoretically informed intervention into debates on the cultural contradictions of globalisation and neoliberalism. This approach has been widely employed in emerging studies that examine postfeminism beyond the Western context (Ge, 2025; Guo, 2022; Jia, 2022, 2024; Loxham, 2021; Yang, 2023). Transnationality remains a key perspective for understanding postfeminism in the context of China, which is the focus of this book. As an elusive concept, transnationality is often invoked but rarely defined. How does the notion of the 'transnational' differ from the 'global'? The following section examines the two concepts by situating them within the overlaps and tensions that arise across cultural, economic, and political domains.

Globalisation is a worldwide process involving interaction and integration among people, institutions, cultures, and technologies, emphasising interconnectedness across boundaries through media, capital flows, and patterns of production and consumption (Hall, 2002). It refers to "social, economic, cultural, and demographic processes that take place within nations but also transcend them" (Kearney, 1995: 548). Appadurai (1990) identifies five dimensions of global cultural flow—migration, media, technology, finance, and ideology—that capture the multiple channels through which globalisation operates. Giddens conceives globalisation as "the intensification of worldwide social relations [with] distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (1991: 64).

In addition, globalisation describes processes and relationships that cross national borders *to some extent*, but not all borders (Hannerz, 1996). More specifically, it reflects a distinctly Euro-American cosmopolitan conception of the 'global' (Smith, 2003). Global mass culture, as a result, is Western-centred and predominantly English-speaking (Hall, 1997). It incorporates Western technology, concentrations of capital, advanced labour practices, and the narratives and imagery of Western societies that collectively shape the contours of global mass culture (Hall, 1997). Similarly, Inderpal Grewal (2005) argues that the term 'global' implies the existence of a single hegemonic mode of power that pervades all places. It is a powerful imagination produced through knowledge circulating along specific transnational networks—a conception rooted in a Euro-American–centred cosmopolitan perspective. Consequently, the 'global' is not—and has never been—truly global, and the will to globalisation was "both profoundly cosmopolitan as well as imperialist" (Grewal, 2005: 22). The power relations among countries

involved in globalisation are central and cannot be ignored. Consequently, globalisation must be understood within specific social contexts, as different countries respond to it in distinct ways.

Building on Grewal's critique of the 'global,' there is a need for a concept that can capture the context-specific and uneven dynamics of cross-border interactions. In contrast to the term 'global,' which can appear all-encompassing and decontextualised, 'transnational' offers a more precise and context-sensitive analytical lens (Chalaby, 2005; Straubhaar, 2007). 'Transnational' is a more modest and adequate way to describe "phenomena which can be of quite variable scale and distribution, even when they do share the characteristic of not being contained within a state" (Hannerz, 1996: 6). Similarly, in the book *Recentring Globalisation*, Koichi Iwabuchi insightfully contends that the term 'transnational' highlights, "in a more locally contextualised manner," the interconnections and asymmetries generated by the multidirectional flow of information and images, as well as the ongoing processes of cultural mixing and the penetration of these messages (2002: 17). It thus effectively bypasses nationally demarcated boundaries through the flow of capital, the migration of people, and the dissemination of media and images. In this sense, postfeminism circulates easily and readily through hyper-feminine imagery, the promotional advertising of Brazilian waxes, and the homogeneous makeup ads that saturate shopping malls in metropolitan cities worldwide.

Grewal proposes the term "transnational connectivities" examine how "subjects, technologies, and ethical practices were created through transnational networks and connections of many different types and within which the 'global' and the 'universal' were created as linked and dominant concepts" (2005: 3). The term "connectivities" emphasises both the extent and diversity of these connections. It also opens up ways to consider why some discourses are translated across contexts while others remain incommensurable during transnational circulation. "Transnational connectivities" is crucial in understanding the production of gendered and racialised subjects at the intersection of geopolitics and biopolitics.

To sum up, the notion of the transnational has two dimensions. First, it refers to the crossing of borders while acknowledging their continued relevance. Transnationalisation highlights the significance of forces that traverse borders, while simultaneously emphasising that these borders persist. National boundaries, therefore, exist to be crossed; in some cases,

they are blurred but remain present. Kearney (1995: 548) distinguishes global processes from transnational ones, arguing that "global processes are largely decentred from specific national territories and take place in a global space, [whereas] transnational processes are anchored in and transcend one or more nation-states." In this sense, transnationalism overlaps with globalisation but generally allows fewer participatory options for individual countries.

Second, the transnational denotes a process that reflects the imbrication of multiple dimensions within a single artefact or phenomenon. Hall (1997: 27) argues that "global and local are two faces of the same movement from one epoch of globalisation." In the context of transnationalism, the global, local, and regional are interconnected and mutually influential. For example, a television format can be considered transnational because it combines an immutable structural framework with local elements that vary across territories. This process similarly applies at the cultural level: the transnationalisation of culture involves the absorption, combination, and integration of elements from multiple cultures (Morley & Robins, 1995). In summary, an artefact or phenomenon is transnational when it transcends borders while being shaped by different territories and is embedded across multiple spatial dimensions.

To what extent can postfeminism be considered a transnational culture? Does a transnational culture exist within the uneven dissemination of global mass and popular culture? More precisely, under what circumstances can postfeminism be applied in the context of postsocialist China? To address these questions, the discussion first examines the relationship between postfeminism and neoliberalism, focussing on whether neoliberalism can be global or transnational. It then relates postfeminism to debates on transnational feminism (Kaplan et al., 1999), exploring whether transnational feminism provides an appropriate framework for analysing postfeminist sensibility in postsocialist China.

Postfeminism originated as a Western concept, emerging as a version of post–second-wave feminism and operating as a form of gendered neoliberalism (Gill, 2017). As a form of 'contemporary gender ideology,' postfeminism is shaped by and connected to broader social changes, particularly neoliberal ideologies (Butler, 2013: 41). Since the early twenty-first century, neoliberalism has evolved from an economic and political philosophy into a form of governmentality—"a central organising ethic of society that shapes the way we live, think and feel about ourselves and each other" (Burchell et al., 1991; Brown, 2003; Gill, 2017: 608;

Rose, 1996). Foucault defines governmentality as practices that "constitute, define, organise and instrumentalise the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other" (1994: 300). Within this framework, individuals are increasingly induced to self-manage and self-optimize according to market logics of efficiency, competitiveness, and profit maximisation.

Gill and Scharff (2011) argue that postfeminism resonates strongly with neoliberalism in at least three dimensions. First, both appear to be structured by "a current of individualism" (2011: 7), in which the intrinsic worth of the individual, independence, and self-reliance are emphasised over collectivism and other social formations. Second, in their constructions of subjectivity, neoliberalism's "autonomous, calculating, and self-regulating subject" closely parallels postfeminism's "active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject" (2011: 7). These parallels suggest that both discourses are organised around and reinforce individualism, with postfeminism functioning as a gendered articulation of neoliberal thought. Third, and most significantly, women more than men are expected to work on and improve the self. Within the patriarchal governmentality of neoliberalism and postfeminism, women are compelled to regard self-discipline and self-empowerment as uniquely essential to the pursuit of happiness.

To what extent can postfeminism be considered a transnational culture, and is neoliberalism transnational in the light of the "synergy" between neoliberalism and postfeminism (Gill & Scharff, 2011: 7)? Neoliberalism first emerged as an economic philosophy among liberal European scholars in the 1930s. It represents a historically specific set of social and political values, centred on freedom, deregulation, privatisation, and entrepreneurism. While these values are not universally shared, they possess the capacity to transcend national boundaries, albeit often carrying colonial implications.

In *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, Aihwa Ong (2006) examines whether neoliberalism can be understood as transnational. Despite critiques of neoliberalism—particularly its American variant—as "a radicalised capitalist imperialism" (2006: 1), Ong demonstrates how neoliberal governmentality has been selectively adopted by Asian governments in the creation of economic zones and the imposition of market-oriented ideologies on citizens. She conceptualises neoliberalism not only as an economic framework centred on efficiency

and profit maximisation, but also as an ethical regime organised around self-responsibility.

Ong proposes examining neoliberalism not as a culture or a structure, but as a technology of governance that "can be decontextualised from its original sources and recontextualised in constellations of mutually constitutive and contingent relationships" (2006: 13). This perspective is particularly useful for analysing neoliberalism in contemporary China, as it enables an understanding of neoliberalism both as an economic formation and as a subject-making technology. In this view, neoliberalism can be "translated, technologised, and operationalised" in diverse contexts (Ong, 2006: 13).

Ong further observes that East Asian neoliberal governmentality often conflicts with local cultural sensibilities and national identity, stemming from the fundamental tension between individualism and collectivism. This tension is exemplified by the coexistence of socialist governance with capitalist elements in postsocialist China. Ong therefore conceptualises neoliberalism as "the kind of political exceptions that permit sovereign practices and subjectifying techniques that deviate from established norm" (2006: 12). Such an approach reframes neoliberalism as a set of technologies, offering a framework for analysing it as a transnational mode of governance. In postsocialist China, neoliberal governmentality operates in conjunction with a state-managed market economy while accommodating the influx of global capital. Understanding neoliberalism as transnational also illuminates the discussion of postfeminism as both a transnational culture and a transnational governing technology, contributing to the production of individualistic, consumption-oriented, and self-empowering subjects.

Beyond the discussion of the relationship between postfeminism and neoliberalism, the question of whether postfeminism can be considered transnational is closely linked to debates on *transnational feminism*. In *Scattered Hegemonies*, Grewal and Kaplan (1994) propose transnational feminism as a more inclusive framework for understanding and interpreting feminism in the global, postmodern era. Transnational feminism emerged from the concept of global sisterhood, which was articulated by white, middle-class feminists in the 1970s and 1980s. This concept was based on the assumption of a universal patriarchal system, in which women share common experiences of oppression worldwide. Accordingly, second-wave feminists emphasised the need to form a united front against patriarchy through collective activism (Morgan, 1984). A key limitation of

the global sisterhood concept is that it frames feminist analysis primarily in terms of relationships between women and men, while overlooking differences among women of varying races, nationalities, classes, and sexualities. It also neglects historical, imperialist, and colonial contexts. By constructing an essentialised category of 'women,' the global sisterhood notion echoes Marxist feminist conventions, equating gender with class and suggesting a singular, universal concept of gender. This approach marginalises those at the edges or in minority positions (Kaplan & Grewal, 1999). Similarly, Mohanty (2016) critiques the notion of universal gender oppression, arguing that it renders categories such as race and class invisible in order to make gender the primary axis of analysis.

Today, global sisterhood evokes a nostalgic recall of a period when feminism functioned as a collective movement. It also serves as a symbolic link for feminists across generations, fostering identification and solidarity. When comparing global sisterhood with transnational feminism, the former emphasises the shared experiences of oppression among women worldwide, whereas the latter highlights communication and collaboration among feminists across different countries. Transnational feminism, therefore, foregrounds the circulation of feminist ideas across national boundaries.

Transnational feminism provides an intersectional framework that cannot be fully explored within the global sisterhood paradigm (Mendoza, 2002). In an era of "global interconnectedness," feminism must reconstitute itself through contemporary transcultural dialogue (Imre et al., 2009: 386). Yet, feminist discourse "is produced and disseminated through the cultural divides that mark global inequalities" (Kaplan & Grewal, 1999: 358), and the circulation of feminist ideas often reflects "asymmetries of power rather than a global cosmopolitanism" (Kaplan, 1996; Kaplan & Grewal, 1999: 358). Moreover, Imre et al. (2009) emphasise the notion of incommensurability, which involves transnational mediation and engages with the politics of authenticity on a global scale. Recognising incommensurability requires acknowledging the diverse manifestations and receptions of feminism in different national contexts without reducing them to a search for uniformity (Jaikumar, 2007). This concept is particularly useful for understanding postfeminism in contemporary China, where feminism has followed a distinct trajectory—from socialist state feminism to a hyper-feminine, consumer-oriented, and empowerment-focussed version of postfeminism shaped by Chinese social and cultural conditions.

In summary, three dimensions are supposed to be considered when examining whether postfeminism is transnational, or the extent to which it can be. First, given the entanglement of postfeminism with neoliberalism and their shared Western origins, postfeminism as a cultural concept possesses the potential to cross national borders through global capital flows and consumerist practices. Gwynne (2013) notes that postfeminism as a cultural sensibility is most prominent in economically prosperous, neoliberal contexts. Understanding postfeminism as a transnational technology of governance allows for an analysis of how it shapes subjectivity within popular media landscapes in contemporary China. Second, the existence and persistence of postfeminist ideas beyond Euro-American contexts cannot be overlooked. In an era of globalisation, no single version of postfeminist sensibility prevails across nations. Female gendered subjectivity is shaped by multiple factors, including transnational cultural flows and local sociocultural and ecological contexts. Outside Western settings, postfeminist sensibilities are always hybrid and transitional. Finally, a transnational approach to postfeminism does not aim to establish it as a universal framework for understanding female subjectivity worldwide, given that certain gendered discourses can always remain incommensurable or untranslatable across transnational connectivities (Grewal, 2005). Instead, it is crucial to understand the transnational notion as a field shaped by the conjuncture of geopolitics and biopolitics.

## 2.6 Postfeminism with Chinese Characteristics

Since the early 2010s, a steady stream of media and cultural researchers has explored postfeminism in a Chinese context, reflecting the theoretical vitality of the concept in a transnational setting. Their work adopts the theoretical framework of postfeminism to examine the construction of new female subjectivities, which are embodied by predominantly urban young women and articulated through women's magazines, advertisements, television series, chick lit, chick flicks, as well as beauty and fashion culture (Chang & Ren, 2016; Chen, 2012; Ge, 2025; Guo, 2022; Iskra, 2023; Jia, 2022; Liao, 2019; Liu, 2023; Ma, 2025; Thornham & Feng, 2010; Yang, 2023). These works have focussed on consumption-oriented and self-empowering subject formation, postfeminist aesthetic labour, and the construction of entrepreneurial femininity, as a response to "the call for a transnational understanding of postfeminism in both theoretical and empirical terms" (Liao, 2019: 4).

In this book, I contend that the postfeminist subject in postsocialist China has emerged from specific economic, political, and cultural forces of the historical conjuncture—most notably the launch and expansion of the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign since 1983, the implementation of the One-Child Policy since 1979, and the rise of consumer culture in urban areas since the 1990s. The convergence of these milestones created the space, foundation, and conditions for the Four-Selves Spirit's emphasis on personal responsibility to intersect with the wandering ghost of the (Western) ethos of individualism in postsocialist China. Inspired by scholarship on the state feminist legacy in China's collective past and on postfeminism in the English-speaking world, and approaching postfeminism as a critical object (Gill, 2007; Hershatter, 2011; Wang, 2017), I propose that postfeminism has a distinctive alignment with the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign (*sizi jingshen yundong*) launched by the All-China Women's Federation in 1983. While the All-China Women's Federation has served as the official women's rights organisation and the leading body of the women's movement in China since its founding in 1949, the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign constitutes a gendered policy aimed at women, responding to the so-called feudal remnants of male supremacy (*nan zun nü bei*) and son preference (*zhong nan qing nü*). The campaign emphasised women's self-awareness and personal responsibility, promoting the cultivation of self-esteem (*zizun*), self-confidence (*zixin*), self-reliance (*zili*), and self-improvement (*ziqiang*), which together constitute the Four-Selves Spirit. These principles uncannily resonate with the themes of self-empowerment, personal choice, and individual agency that are central to postfeminism in the Western literature. By fostering a cultural ethos of female subjectivity, the campaign has exerted a wide-ranging, powerful, and enduring influence on women's self-construction and development. It also provided a conducive environment for postfeminist ideas to germinate, manifest, and operate within a Chinese context.

The Four-Selves Spirit was first articulated in Kang Keqing's report to the 5th National Congress of Chinese Women in 1983. It consisted of self-esteem (*zizun*), self-love (*ziai*), self-respect (*zizhong*), and self-improvement (*ziqiang*). The Four-Selves Spirit urged Chinese women to safeguard their legal rights, free themselves from the vestiges of feudal traditions, and refrain from actions that were dehumanising or detrimental to national dignity. In 1988, the 6th National Congress of Chinese Women adopted Zhang Guoying's report, "Self-esteem, Self-confidence, Self-reliance, and Self-improvement: Contributing to Success

in the Pivotal Phase of Reform." The Congress provided a systematic exposition of the Four-Selves principles and incorporated them into the charter of the All-China Women's Federation. Specifically, self-esteem entails respecting one's own dignity and personal worth while rejecting self-deprecation or belittlement. Self-confidence involves trusting in one's abilities, upholding one's convictions, and avoiding undue self-doubt or self-deprecation. Self-reliance emphasises cultivating an independent mindset, recognising one's social value, and rejecting dependence or submissiveness. Self-improvement encompasses striving with determination, pursuing personal advancement, and rejecting self-pity or weakness. Together, these Four-Selves principles constitute the new woman consciousness (*xin nüxing yishi*), which has been articulated as a response to the imperatives of China's Reform and Opening Up in the postsocialist era. Within this specific context, contemporary women were called upon to pursue further self-emancipation and to enhance both their ideological and ethical standards (*sixiang daode suzhi*) as well as their scientific and cultural competencies (*kexue wenhua suzhi*). In 1992, the 7th National People's Congress passed the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, formally incorporating the Four-Selves Spirit into the General Principles.

The new woman consciousness has been closely linked to women's initiative to enhance their *suzhi*, a term roughly translated as "quality" in English. *Suzhi* constitutes a historically and contextually specific discourse that gained formative discursive power when associated with the concept of population during China's Reform and Opening Up beginning in 1976. The shift from a planned to a market economy has led to changes in the discursive formation and understanding of value in contemporary China, where human life is positioned as "a new frontier" for capital accumulation (Anagnost, 2004: 189). According to Anagnost (2004), the discourse of population quality (*renkou suzhi*) appears to have emerged in the 1980s within state documents addressing rural poverty, which connected China's modernisation challenges to the perceived 'low quality' of its population, particularly in rural areas. Broadly, the concept of *suzhi* intersects with multiple domains, including the objectives of the educational system, framed in terms such as ideological and ethical standards and scientific and cultural competencies, the criteria for psychological competence, and the assessment of embodied labour, such as the valuation of migrant workers (Anagnost, 2004). The emphasis on improving population quality signals a significant shift in state policy, moving from

regulating population quantity through measures such as the One-Child Policy to enhancing population quality. In this context, embodying the new woman consciousness and the Four-Selves Spirit can be understood as a marker of 'high-quality' citizenship.

The Four-Selves Spirit Campaign functions as a guiding principle through which the state directs women to cultivate and project new female subjectivity. The qualities of self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement all begin with an emphasis on the female self. Women are encouraged to assert their self-worth against the feudal patriarchal structures underpinning gender discrimination, to pursue personal development, and to strive for self-actualisation. The concentrate on individual agency stands in sharp contrast to the previously prioritised collective identity and class struggle embodied by the 'iron girl' in the socialist era. The construction of female subjectivity in both the socialist and postsocialist eras reflects the state's shifting needs and the evolving expectations imposed upon women. Notably, calls for the formation of women's subjectivity in both periods have been framed under the banner of women's emancipation, articulated through the language of the new woman consciousness, and emphasising their contributions to national development. These dynamics illuminate the formation of female subjectivity in China, interweaving state power, gender relations, top-down mobilisation, and the demands of distinct historical moments.

Against the backdrop of China's Reform and Opening Up, the launch of the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign coincided with the implementation of the One-Child Policy, which lasted from the early 1980s to the 2010s. The policy produced at least two generations of only children in China. As a population control measure, it inadvertently enabled brotherless daughters to potentially escape gender-based discrimination by granting them unprecedented levels of parental support, particularly in urban areas where the policy exerted the most pronounced influence (Fong, 2002). The synergistic effect of the One-Child Policy and the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign on the self-making of urban only daughters was profound. This historically specific context shaped the emergence of the postfeminist subject in China, predominantly associated with urban populations and the only-child generation.

This intersection between demographic policy and ideological campaigns provides the foundation for understanding how notions of selfhood and gender were reconfigured in postsocialist China. The articulation of the (female) self lay at the heart of the Four-Selves Spirit

Campaign. Its emphasis on *individual responsibility* strikingly resonates with the grammar of individualism inherent in postfeminist discourse, foregrounding individual agency, self-empowerment, and self-cultivation. In both social contexts, women are conceived as flawed yet autonomous agents, expected to take responsibility for self-improvement and transformation. In China, the flawed subject is tasked with enhancing her *suzhi* and embodying the Four-Selves Spirit, whereas in Western contexts the "new ethical selves" pursue modernisation and self-upgrading as solutions to the dilemmas of personal life (Wood & Skeggs, 2004: 206).

Apart from the One-Child Policy, the rise of consumer culture—fuelled by commercial advertising, unprecedented commodities, and expanding entertainment since the 1990s—has shaped the emergence of postfeminist subject in China. Consumer culture not only reflected a retreat from the collectivist values of the socialist era—such as hardship, frugality, self-sacrifice, and the repression of desire—but also fostered new modes of self-fashioning, in which individual identity, empowerment, and social status became closely tied to consumption. This cultural shift contributed to the formation of a cosmopolitan, postfeminist subject in China's postsocialist urban landscape.

A defining feature of the postfeminist subject in China is the embodiment of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism is seen as the capacity to situate oneself beyond a single community, selectively drawing upon a range of discursive meanings. Theoretically, it refers to "a vision of global democracy and world citizenship, [and] points to possibilities for shaping new transnational frameworks for making links between social movements" (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002: 1). Among the various processes and conditions that have shaped the emergence of cosmopolitanism, globalisation, multiculturalism, and feminism are particularly significant. Cosmopolitanism is often understood as a mode of negotiating and managing cultural and political multiplicities (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002). It also signifies a form of transformation in which people are not inspired solely by any single, coherent, and organic culture, but rather engage with "the traces and residues of many cultural systems, of many ethical systems," exercising personal choice and intention (Hall, 2002: 26; Waldron, 1992).

Historically, cosmopolitanism was believed to be accessible only to the privileged, bourgeois elite, who possessed the means to travel internationally and acquire multiple languages (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002). In the

contemporary era of culturally diverse information and rapid media proliferation, new communication technologies have created greater opportunities for people to access and absorb other cultures, thereby accelerating cosmopolitan trends. In response to these ubiquitous forms of cosmopolitanism, Hannerz (1996) differentiates 'true' cosmopolitans from globally mobile individuals, arguing that only true cosmopolitans possess a culturally open disposition and a consistent willingness to engage with other cosmopolitan projects.

Furthermore, individuals who practise cosmopolitanism, or who are labelled as cosmopolitans, have often been regarded as deviant by nationalists due to their rejection of self-definition based on location, ancestry, citizenship, or language (Waldron, 1992). The tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism is particularly noteworthy. To conceptualise this dynamic, Ulrich Beck drew on Billig's (1995) notion of banal nationalism and proposed the idea of "banal cosmopolitanism" (2001: 28). This concept describes how everyday expressions of nationalism are circumvented and undermined by the emergence and spread of cosmopolitanism, as people increasingly find themselves integrated into global processes and phenomena.

Building on this tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, scholars have examined how cosmopolitanism is not only political but also aesthetic, shaping tastes and cultural practices. According to Szerszinski and Urry, the culture of cosmopolitanism is "a cultural disposition involving an intellectual and aesthetic stance of 'openness' towards people, places and experiences from different cultures, especially from different 'nations'" (2002: 468). Using cross-border tourism as an example, Urry (1995) argues that tourists have developed more cosmopolitan and far-reaching aesthetic tastes, and that the notion of aesthetic cosmopolitanism is closely linked to exoticism, commodification, and consumer culture. Regev (2007) further conceptualises aesthetic cosmopolitanism as a cultural condition in which ethno-national uniqueness is intertwined with contemporary cultural forms produced by global cultural industries. In a similar vein, LiAnne Yu (2014) suggests that Chinese forms of cosmopolitanism create a hybrid, complex, and multinodal landscape, combining a desire to embrace globalism and Chineseness at the same time. Cosmopolitanism in China is often linked to a nostalgia for disappearing traditions, frequently expressed through interest in exotic domestic locations. By seeking out the exotic and the rural, urban Chinese articulate their sense of modernity. The desire to

consume what is perceived as pure and traditional becomes another way of performing and expressing cosmopolitan identity (Yu, 2014).

The cosmopolitan identity is intertwined with consumption since it is enacted, displayed, and validated through the purchasing and experiencing of cross-cultural goods, services, and lifestyles. According to Baudrillard (1970/1990), contemporary consumption can be understood as enjoyment and leisure. It also provides liberation and contributes to the development of a sense of self. To consume is a "distinctive behaviour as freedom, as aspiration, as choice"; it is a way of belonging, a game of identity, where individuals differentiate themselves according to the order of differences and confirm their place within consumer society (Baudrillard, 1968: 62). Consumption is also "a space of manipulation and control, but also of discretion and fulfilment," within which people navigate the combination of "principles of equality and hierarchy, and pleasure and rationality" (Zukin, 2004: 32). In the context of subject-making in postsocialist China, Rofel (2007) suggests that consumption involves embodying a new sense of self, with desire at its core. "A properly cosmopolitan self is supposed to be desirous, and this desire is supposed to be open and unconstrained" (Rofel, 2007: 118). Consumption functions as "a postsocialist technology of the self," enabling Chinese young women to transcend the limitations of local identity and context and engage with a broader, worldly community (Rofel, 2007: 118). However, Rofel also notes that this worldly community is exclusive, shaped by American middle-class ideals and the prominence of American consumer goods within the chains of globalisation.

In postsocialist China, consumption has emerged as a new ideology shaping subjectivities since the 1990s, coinciding with the rise of a bourgeoisie. It also creates a space at the intersection of the private and public spheres, within which individual consumers can experience both instant gratification and persistent desire, while simultaneously seeking self-empowerment and self-fulfilment. In this context, consumption becomes a key terrain for the production and cultivation of the postfeminist subject, articulating aesthetic sensibilities, cosmopolitan dispositions, and individualist aspirations within a neoliberal rationality. Resonating with the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign's emphasis on self-fashioning and personal responsibility, consumerist practices operate as technologies of the self through which urban women are encouraged to govern themselves, negotiating and performing autonomy, female identity, and social

status in alignment with the demands of a rapidly globalising cultural and economic order.

## 2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the historical, contextual, and theoretical foundations for examining gender, (post)feminism, and the construction of female identity in China, setting the stage for exploring new forms of female subjectivity as represented in the reality dating show *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. Being a deeply political topic, the construction of the female self has shifted from the androgynous and masculinised 'iron girl' of the socialist era to the refeminisation of women and the resurgence of ideas about sexual difference in the postsocialist period. Female identity has been shaped by the state's varying needs to mobilise women as human resources in service of national goals. By situating the 'iron girl' within the framework of socialist state feminism, I emphasise the double burden placed on women, who were expected to contribute both to the public sphere and to domestic life. Referencing the slogan "women hold up half the sky," historically celebrated as a marker of 'gender equality' in the socialist era, I argue that the feminist movement—and broader efforts toward female emancipation in China—have largely been state-sponsored, top-down initiatives.

Understanding postfeminism as a sensibility that responds to, neglects, and individualises feminist politics, I examine its applicability within a Chinese context as a framework for exploring emerging female subjectivity in postsocialist China. Tracing its Western origins—emerging after second-wave feminism in predominantly English-speaking countries—and its contemporary interpretations as an epistemological shift within feminism, a backlash, and a historical transformation, I adopt Rosalind Gill's (2007) view of postfeminism as a distinctive sensibility. To bridge the gap between Western geopolitical and biopolitical contexts and China's unique social landscape, I approach postfeminism as a transnational culture (Dosekun, 2020). Comparing the terms 'transnational' and 'global,' I argue that this framing avoids overgeneralised or colonial interpretations, highlighting the interplay of the global and the local while acknowledging that postfeminism's cross-border reach is uneven.

This chapter introduces the concepts of postfeminism with Chinese characteristics and Chinese postfeminist sensibility, which constitute the book's core theoretical contribution. I argue that postfeminist themes,

such as individual agency, self-empowerment, and self-transformation align closely with the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign, which promotes self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement as the foundation of new female consciousness in postsocialist China. The emergence of the postfeminist subject in China can be traced to three overlapping historical milestones: the launch and expansion of the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign from 1983, the implementation of the One-Child Policy from 1979, and the rise of urban consumer culture in the 1990s.

Sharing similar technologies of the self, the campaign's emphasis on women's personal responsibility to enhance their *suzhi* resonates with postfeminist discourses of individual agency, creating fertile ground for postfeminist sensibilities to take root in China. Specifically, postfeminism with Chinese characteristics refers to a form of gendered subjectivity that emerges through the convergence of state-guided gender campaigns, neoliberal rationalities, and consumer culture. Unlike postfeminism articulated in the Western literature, which is mediated primarily through market logics and popular media culture, postfeminism in China is grounded in the Four-Selves Spirit and the discourse of *suzhi*, positioning women as autonomous yet governable subjects responsible for continuous self-management in the service of both personal improvement and national development. It is predominantly appealing to and embodied by urban, highly educated women, who negotiate empowerment, femininity, and cosmopolitan identity through consumption and aesthetic labour.

A defining feature of Chinese postfeminist sensibility is cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan subjects in postsocialist China exhibit cultural openness and a willingness to engage with and absorb other cultures. To some extent, they can be seen as rootless, not fully anchored to any single state (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002). Unlike the notion of the 'transnational,' which emphasises forces that cross borders while recognising national boundaries, cosmopolitanism reflects an active intention to render such boundaries less salient. Cosmopolitans vary in their approach to cultural and political multiplicities: some adopt anti-essentialist perspectives that embrace global belonging, while others integrate cultural uniqueness, nationalism, and globalisation within transnational processes. In postsocialist China, where globalisation and neoliberalism intersect, cosmopolitanism has become integral to the postfeminist subject, as ideas of female liberation and empowerment circulate across borders alongside media, capital flows, and production and consumption. While the

term 'cosmopolitan' typically describes people, 'transnational' is generally used for objects and cultural phenomena. Viewing postfeminism as a transnational culture through the lens of cosmopolitanism broadens our understanding of its manifestation in contemporary China.

A key question arises: how is postfeminist sensibility projected and interpreted by young women in relation to female subjectivity, particularly in the context of heterosexual dating and engagement with reality dating television? The next chapter addresses this question by foregrounding the voices of young female audiences, examining how a new form of female subjectivity is embodied and negotiated by this group.

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CHAPTER 3

# The New Independent Woman

## 3.1 The New Female Subject

Interviews with the 23 female participants were conducted following the texts-in-action viewing sessions, during which they watched segments of *Chinese Dating with the Parents* with me. The interviews began with the questions, "Compared to the previous generation, what traits are shared by today's young women? What qualities did they display on the reality dating show?" It is unsurprising that the most frequent and salient response from all participants focussed on *the awakening of young women's self-awareness* (*ziwo yishi*), which constitutes a key factor of the formation of the new independent woman (*xin duli nüxing*). Female viewers emphasised that the independent woman holds an anti-traditional stance toward gender norms. Such self-awareness echoes the 'me-first' ethos of contemporary China, aligning with broader processes of individualism in the postsocialist era. It is precisely this awakening subjectivity that differentiates the emergent female subject from the preceding generation. Besides, young women's assertion of self-awareness manifests in their pursuit of becoming independent 'big humans' (*daxie de ren*), asserting agency beyond the constraints of gender, sexuality, and age.

In general, young women have increasingly begun to pose a 'Why' question when confronting normalised expectations of female identity in everyday life. Their inquiries include: "Why is (heteronormative) marriage a necessity?" "Why must I make sacrifices for the family?" and "Why can't my child carry my surname?" They are eager to pursue and advocate for

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a proactive trajectory towards female empowerment and gender equality, as evidenced by their responses to these questions. While these women may not be visibly demonstrating in the streets with banners demanding equal rights, they nevertheless articulate feminist challenges through their questioning of established gender norms. In doing so, they contribute to unsettling and reshaping the status quo. The emerging sense of female identity is widely shared in the viewers' quotations below:

> Young women now have independent opinions and are less constrained by traditional roles, such as men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. We advocate for freedom and the right to make our own choices. We are neither chosen nor controlled or suppressed by any ideas. As a woman, I'm neither superior nor inferior to men.
> Xue, 24, state-owned enterprise employee
> It is clear that young women today have a much stronger sense of themselves than their mothers' generation. On the reality dating show, female candidates emphasise their high level of education and income—a quite anti-traditional act. I think this behaviour shows that women are asserting themselves as independent individuals—highlighting the capacity for self-sufficiency in society and their achievements, rather than reiterating the subordinate roles of womanhood, such as being a wife, mother or future mother.
>
> Yu, 26, PhD student

The two interviewees cited above identified the 'traditional' aspects attached to the female role—namely, the subordinate status of wives and mothers, the obligation to sacrifice for the family, and confinement to the private sphere—all of which continue to play a key role in shaping perceptions of female subjectivity. Women's limited mobility and the corresponding norm of their seclusion are vividly encapsulated in a widely used phrase from the collective era: "No one is home" ( *jia li mei ren*). As Gail Hershatter (2011) observes in *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*, when a guest came knocking at the door, the woman inside would call out, "No one is home." The phrase literally means "There is no person in the house." Perhaps the woman was, at the same time, engaged in housework or needlework, contributing to the family through her own labour. Yet she was not considered "the one." "No one" signifies "the absence of able-bodied male labourers from a household" (Hershatter, 2011: 63). Thus, "No one is home" does not imply a woman's neglect of her own existence or

personhood; rather, it refers to her seclusion within the inner chambers and the prohibition against entering the public sphere (Hershatter, 2011). Although the phenomenon described in Hershatter's book occurred six decades ago, the subordinate status of women and their confinement to the private sphere persist in postsocialist China—precisely what the new female subject is challenging.

Higher educational attainment serves as both a weapon and a foundation for today's young women in their efforts to challenge gender inequalities embedded in prescribed gender roles. On *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, a candidate's educational background is one of the key attributes highlighted in their brief self-introduction. In a promotional stunt, the reality dating show also emphasises candidates' higher education credentials through the wording of each episode's title. The show uses rubrics to describe female participants with appealing expressions such as "learning tyrant girl" (*xueba nü*), "super-high-quality girl" (*youzhi nü*), and "brilliant girl" (*youxiu nü*). All of these terms carry an affirmative and uplifting tone, suggesting that higher educational attainment is regarded as a symbol of high ethical, scientific, and cultural quality (*suzhi*). These values resonate with the ideals of the Four-Selves Spirits Campaign.

Likewise, female viewers of the dating TV emphasise higher educational attainment when describing the new female subject. They argue that it not only equips women with the ability to make a living in society but, more importantly, redefines the very sources of women's sense of achievement and security, which are no longer confined to being "the woman behind the man" (*xian nei zhu*). Xiyang points out,

> Perhaps the previous generation of women were more willing to be appendages of men or to live in service to them. They derived a sense of satisfaction or achievement from serving the family: "I am useful; I take care of the children; I support and free my husband so that he can focus on his work. Being his capable partner gives me a sense of achievement." However, among today's post-90s generation—particularly only daughters with higher education—such roles no longer provide a sense of accomplishment. Even if they are forced into these positions, what they are more likely to experience is a sense of oppression.
>
> Xiyang, 25, state-owned enterprise employee

Supported by higher education and employment, young women have experienced a transformation in their perception of the traditionally

subordinate female role—from viewing it as a source of satisfaction to recognising it as a source of oppression. They no longer measure their self-worth by fulfilling the role of a supportive spouse. In postsocialist China, higher education is an indicator of socio-economic status. People with a higher educational background stand more chance of securing well-paid jobs and become the middle class. Beyond its economic benefits, higher education plays an irreplaceable role in empowering women by promoting female employment and contributing to the gradual erosion of patrilineal and traditional gender values (Hu & Scott, 2016; Li, 2020). Meanwhile, the One-Child Policy has empowered urban only daughters and reshaped gender norms. Legalised in 1979 and formally phased out in 2015, its effects are evident in the widespread adoption of the nuclear "4+2+1" family model in urban areas, as well as the increased opportunities and autonomy for educated urban women and girls (Greenhalgh, 2001). The phrase "No one is home" reflects a social context that female respondents perceive as a barrier to women's emancipation and self-fulfilment. In response to these gendered obstacles inherited from the past, young women emphasised their own abilities to resist, aided by higher education, employment, and familial support, while remaining aware of the continued hegemony of gender norms and their disciplinary power over women.

Female candidates on the show and respondents who participated in this book were mainly born during the implementation of the One-Child Policy. However, when discussing female social status, several respondents mentioned the discrimination against daughters, referring to the practice of valuing boys over girls (*zhong nan qing nü*). It is a patriarchal concept that prioritizes the rights and interests of men while defining women as their subordinates, thereby restricting women's freedom and limiting their opportunities for development. In everyday usage, it primarily describes familial and parental attitudes that favour boys over girls. However, this does not mean that discrimination against daughters exists only during childhood or within the family context. Rather, it is a pervasive cultural phenomenon in China, particularly in rural areas. Although it has not been widely argued in public and official media, it has been illustrated by the population data showing that there are about thirty-four million more men than women in China in 2021 (Textor, 2023).

In this book project, young women's awareness of discrimination against girls is intertwined with *fleeting relief*. Xiyang gave off a sense of self-affirmation while introducing herself as a Xi'an local, compared to her

schoolmates from suburban and rural areas. Urban citizenship signifies a more progressive status, enabling Xiyang to escape potential gender-based oppression and unequal treatment associated with the absence of male siblings in her family—a situation that contrasts sharply with the experiences of rural women. She said:

> Under the One-Child Policy, a couple was allowed to have only one child. They have to treat and cultivate the only daughter nicely. Even if the father values boys over girls, he has to educate his daughter as he would a son. Girls of the one-child generation are more mature and independent (than their male peers).
>
> Xiyang, 25, state-owned enterprise employee

Like most young women who participated in this book project, Xiyang holds the privilege of urban citizenship. She recognises that this privilege is linked to the stricter implementation of the One-Child Policy in urban areas compared to rural regions. However, the implementation of the One-Child Policy did not mark the end of discrimination against daughters. Xiyang's relief illustrates that the persistent sexism and misogyny deeply rooted in society may be partially invisible, but this invisibility does not equate to nonexistence. The One-Child Policy, however, has united parents and their only daughters in resisting gender-based discrimination. Urban families with daughters have responded by educating girls as if they were boys. In doing so, they seek to demonstrate that girls are not inferior to boys and are equally capable of bringing honour to their families. Another respondent, Xin, observes that the female candidates on *Chinese Dating with the Parents* are exceptionally accomplished and that their parents have invested heavily in their daughters' education and development. This gives her the impression that discrimination against daughters is gradually fading. Moreover, families with daughters take pride in showcasing them on dating shows. Securing a match through such programmes is not even their primary goal; what the parents value most is the opportunity to introduce their daughter—their only hope, their masterpiece.

Young women, having benefited from the One-Child Policy, are emphasising 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. The One-Child Policy has become a part of history. It was replaced by the two-child policy in 2015 and later revised to the three-child policy in 2021. Xiyang reflects on this policy shift in birth control, suggesting that it may not benefit girls anymore. She explains: "Families with sons still adhere to an old, gender-segregated model of education. With the introduction of the two-child policy, I think more girls may lose access to preferential family resources, especially if they have a male sibling. Society is increasingly likely to push them back into the private family sphere." Jieyu adds another dimension to understanding the phenomenon of favouring boys over girls after the abolition of the One-Child Policy. She notes that, when raising multiple children is not considered a financial burden, well-off families remain determined to have a son. The sex ratio among third-born children in China in 2020 was approximately 132.93, reflecting the persistence of discrimination against daughters (Xia & Zhao, 2024).

This section addresses the new female subject as embodied both in the candidates of *Chinese Dating with the Parents* and in the show's viewers. These young women are empowered by urban citizenship, higher education, and financial independence. They appear on the dating show to showcase their achievements and assert a newly constructed female subjectivity, distinct from the traditionally defined subordinate female role. The emphasis young women place on being independent is particularly noteworthy. To what extent, then, is the new female subject associated with heterosexual dating? It is widely recognised that women are often expected to make greater sacrifices in terms of their personal development within heteronormative relationships and marriages. Aware of these expectations, young women are eager to redefine male-female relationships on reality dating shows, adjusting them to better accommodate the needs of the new independent woman. Reality dating shows are typically programmes that prioritize entertainment, contemporary matchmaking ideologies, and audience ratings. While these shows are not explicitly designed to promote gender equality or feminist ideas, young women nevertheless seize these platforms to assert their empowered female subjectivity and to redefine a female self, shaped by the One-Child Policy and characteristic of postsocialist China. The next section addresses young women's changing perceptions of dating.

## 3.2 Young Women's Changing Perceptions of Dating

When talking about the female candidates' motives for attending *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, Yuan said,

> During a class reunion, one of the guys jokingly asked, "So, who's still single in our class?" I was really put off by how they treated being in a relationship as some kind of achievement. That kind of thinking belongs to the past. Nowadays, it's simply a personal choice!
>
> Yuan, 23, postgraduate student

Yuan's view that being in a relationship is a personal choice reflects young women's evolving perceptions of dating and marriage. The formation of marriage has gradually 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 is increasingly regarded as an individual choice, informed by personal reflections and considerations of the demands at different stages of life. 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 and support. In response to the reduction of social welfare in the postsocialist 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" frequently arises in discussions about women's attitudes toward dating and marriage. Female respondents use it to emphasise that choosing to remain single is likewise a matter of personal choice. Postfeminist narratives have been focussed 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 the audience reception study of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, female viewers similarly expressed the belief that remaining single is a choice

made for their own benefit, personal fulfilment, and maintenance of their standard of living. This perspective adds another layer to understanding how a woman's decision is framed as a personal choice. Among female viewers of the reality dating show, the discourse of personal choice can be understood as a form of resistance against dominant societal norms and expectations that dictate what is considered 'natural' and normative human behaviour. However, the ability to exercise personal choice is itself contingent upon certain preconditions. This raises critical questions: who possesses the agency to make choices based on personal will, and who has little or no option but to conform to societal norms? Young women find themselves navigating a narrow path, making cautious decisions about their life trajectories.

Young women's changing perceptions of dating and marriage also influence how they view the age-related social norms. Yue exemplified this by comparing her own life trajectory with that of her mother at the same age.

> By the time my mother was my age, she had already given birth to me. Back then, people typically married either when a suitable partner was introduced by a matchmaker or when they reached a socially 'appropriate' age. Today, however, young women tend to enter marriage less readily—particularly those who are highly educated, have stable jobs, hold independent opinions, and enjoy greater freedoms in other areas, such as owning property. For many women, marriage is no longer necessarily advantageous. While single women often maintain a high standard of living, marriage can reduce their quality of life. Therefore, we should approach marriage with caution and deliberation, marrying only for love rather than merely to reach a certain age.
>
> Yue, 28, university administrator

The phrases "a certain age" and "a proper age" are commonly used by female participants when discussing decisions related to dating, marriage, and childbirth. The notion of a "certain age" perpetuates the belief in traditional milestones that prescribe a linear progression of life. These milestones—encompassing birth, marriage, reproduction, and death—are often viewed as "paradigmatic markers of life experience" (Halberstam, 2005: 2). The age-related myth is in tune with Freeman's concept of chrononormativity, guided by the notion that time must be used productively for an individual's life to make sense. Freeman defines chrononormativity as "the use of time to organise individual human bodies toward

maximum productivity" (2010: 3). Consequently, chrononormativity constructs the meaning of time and influences how people manage their time. A life trajectory is imbued with significance and meanings when it aligns with a state-sanctioned 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.' Postfeminist culture is marked by a preoccupation with temporality, in which "female adulthood is defined as a state of chronic temporal crisis" (Tasker & Negra, 2007: 10). Women's lives are framed as "time starved," and they are subjected to the pressures of the "biological clock" (Negra, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2007: 10). In this project, young women actively challenge the age-related lifecycles, resist traditional milestones associated with 'women's time,' and confront misogynistic attitudes toward ageing. Nevertheless, as Yue argues, young women who are able to challenge the age myth often possess certain privileges, such as higher educational attainment, well-paid employment, and property ownership.

The evolving attitudes of young women toward dating and marriage have prompted a re-evaluation of the 'leftover women' (*sheng nü*). The term refers to women who are unmarried in their late twenties or older. It carries a stigma by comparing unmarried women to leftover food and has been popularised through its use in the documents of the All-China Women's Federation. It is also frequently referenced in the mass media, including newspapers, comedies, television series, and films. The term has sparked resistance and critique in feminist studies published during the 2010s (Ji, 2015; Luo, 2017; To, 2015). In *Leftover Women*, Fincher (2016) introduces what is known as the 'three highs' for these women—high educational attainment, high professional achievement, and high income. Attached to the label of 'leftover women,' women's subjectivities have been largely obliterated, and it appears that positioning themselves within heterosexual marriages before reaching a certain age is presented as their ultimate achievement.

Since the rise of Chinese digital feminisms in mid-2010s, public opinions on gender and feminism have undergone rapid change. Chinese feminist activism has effectively challenged the stigma attached to single, professional women. In 2016, the All-China Women's Federation recommended that terms such as 'leftover men' and 'leftover women' be prohibited in news reporting, during the 12th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (Chen, 2016).

Femvertising campaigns, such as SK-II's *Marriage Market Takeover* (2016), specifically target the issue of 'leftover women' by strategically employing feminist values and challenging stereotypical perceptions of unmarried women. While the labelling of single women as 'leftover' has largely disappeared from official media, it continues to persist in other areas of society. For instance, parents may expect their daughters to marry and have children at a certain age, and companies may demonstrate bias toward male executives in recruitment. These factors collectively make women acutely aware of their social position in their late twenties, even in the absence of explicit reminders about their marital status. In this book project, young women describe that staying single is a matter of personal choice and being in a relationship is not an achievement. This attitude reflects a women-centred perspective, showing their resistance to the stigma attached to 'leftover women' and their aim to redefine them as 'victorious women.' In Chinese, the words for 'leftover' and 'victory' share the same pronunciation, *sheng*.

In response to the question, "Do you recognise any shifts in the expectations of young women regarding dating and marriage?" Yue remarked, "It's hard to tell how many young women still anticipate marriage, given the decreasing marriage rate in China in recent years." The *Chinese Marriage and Families Report 2022* presents a line chart illustrating the trends in marriage and divorce rates in China from 2000 to 2020 (Liang, et al., 2022). The marriage rate rose steadily from 2000 to 2013, after which it began to decline each year, reaching its lowest point in 2020. In contrast, the divorce rate showed a consistent upward trend throughout the same period.

Female respondents demonstrated a deliberate and cautious attitude toward dating and marriage. The reasons behind young women's reluctance to anticipate a partner can be attributed to two main factors. On one side, the patriarchal structures surrounding dating and marriage no longer align with the needs of young, highly educated, and financially independent women. On the flip side, young women hold a clear expectation of a 1+1>2 model in dating and marriage—a perspective shared by men as well. This perspective views a good relationship as a mutually beneficial arrangement in which both parties maximize their gains. Consequently, young women tend to avoid dating individuals they perceive as unequal, as such relationships may negatively affect 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 in 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 as an independent individual. However, even when a man professes support for gender equality, discrepancies may still exist between his understanding and that of women. For example, Xue referenced a conception of gender equality intertwined with the traditional Chinese idea of the 'harmony of *yin* and *yang*,' a notion that was prevalent in her parents' generation. She explained how her father described gender equality while they had conversations about gender issues.

> Chinese tradition emphasises the balance of *yin* and *yang*. If *yin* and *yang* are not balanced, things will not be harmonious. In our family, I am the *yang* and you are the *yin*—this doesn't refer to competition between men and women; rather, it depicts the harmony of men and women, like the harmony of *yin* and *yang*.
>
> Xue, 24, employee in a state-owned enterprise

Originally fundamental concepts in Chinese philosophy and cosmology, *yin* and *yang* represent how seemingly opposing forces are interconnected in the natural world. In traditional Chinese thought, these concepts are also gendered, with *yin* associated with femininity and *yang* with masculinity. *Yin* and *yang* are similar to gender in that both are dynamic, fluid constructs not necessarily linked to biological sex. Heterosexual partnerships are often conceived as a union of *yin* and *yang* energies. Within this framework, the harmony of *yin* and *yang* is sometimes appropriated as a rationale for gender equality between women and men; however, such claims are detached from historical and sociocultural realities. They also selectively ignore that *yin* and *yang* are not rigid prescriptions for women and men, and that every person, regardless of biological sex, possesses both *yin* and *yang* qualities. Xue further explained, "However, the concept of the harmony of *yin* and *yang* is rooted in the belief that men are superior to women." In this context, preserving the balance of *yin* and *yang* can be appropriated as a mechanism for men to assert gendered privilege and maintain dominance over women. Applying the harmony of *yin* and *yang* to explain gender equality, on the one hand, reflects the absence of publicly accessible discourses or theories that address the pursuit of gender equality in the Chinese context. On the other hand, the emphasis on harmony and balance reveals both a fear of

losing privileges among vested interests and an intentional avoidance of engaging with feminist ideas and women's rights.

This section explores the new independent women's changing perceptions of dating and marriage. They increasingly embrace the view that entering a relationship or getting married is no longer a marker of success or a milestone in life. At the same time, they navigate the tension between the patriarchal framework governing partnerships and their own aspirations to be respected as independent individuals. Adopting a cautious and deliberative attitude toward dating, both dating candidates of the reality dating show and young women who participated in the book project place particular emphasis on the expectation of a 1+1>2 relationship, which will be examined in the following section.

## 3.3 The Entrepreneurial Subject in Reality Dating Shows

In the 2010s, female contestants on *If You Are the One* (*fei cheng wu rao*) (2010–present), the emblematic Chinese reality dating show, were often subjected to misogynistic criticism and portrayed as pathological or shamelessly materialistic, largely because they voiced aspirations for upward social mobility through heterosexual relationships and their participation in dating shows. They were depicted as setting specific financial standards for potential male partners, presenting economic resources as prerequisite for dating (Wang, 2017; Wu, 2012). Infamous quotes from female contestants on *If You Are the One* include: "I would rather weep in a BMW than smile on the back of a bicycle." and "I will not consider dating if your monthly salary is under RMB 200,000." As a result of these statements and their repercussion in the mass media, women were positioned as "the primary carriers" of the unsettling moral crisis associated with the pursuit of rapid marketisation and modernity during China's transition from socialism to postsocialism (Wu, 2012: 232). Dating shows in the noughties predominantly framed the exchange of men's socio-economic resources for women's physical attractiveness and homemaking abilities within heterosexual matchmaking. However, rising educational attainment and employment rates among women, combined with the socialisation of household labour, have increasingly challenged the traditional exchange model of dating. This shift has given rise to an entrepreneurial 1+1>2 model, exemplified by reality

dating shows that premiered after the mid-2010s, following the waning popularity of *If You Are the One*.

The discussion surrounding assets and property is inevitable in conversations that emerge in television programmes about matchmaking and dating. The recent reality dating show *Hi, the Other Half* (*nihao lingyiban*) (2021) brings up the recurring theme of dating and materialism to public conversation. Premiering in 2021 and produced by the video platform iQiyi, the show recruited an exclusive group of middle and upper-middle-class individuals residing in some of China's most prosperous cities as dating candidates. The first episode was titled "A Small-Town Girl Requires Someone with an Annual Salary of One Million." It featured Shichen, a small-town girl who hopes to upgrade her social standing through higher education and dating. Audiences criticised Shichen for being 'peacockish' and materialistic. In response to this public moral denunciation, Shichen bluntly and incisively posed two questions: "What is the disadvantage of being materialistic today?" and "Do you think the requirement for a man to have an annual salary of one million is excessive when I also earn one million annually?" In the episode's framing, Shichen is described solely by her place of origin: a small town. She is defined by where she comes from rather than by her own achievements. The term small-town girl is sharply contrasted with her expectation of a partner earning an annual salary of one million. The focus is clearly on portraying her as greedy—a stereotypical image of women who place their hopes of upward social mobility on dating and marriage. Shichen's reaction to the criticism reflects the younger generation of women's resistance to being labelled as materialistic or unrealistic in matters of dating and marriage. Her entrepreneurial mindset is evident in the way she views dating someone equally or more successful than herself as a strategic path to better the self (Archer & Hutchings, 2000). Beneath the salary-related expectation lies a typical middle-class aspiration that reinforces the operation of the entrepreneurial self in postsocialist China.

One of the key themes that consistently emerges when young people discuss their expectations of relationships, both on *Chinese Dating with the Parents* and in audience reception studies of the show, is the ideal of a 1+1>2 relationship. 1+1>2 is used metaphorically to describe a synergistic partnership in which the combined value of two individuals exceeds the sum of their individual contributions. Within the discourse on relationships and marriage, this metaphor has been adopted to signify mutually empowering partnerships that emphasise complementarity, collaboration,

and shared personal growth—an ideal that reflects contemporary understandings of intimate relationships.

The 1+1>2 model reflects not only contemporary expectations of relationships but also the logic of the entrepreneurial subject, who are reconfigured as proactive, calculative, and self-responsible. In the Cambridge Dictionary, the term entrepreneurial is defined as describing an individual who generates profit by starting their own business, particularly by identifying new opportunities and assuming risks. This notion of the entrepreneurial self can be traced back to the culture of enterprise capitalism, where autonomous and initiative-driven characteristics are prioritised (Heelas & Morris, 1992). The entrepreneurial subject refers to a subjectivity that sustains the self and organises one's life as the management of an enterprise. This subjectivity emphasises values such as ambition, initiative, efficiency, competition, calculation, and accountability, and, more significantly, situates market exchange as a foundational ethical principle (Rose, 1992). Theoretically, the entrepreneurial subject derives from the neoliberal and entrepreneurial government, characterised by the reduction of social welfare, the withdrawal of the state's comprehensive security functions, and defective administration (du Gay, 2000). According to du Gay (2000), entrepreneurial government applies an enterprise mode to all forms of conduct, including human behaviour. Under such conditions, individuals are expected to assume personal responsibility and to become accountable, enterprising managers of themselves. du Gay (1996: 181) conceptualises these individuals as "entrepreneurs of the self," engaging in a lifelong project that is conceived both as a "single arena" and as a unidirectional journey toward the optimisation of one's existence. Similarly, Ulrich Bröckling employs the notion of 'Me-Incorporated' to liken the entrepreneurial self to "a joint-stock company" (2016: 20), where working on the self entails enhancing the market value of one's Me-shares. Meanwhile, the entrepreneurial self indicates an ongoing procedure of transformation and becoming—an active rather than static mode of subjectivity. As Bröckling (2016: 20) emphasises, the entrepreneurial self is "a subject in the gerundive," implying it is something that ought to be continually produced and brought into being.

Researchers have applied the concept of the entrepreneurial subject to media and cultural studies, highlighting its relevance to postfeminist discourses (Allen & Finn, 2024; Gill, 2014; Guo, 2022). Sara Liao (2019) examines the subject formation of young Chinese female online

celebrities who embody entrepreneurial femininity. She characterises this form of femininity as "powerful, playful, and narcissistic" (Liao, 2019: 15), suggesting that these online figures enact agency through self-branding. Their entrepreneurial initiatives are deeply entangled with a postfeminist sensibility that celebrates beauty, fashion, sexiness, and self-empowerment. Hanna-Mari Ikonen suggests that the entrepreneurial mindsets demonstrated by Finnish young women involve "purposefully taking the initiative, being self-responsible, planning their career steps, developing useful skills, and building themselves into marketable packages" (2020: 948). In this book, postfeminist entrepreneurial sensibility denotes a mode of subjectivity, or a constellation of values, that shapes how individuals, particularly women, think, behave, and relate to themselves and others in neoliberal, postfeminist contexts. This sensibility is embodied in self-managing subjects who make strategic choices—especially regarding beauty, career, lifestyle, dating and marriage—as both expressions of and means for pursuing personal freedom and enhancing their empowerment. Yet, this subjectivity simultaneously operates within structures that emphasise individual responsibility, self-optimisation, and consumerism. Her femininity is thus meticulously curated and positioned as a strategic asset; while she appears autonomous and agentic, her empowerment remains deeply entangled with market logics, heteronormative gender norms, and the continual imperative to brand and invest in herself.

Through the 1+1>2 model of relationships, we observe the entrepreneurial postfeminist subject—autonomous and calculating—who approaches intimate relationships with a market-driven and entrepreneurial mindset. The underlying assumption is that young people desire to improve themselves, lead better lives, and achieve mutually beneficial outcomes through dating or marriage. Meanwhile, the 1+1>2 model is distinctly gendered and classed. When reality fails to meet these expectations, many young people, particularly women, prefer remaining single rather than compromising their ideals. Additionally, two interrelated factors contribute to young women's reluctance to date. They face the difficult task of weighing their priorities: maintaining personal quality of life through singlehood or enhancing their lifestyle by dating someone who offers greater material resources. For many, the latter is viewed as a potential means of improving quality of life, while the former is often seen as a preferable path to autonomy and self-sufficiency. Among the women participants in this book project, young women often choose to

remain single in order to preserve their middle-class lifestyle, fearing that a relationship with a male partner might lead to oppression or exploitation.

### *3.3.1 Imagining the Middle-Class via Dating*

In this project, female viewers pointed out the bourgeois taste embodied by dating contestants on *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, which I frame as imagining the middle-class via dating on television programmes. Contestants introduced themselves as individuals who enjoy life, with hobbies such as skiing, wine tasting, fitness, and traveling around the world. In response to questions about their intentions for appearing on the reality dating show, viewers argued that the contestants' glamorous appearances, educational backgrounds, and middle-class identities gave them confidence and courage, setting them apart from 'ordinary' people.

Xin has been a devoted, savvy, and knowledgeable viewer of reality dating shows throughout her 20s and early 30s. She noted a shift in her attitude toward these shows over time. Before marriage, she was enthusiastic about dating television, seeing them as educational and functional. "I was considering how to improve myself and set standards for men based on my own assets while watching reality dating shows,' she explained. However, after marriage, Xin began to see dating shows as little more than entertainment for critique. At times, she would leave the television on while dating shows aired, using them simply to pass the time.

Xin also compared *If You Are the One* with *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. She described the former as "extremely cruel and realistic" in terms of mate selection and competition, while viewing the latter as progressive for involving parents on set and showcasing contemporary "brilliant young women." Xin found *If You Are the One* particularly harsh due to the high expectations and requirements set by female candidates for their partners. She was surprised to see one of her male friends, whom she considered impressive and outstanding, rejected by all the female contestants on the show. Xin then shared with me her observations about the invisible hierarchy regarding social class that exists within reality dating shows.

> If a male candidate is from Taiwan or is a foreigner, his likelihood of being chosen exceeds 90 percent. However, if he comes from a rural area, his chances drop to nearly zero. Similarly, if he belongs to the working-class, 90 percent of female candidates are unlikely to consider him as a match.

> Conversely, if he is middle class, his chances of finding a partner on the show rise to over 50 percent.
>
> Xin, 35, state-owned enterprise employee

Xin categorised dating candidates into four groups: rural residents, the working class, the middle class, and foreigners. She also compared herself to the women on the dating show, stating, "I define myself as an ordinary person (*yi ban ren*). Those who appear on reality dating shows are at a higher level than us ordinary people." Xin's observation reveals the hidden norm behind the recruitment and selection of participants for reality dating television. From *If You Are the One* to *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, urban and middle-class culture have come to dominate mainstream media representations. Reality television intervenes in people's lives with "an unstated impetus" to showcase a variety of middle-class lifestyles (Ouellette & Hay, 2008: 6). In postsocialist China, the middle-class imagination has been largely shaped by Western and cosmopolitan cultures, as evidenced by the bourgeois tastes and hobbies of dating candidates. Conversely, individuals from rural and underdeveloped areas, the poor, and the working class have received less visibility in entertainment-oriented television programmes.

The dating show viewer, Yu, highlighted the tendency for the poor and working class to be subjected to humiliation in mass media, particularly regarding their intelligence and adherence to ethical and moral standards. Yu argued,

> It is increasingly difficult to find characters portrayed positively despite their poverty in contemporary Chinese TV dramas. For example, in *Ode To Joy* (*huan le song*) (2016), the representation tends to favour the wealthy, while depicting the poor in a negative light.[1] Among the women characters of the TV series, Fan Shengmei comes from the most disadvantaged family and is tormented by her family of origin. Qiu Yingying is sweet but ditzy—a typical *sha bai tian*—with a low income. Andy is rich and has a successful career. Qu Xiaoxiao is a witty and warm-hearted second-generation rich woman. Poor girls are often shown as unintelligent, naïve troublemakers who are unable to escape their family traumas, with poverty almost portrayed as their original sin. In contrast, wealthy girls are depicted

[1] Premiered in 2016, *Ode To Joy* (*huan le song*) is a TV series that tells the stories of five young women living on the same floor in Shanghai, each from a different family and social class and possessing distinct personalities.

> as having a broader perspective, succeeding in their careers and relationships, being kind, generous, quick-witted, embodying high *suzhi* and moral integrity.
>
> Yu, 26, PhD student

In contrast to the negative portrayal of working-class individuals in popular TV dramas, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* focuses exclusively on middle-class dating culture by recruiting and representing the middle and upper-middle classes, who serve as icons of a distinct middle-class imagination. The dating stage has been exclusively dominated by an urban, middle-class, and cosmopolitan identity and lifestyle, emphasising the cults of good-looking appearances, wealth, and elitism on reality television dating. Meng and Huang (2017) argue that in contemporary China, the notion of the middle class functions more as a cultural aspiration than as an economic category. In reality dating shows, the middle-class imagination can be understood as an updated version of a particular set of aesthetics, cultural capital, and modes of dressing and comportment. It also reflects aspirations for upward mobility and anxieties about downward mobility within an entrenched class hierarchy, intersecting with the ideal of a 1+1>2 relationship model and young women's preference for remaining single out of fear of diminishing their quality of life.

Furthermore, the imagined middle-class identity is associated with, and can be enhanced by, active participation in consumerism. The consumer behaviour has been reinforced by promises of happiness and instant gratification and is carefully framed within discourses such as "treating yourself," "spoiling yourself," and "enjoy the moment." On *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, for example, female contestant Wang Jiahui introduces herself by admitting that she does not have a habit of saving and prefers to maintain a high-quality lifestyle: "I spend the money I earn, and I deserve this. Women should invest in themselves." Jiahui used the phrase "investing in herself" to describe her consumption, which deviates from the true meaning of investment. By framing spending on consumer goods as an act of self-investment, consumerism becomes linked to self-worth and valorised as a form of empowerment. Such narratives blur the boundaries between pleasure, necessity, and self-improvement, positioning consumption as central to the construction of a middle-class identity.

From the viewer's perspective, the polished and radiant lifestyles—typically middle-class—portrayed on reality dating shows offer a sense of relaxation and comfort. Anne expressed genuine admiration for these depictions, noting that watching attractive contestants dress elegantly for dates and anticipating unexpected surprises gives her a feeling of comfort and satisfaction after a long day of work and childcare. This idealised middle-class way of living, as represented on reality dating shows, can be understood as the product of the interplay between the shows' narrative scripts and the audience's expectations. Despite providing audiences with aesthetic pleasure and emotional enjoyment, reality dating shows simultaneously present contestants with a platform for self-branding and the potential economic benefits of visibility and new opportunities, which will be explored in the next section.

## 3.4 The Unpaid Labour of Self-Branding

Dating candidates act as autonomous, self-enterprising individuals and uncompensated workers who engage in self-branding on reality dating shows (Duffy, 2017; Gill, 2010). Originally conceived as a marketing strategy, self-branding embodies a mindset that views the self as a commodity capable of attracting potential employers and customers (Marwick, 2013). With the advent of internet and digital media, self-branding has become accessible to a broader spectrum of individuals. It has been heralded as a one-size-fits-all solution for individuals across various industries grappling with economic hardship.

On reality dating TV, contestants are expected to perceive themselves as flexible commodities with unique branded personas and enthusiastically participate in self-promotion. They embody the concept of being the 'CEO of Me Inc' where gaining visibility, attracting attention, and seeking publicity are paramount (Peters, 1997). The discussion on the relationship between reality television, self-branding, and exhibitionism is not new. According to Kavka (2014: 54), reality TV shows are increasingly sensationalist and "packed to the rafters with exhibitionists." Caldwell (2020: 708) describes televisual exhibitionism as "a stylising performance" and "a presentational attitude, a display of knowing exhibitionism." Building on this concept, Kavka (2014) suggests that gender on reality television is not merely performed but flaunted. According to Kavka,

> Flaunting combines the denotations of display and visibility with the connotations of showing off in a social, relational context. Flaunting is always performed for someone's benefit, as it were, usually by displaying something that one expects the other to desire. Flaunting thus implicitly or explicitly invokes systems of social value and cultures of taste, since the expectation that others will desire the thing or attribute being flaunted is preceded and supported by a social consensus about its desirability.
>
> (Kavka, 2014: 57–58)

The politics of flaunting helps contextualise contestants' self-branding efforts on reality dating shows. Contestants actively showcase their attributes and achievements, often framing them within polished, romanticised narratives intended to impress both other contestants and the audience. The show's directorial team creates introduction videos for each dating candidate, introducing basic information such as age, occupation, place of residence, hobbies, family background, and previous relationships. These videos are meticulously curated, featuring candidates in exquisite outfits and makeup, as well as carefully selected stylish locations and venues, demonstrating a cosmopolitan aesthetic and bourgeois taste. Alice Marwick (2013: 122) uses "aspirational production" to characterise the attention-seeking practices on social media, wherein micro-celebrities endeavour to elevate their status by emulating celebrities. Reflecting this phenomenon, among the introduction videos, candidates are often depicted in a high-status light, portrayed as versatile, positive, confident, and glamorous. They have been branded as travelers of world tour, stylish fashionistas, and hip-hop dancers, and more. These carefully crafted personas serve to position them as desirable figures within the realm of reality dating TV. This portrayal aligns with the broader narrative of the show, which aims to create an aspirational atmosphere and captivate the audience with idealised images of love and success.

Dating candidates are bound by a hidden (work) contract offered by reality dating TV. This contract obliges contestants to maintain their appearances, dress well, accept guidance and harsh comments from dating coaches, and present themselves in a media-savvy and business-friendly way in the reality TV marketplace. They are compelled to invest in their participation in reality dating TV shows while embracing the so-called success or failure as their own responsibility. Given the popularity of *Chinese Dating with the Parents* candidates are aware that their performance will be seen by a national audience, which they perceive

as an honour and a privilege. They are required to subtly incorporate brand mentions into their participation through product placement or by featuring products during the recording of the dating show. For example, they are often shown drinking a branded beverage within the storyline to promote products from the title sponsors. One of the main sponsors is a liquor brand, *Langpai Tequ*. In each episode, contestants recite the features and benefits of the drink, express their genuine interest, and suggest that they would purchase it for their wedding parties. Using contestants as labour to advertise and promote products for corporations is a normative strategy in television programmes, representing a form of exploitation in the media industry.

The majority of contestants on reality dating TV show work in fields such as media and communication, the fitness industry, and finance. Many are social media influencers, fitness instructors, or marketing professionals—occupations that emphasise flexibility, public visibility, entrepreneurial initiative, and digitally mediated forms of self-employment. They often disclose their social media accounts and personal company information during the show. Participating in dating shows not only enhances a person's dating and mate-selection prospects but also aids in their career development.

Female viewers in this book project also highlighted the multiple motivations for contestants appearing on dating shows beyond finding a partner. They emphasised contestants' entrepreneurial awareness and mindset. From the viewer's standpoint, dating contestants in the reality dating show aim to promote themselves, garner attention, and secure online fame, which has become a valuable currency that can be traded for other resources. Yuan, the viewer, described a positive correlation between intelligence and personal appearance, suggesting that it influences one's likelihood to appear in the media sphere. According to Yuan, "These candidates are too brilliant to find a partner in real life. They have to commodify themselves to attract more people through reality dating shows." It is evident that audiences are already accustomed to using market logic and rubric to view and describe dating candidates on reality TV. Yuan's observation strongly echoes Ouellette and Hay's (2008: 7) argument regarding the self on reality television: "The self becomes more important as a flexible commodity to be moulded, packaged, managed, reinvented, and sold."

Furthermore, viewers noted contestants' ability to assess the advantages and disadvantages of participating in the show while emphasising

their strengths and concealing weaknesses to craft a positive persona. They often prepare a backup plan: if they find a match on the show, it is advantageous; if not, they can still promote themselves to a wider pool of potential partners and opportunities. Additionally, contestants can leverage the show's visibility to boost their social media profiles, benefiting their career development, especially in professions where self-branding is a strategic necessity. In this sense, participation in reality dating shows functions as both an economic and emotional investment with potential future returns. Contestants are portrayed as self-reliant, strategic, and autonomous individuals who follow the entrepreneurial principle of "not putting all your eggs in one basket," exemplifying an approach that maximizes gains while minimising risks in the context of reality television. However, within the context of reality television centred on heterosexual dating, female contestants are constrained by gendered norms that force them to navigate tensions between confident, self-assured self-presentation and the need to gain male approval to succeed in the competitive matchmaking game. The following section examines these dilemmas faced by women on reality dating shows.

## 3.5 Female Dilemmas in Reality Dating Shows

Female candidates on reality dating shows conform to contemporary Chinese ideals of female beauty (Ma, 2022). This includes maintaining a slim figure, wearing glittery dresses, and applying makeup to accentuate the eyes while promoting a pale complexion. On *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, young women are constantly subjected to the patriarchal family gaze, which shapes their gender performance. They are expected to embody 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 highlighted the unseen yet pervasive expectations and demands imposed 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 potentially 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 reinforces certain modes of constraints. On *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, there is typically a noticeable shift in women's attitudes toward 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 stigma of the 'leftover women,' which has proved to be a gendered dilemma in this context.

## 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter centres on the female subjectivities presented by young female contestants on *Chinese Dating with the Parents* and how female viewers reflect upon these subjectivities, particularly as embodied by urban young women born under China's One-Child Policy. It offers a nuanced examination of how young women negotiate understandings of the female-gendered self, emergent femininities, and shifting perceptions of heterosexual dating and marriage. The new female self, articulated by both female contestants of *Chinese Dating with the Parents* and female participants in this book project, is encapsulated in the figure of the 'new independent woman' (*xin duli nüxing*), who constructs herself as more progressive and autonomous previous generations. This identity is often grounded in the privileged social position conferred by the One-Child Policy—being the sole recipient of parental support and investment—as well as by access to higher education, mostly in Euro-American contexts, and by financial independence.

However, this discourse of independence is not without ambivalence. The very autonomy these young women claim is conditioned by historical state policy, familial investment, and neoliberal values that equate self-worth with educational and economic achievement. The 'new independent woman' thus emerges as a figure of empowerment and a subject of gendered state regulation, reflecting the internalisation of the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign, which urged women to cultivate self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement as the moral core of

the contemporary womanhood. Young women's increasing higher education attainment further resonates with McRobbie's 'top girl' figure. As "a bearer of qualifications" and "an active and aspirational subject of the education system" (McRobbie, 2007: 727), top girl's agency is celebrated yet circumscribed by meritocratic and postfeminist values.

Meanwhile, young women's insistence on upholding feminist ideas—by critically questioning and resisting the patrilineal naming system, the traditional gendered division of domestic labour, expressing fleeting relief over the absence of male siblings within a culture that has long privileged sons, and adopting deliberate and cautious attitudes towards heterosexual dating and marriage—reveals the persistent presence of gender inequality and misogyny deeply embedded in the contemporary society. This points to a fundamental different social context that of the English-speaking countries, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States, where postfeminist discourses originated and have generated widespread scholarship.

As a contested and ambivalent term, postfeminism selectively encompasses both feminist and anti-feminist discourses, implying that feminism has been "taken into account" and is therefore thus no longer necessary (McRobbie, 2004: 259). Although postfeminism is presented as "universally accessible" and as signalling that "a limited version" of gender equality has been achieved—albeit one still marked by exclusions based on social class, age, sexuality, disability, race and ethnicity (Tasker & Negra, 2007: 2)—it fundamentally rests on the assumption that gender equality has already been realised. Consequently, postfeminist narratives tend to portray feminism as "a spent force" (McRobbie, 2004: 255).

Nevertheless, the commonsense understandings of feminism that emerged from this project reveal that, within the Chinese context, entrenched gender inequality continues to constrain women's self-actualisation. This has compelled women to heed the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign's call for self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement as pathways toward self-empowerment. Yet, self-empowerment here functions less as a collective feminist politics and more as an individualised, pragmatic strategy—an executable means to negotiate a social order in which inequality remains structural and intersecting. Consequently, as an unintended outcome of the One-Child Policy and China's unique trajectory of neoliberal reform, the Chinese postfeminist sensibility is characterised by an acute awareness of persistent gender inequality and embodied in the precarious welfare status of

urban only daughters, whose empowerment constitutes both a byproduct of state population and modernisation policies and a subtle critique of the patriarchal and neoliberal logics underpinning them.

The chapter also examines the emergence of the entrepreneurial postfeminist subject on reality dating shows. It is exemplified by young women's pursuit of a 1+1>2 relationship—an ideal guided by a distinctly middle-class imagination within postsocialist China. The 1+1>2 model is both gendered and classed: young women choose to remain single in order to preserve a middle-class lifestyle, concerning exploitation or depletion in relationships with male partners who are financially less advantaged or unequal to them. Within this framework, an intimate relationship is conceived as a process of self-optimisation—a strategic alliance governed by the logic of maximising mutual benefit. This rationalised understanding of intimacy aligns closely with the calculating and enterprising subjectivity promoted under neoliberalism.

The entrepreneurial postfeminist subject also manifests through the unpaid labour of self-branding, as young women leverage their appearances on reality dating shows to expand their pool of potential partners and to promote side hustles, primarily via social media platforms that depend on public persona, online visibility, and mediated fame. These practices illustrate how the neoliberal logic of entrepreneurship infiltrates mediated dating and matchmaking, linking self-presentation on reality dating shows to an economic and affective form of investment. The entrepreneurial postfeminist subject on Chinese reality dating television thus refers to women who internalise entrepreneurial rationalities—emphasising ambition, initiative, calculation, and self-responsibility—and who continuously manage and reinvent themselves as marketable commodities and valuable assets. For these women, self-betterment becomes not only a moral imperative but also the ultimate measure of success in a competitive, market-driven society.

Reality dating shows constitute an iconic manifestation of patriarchal society, representing and constructing normative expectations for heterosexual relationships in which men hold the power. The competitive format typical of the reality television genre, coupled with the subtle discipline embodied in *Chinese Dating with the Parents*—particularly the expectations of the 'good wife' and 'dutiful daughter-in-law'—constrains female contestants from expressing a fully candid and independent representation of female subjectivity. This competitive dynamic is reinforced by the

longstanding cultural traditions of matchmaking and family involvement, creating a tension between individual agency and social expectation.

Consequently, two competing forces operate simultaneously: on the one hand, the growing self-awareness and demands for gender equality among young women; on the other, the resurgence of patriarchal norms, often reinforced through neoliberal rhetoric and legitimised by both market and state structures. Women are directly targeted through this entrepreneurial subject-making process, which positions them as carefully weighing, calculated, self-optimising actors. The entrepreneurial self-performed on reality dating television enriches the understanding of postfeminist sensibility by demonstrating how neoliberalism frames women as entrepreneurial agents in every dimension of life. In the next chapter, the focus shifts to the mechanisms of reality dating shows that compel female contestants to adopt the 'little woman' masquerade in order to be deemed eligible as romantic partners.[2]

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[2] An earlier version of Sects. 3.1, 3.2, and 3.5 was published as part of a chapter entitled "Intimate Activism and A Chinese Postfeminist Sensibility: Female Viewers' Responses to Reality Dating Shows" (Jia, 2024) in the edited volume *Feminist Activism in Post-2010 Sinosphere*. That chapter explicitly examines female viewers' responses to reality dating television and conceptualises their collective resistance to patriarchal norms surrounding dating and marriage under the notion of "intimate activism." In the present book, all sections of Chapter 3 have been reorganised and substantially revised to more effectively foreground the figure of the new female subject.

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CHAPTER 4

# The 'Little Woman' Masquerade

## 4.1 Guidelines for Selfhood in Reality Dating Shows

### *4.1.1 Makeover Paradigm in Reality Television*

As a genre of factual television that incorporates first-person media, reality television has opened new public spaces for the representation of identity and the performance of individuals' ordinariness within their "extraordinary subjectivity" (Dovey, 2000: 4). It also presents "a material process in which real people make real decisions" within clearly defined situational settings (Dovey, 2000: 2). In conjunction with the makeover paradigm, reality TV intervenes in the construction of the self by evaluating, rewarding, and advising on individuals' self-presentation (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Reality TV circulates and reinforces guidelines for living, as its participants are prompted to engage in the "subjective, autobiographical, and confessional" expression of the self across different domains of life (Dovey, 2000: 1).

Makeover TV constitutes a subgenre of reality TV, emphasising processes of self-improvement and the performance of social ideals. Moseley (2000: 299) suggests that the "makeover takeover" has dominated British primetime TV with an exclusive target on girls and women. Makeover TV communicates the promise that things can get better, encompassing home and garden decoration, makeup, lifestyle, and of course, the self. It is characterised by the 'before and after' format, which circulates "a sense of the accessibility and achievability" of an idealised

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version of the self or a desired status (Moseley, 2000: 304). The transformation narrative offers audiences with cheerful spectacles in the closing sequence, conveying the implicit message: "Follow the show's guidelines, and you can do this too." In this sense, self-transformation on makeover TV not only produces a moment of visual splendour but also encourages women to adopt this approach as a strategy for addressing the dilemmas and precarity in their lives. Targeting primarily girls and women, makeover TV frames femininity as a site of "limitless possibility and endless consumption," acting as the pivot around which intensifying neoliberal processes continuously remake the self into successful, postfeminist bourgeois subjects (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008: 227). Ringrose and Walkerdine suggest that women's bodies and minds constitute "a core site of abjection—a subjectivity designated as uninhabitable and therefore also a central site of regulation" (2008: 227).

The Chinese makeover show *You Are So Beautiful* (*ni zenme zheme haokan*) exemplifies how reality television actively mediates the formation of women's subjectivity, reinforcing narrowly defined, mass-produced ideals of femininity through its format and narrative strategies. Co-produced by Mango TV and He Chen Studio and premiering in 2019, the show recruited a group of ostensibly ordinary women who were identified as flawed and problematic, purportedly in need of both professional guidance and self-transformation (Peng, 2022). The programme also enlisted five 'experts' in the fields of appearance management, fashion, home makeover and interior design, dietary habits, and intimate relationships, who were tasked with assessing female contestants' performance across these domains. Consequently, the women were evaluated, mocked, and at times humiliated by these so-called life coaches. Functioning as judges, the experts guided the contestants to become competent managers of their own lives. They first diagnosed deficiencies in specific areas and then prescribed the knowledge and skills the women were expected to acquire and cultivate. The first episode, entitled "Hannah Quinlivan Sends a Wedding Dress to Comfort Fang Jing," features the makeover of Fang Jing, portrayed through fragmented scenes as a woman without lipsticks or high heels, who never wears makeup, rents a room decorated like that of an old man, and has lived alone for ten years as a female PhD. These descriptions of the contestant reinforce a sensational and stereotypical perspective. Fang is further depicted as socially withdrawn—someone who can remain silent for four days when not at work, has fewer than 130 WeChat contacts, and spends less than 30 minutes

on social media daily. The episode concludes with her walking alone onto the stage, wearing the wedding dress gifted by Hannah Quinlivan, and sharing reflections on her transformation. The makeover of Fang Jing on the programme provides instant gratification for the audience, as she appears fulfilled and transformed by the final episode. However, the makeover show avoids addressing the social and structural factors that may have affected the constant's circumstance. Instead, her current situation is attributed to her supposed failure to acquire proper femininity. Her personal achievement goes largely unrecognisable by both the life coaches and the audience.

Wood and Skeggs (2004: 206) argue that the makeover narrative on reality TV produces scenarios of "new ethical selves" which are displayed and rehearsed into a highly classed and gendered category. "The ethical self […] can transform, tell and show its moral worth" (ibid.: 207). Such profoundly classed and gendered selves are constructed through processes of consciousness-raising and lifestyle improvement. As shown on *You Are So Beautiful*, female contestants are refashioned into 'better' upgraded selves who not only possess proper taste in fashion and lifestyle but also align with the expectations of heteronormative relationships. *You Are So Beautiful* exemplifies the postfeminist logic of individualisation. By framing women's deficiencies as personal failings and their self-improvement as both a moral and aesthetic duty, the show rearticulates women's dilemmas as matters of individual responsibility and lifestyle management. The contestants' transformations are celebrated as evidence of their agency and as rewards for their willingness to adhere to prescribed regimes of self-discipline and self-care, while the social and structural conditions that constrain women's choices remain unacknowledged. In this way, makeover television transforms the collective struggles inherent in women's lived experiences into a spectacle of individual self-fashioning, aligning femininity with the neoliberal ideal of the self-managing, self-responsible subject.

Phrases such as "being yourself," "making a better self," and "searching for a real self" are pervasive within postfeminist media culture. These discourses have been appropriated by reality makeover television to encourage and ostensibly empower individuals to take control of their lives through lifestyle choices aimed at achieving happiness and fulfilment. The self, as Giddens (1991: 75) conceptualises it, is "a reflexive project" that develops through a continuous process linking one's past to an anticipated future. The individual is thus rendered responsible

for the "trajectory of development" of the self (ibid.: 75). As Giddens asserts, "we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves" (1991: 75). In conditions of high modernity, he argues, individuals are compelled to engage in lifestyle construction: "we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so—we have no choice but to choose" (Giddens, 1991: 81). The decision to adopt particular routines, practices, and habits becomes an expression of self-identity—encompassing not only what one wears, how one behaves, and what one believes, but also who one aspires to become. However, Giddens's model of the reflexive self overlooks the extent to which this process is gendered, assuming an even distribution of both the capacity and the obligation to undertake such projects of selfhood. Within postfeminist media culture, this reflexive project has become distinctly feminised: women, in particular, are positioned as moral subjects of self-improvement and self-surveillance, expected to demonstrate autonomy, confidence, and desirability through continuous self-management within neoliberal frameworks of empowerment.

Reality dating shows have a profound preoccupation with constructing, navigating, and disciplining the performance of the gendered self. The "makeover paradigm" has permeated postfeminist media culture where the self is seen as a project with *inherent defects* thus demanding lifelong and all-encompassing work, transformation, and upgrading (Gill, 2007: 156). Reality dating shows can be a key element of the female subject-making in postfeminist media culture as they have engaged in educating and guiding female participants to perform the 'right' and 'proper' femininity in a blind date. The makeover paradigm on reality dating shows has been reflected on the bodily discipline of the ideal femininity and the psychological regulation of how to become an eligible partner in heterosexual relationships. The format of reality dating shows contains features of makeover TV.

On reality dating shows, women's engagement in gender performance is framed as a personal choice rather than as a response to the demands of ingrained patriarchal culture. The decision to pursue self-transformation is positioned as "an individualised responsibility" and an efficient solution to the personal plight, an approach that runs counter to the feminist principle of the personal-as-political (Wood & Skeggs, 2004: 206). Work on the self is thus presented not only as "the quest for a path" and "the search for authenticity," but also as "an antidote to the anxiety-provoking uncertainties of a new economic and social order" (Orgad &

Gill, 2022: 12). Yet this continual call for women to work on themselves ultimately reinforces the paradoxical notion that social change can be achieved through individual transformation, thereby diverting attention from the systemic and structural inequalities that shape women's lives (ibid., 2022). This emphasis on personal choice and self-transformation in reality dating shows reflects broader trends in postfeminist culture, where individual agency is foregrounded even as underlying social structures and power relations remain largely unchallenged.[1]

### *4.1.2 Disposition and Postfeminist Feeling Rules*

The literature on postfeminism in the early noughties features in the discussion about the individualistic, consumption-oriented, self-empowering female subject, agency and personal choice, and the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Illuminated by the current and ongoing "luminosity and popularity" of feminism in the post #MeToo era (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Orgad & Gill, 2022: 145), and against the backdrop of an increasingly complex socio-political climate marked by misogyny, racism, homophobia, and nationalism, as Gill (2017) argues, it has become more difficult to conceptualise postfeminism as a distinctive sensibility. Instead, postfeminism has gradually evolved into a psychological discursive strategy that promotes the 'right' kind of dispositions, such as confidence, resilience, positivity, and optimism (Berlant, 2011; Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2020; Orgad & Gill, 2022). This section begins by examining the notion of disposition and then explores how it constitutes the core of the affective and psychic dimensions of postfeminism, as well as how postfeminism's regulatory force has shifted from fostering the 'right' choices to cultivating the 'right' dispositions.

Disposition derives from the French word *dispositif*. Foucault developed the notion of *dispositif* which refers to "a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions" (1977: 194). A

[1] An earlier version of Sect. 4.1.1 was published as part of a chapter entitled "From the 'Right' Choices to the 'Right' Dispositions: The Subjective and Psychological Construction of Postfeminism in Chinese Reality Dating Shows" (Jia, 2023) in the edited volume *Media and Gender: History, Representation, Reception*.

*dispositif* maintains and reinforces the exercise of power within the social body. It is heterogeneous since its elements, such as knowledge, techniques, and institutions, are continually established and re-established over time. Furthermore, *dispositifs* function as a response to "an urgent need" to society at a given historical moment (Foucault, 1977: 195). This notion is important for understanding how society moulds people across different contexts and historical times.

Although Foucault did not emphasise the gender dimension in *dispositif*, Butler (1990) applies the concept of disposition to the study of sexuality by conceptualising bisexuality as a combination of feminine and masculine dispositions. According to Butler, "the dispositions that Freud assumes to be primary or constitutive facts of sexual life are effects of a law which, internalised, produces and regulates discrete gender identity and heterosexuality" (1990: 87). Dispositions can reveal the untold history of enforced sexual prohibitions. From a psychoanalytic perspective, dispositions are "trained, fixed, and consolidated by a prohibition which later and in the name of culture arrives to quell the disturbance created by an unrestrained homosexual cathexis" (Butler, 1990: 87). In this sense, the prohibitive law of gender produces sexuality in the form of dispositions and shapes it into culturally acceptable forms.

Beyond the gendered aspect of disposition, Featherstone (2007) highlights a classed dimension, particularly in relation to consumer culture and its implications for social status. Featherstone conceptualises dispositions as a form of habitus, that is socially recognisable and serves to demarcate boundaries between different groups. Building on this, Orgad and Gill develop the notion of "the confidence dispositif," referring to a set of ideas and techniques which enable the confidence culture to prevail (2022: 144). In a society where welfare structures have been dismantled, the confidence dispositif works as a "gendered technology of self" and it "is mobilised as a device to manage the intensifying precarity and flexibility in the labour market and is a response to the increasing disinvestment in social welfare and the privatisation and individualisation of social risks" (Orgad & Gill, 2022: 144). Women are encouraged to work on the self and cultivate the 'right' and 'proper' dispositions, although what constitutes these 'right' dispositions is classed and may vary across different social contexts.

In this book, I use 'disposition' as an umbrella term to describe a person's gendered and classed character, behaviour, and performance. As

the building block of subjectivity, disposition originates from an individual's nature and is subsequently shaped, adapted, and cultivated through processes of gradual socialisation. It encompasses important affective dimensions, referring to how individuals tend to feel and how they influence the emotions of others. Disposition is closely related to the notion of feeling rules and is profoundly gendered. Hochschild defines feeling rules as "what guide emotion work by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchange" (2012: 56). Feeling rules provide a framework for understanding how people "intervene in" emotions across different roles—parents and children, men and women, waitresses and customers—in order to control feelings (Hochschild, 2012: 56). This concept is particularly useful for understanding feelings as socially and culturally constructed phenomena that can be managed and directed.

Gill (2017: 619) proposes "postfeminist feeling rules" to describe the affective life of postfeminism. Postfeminist feeling rules outline how young women are expected to feel and to be. Postfeminist media culture shapes and enforces these "distinctive feeling rules" of emotion and selfhood. Gill (2017: 620) further employs the term "psychological dispositions" to explain how these feeling rules operate on participants. A typical example is femvertising, a neologism for female-empowerment advertising that emerged in the 2010s. It emphasises empowering and inspirational messages and "strategically appropriates feminist values and utilises pro-female messages" to exclusively target potential female consumers (Jia, 2022: 18). The dispositions emphasised by femvertising include confidence, positivity, and the full acceptance and celebration of personal flaws. Women are encouraged not only to act confidently and positively but also to feel confident and positive about themselves. By capitalising on the intimate vulnerabilities and insecurities of subordinated groups, femvertising easily moves its audience to tears, revealing the affective dimensions of ideology (Gill & Elias, 2014). This conveys the broader message that the patriarchal and neoliberal forms of governmentality have extended their reach from regulating women's bodies to shaping women's minds (Jia, 2022). What kinds of dispositions are made eligible within the context of reality dating shows? How are these dispositions gendered, how are they shaped by mechanisms such as casting, interaction, and evaluation within these shows? In the following section, I examine the makeover paradigm in *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, through which reality dating shows shape and valorise a gendered disposition exemplified by the 'little

woman' ideal—a set of self-presentation, coping strategies, and affective styles expected of female candidates, which the show positions as desirable and normative, thereby reinforcing broader social expectations of femininity. I also explore how female viewers of the show negotiate and deconstruct the discourse of becoming a 'little woman.'

## 4.2 Becoming the 'Little Woman'

The new independent woman figure, who embodies the Four-Selves Spirit—self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement—is the primary feature of female subjectivity represented by contestants on *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. It also reflects female viewers' perceptions of young women born under the One-Child Policy, as observed through their participation in the audience reception of this book project. Like most dating programmes produced in contemporary China, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* exclusively recruited a group of privileged young women as contestants. Their privilege manifests in multiple, intersecting aspects, including urban citizenship, only-daughter status, higher education obtained in Euro-American contexts, steady middle-class occupations, financial independence and related career achievements, as well as a media-friendly superior physical appearance. All these factors align with, or contribute to, what Tasker and Negra (2007: 2) describe as the "centralisation of an affluent elite" in postfeminist culture. Meanwhile, these young women demonstrate a strong sense of self as the 'new independent woman' discussed in the previous chapter. *Chinese Dating with the Parents* offers public advice and guidelines on how to become a 'proper' dating partner and display the 'right' disposition on a blind date. This advice is strikingly gendered. In this section, I argue that female contestants are implicitly encouraged to perform as 'little women' who conform to patriarchal expectations in order to secure a match, given the limited pool of six male contestants available for selection in each episode. The dating programme internalises the makeover paradigm and actively hails women to undergo self-transformation in their understandings of female subjectivity, heterosexual relationships, and self-presentation strategies. This transformative process is guided by the host and matchmaker, Meng Fei, along with the invited dating 'professionals' featured on the show. Focussing on a group of privileged and independent female contestants, this section examines how reality dating shows incorporate the makeover paradigm into their production mechanisms and how

this framework shapes young women's on-screen self-presentation and gender performance.

Many female contestants on *Chinese Dating with the Parents* performed the 'cool girl' persona, emphasising independence, career ambition, financial autonomy, and assertiveness in taking charge of their lives. A typical episode of *Chinese Dating with the Parents* begins with a candidate's self-introduction, in which they briefly share their name, city of residence, higher education background, age, and occupation. During this session, female contestants often emphasise their identity as independent new women in various ways. For example, the contestant Xie Xinyan in the fifth season holds a Master's degree in Civil Engineering at INSA Orléans, France, and currently works at the headquarters of a central state-owned enterprise, where she is responsible for overseas project bidding and tendering. While introducing her side hustle as a vlogger, she stated, "When I'm creating short videos, I feel I'm the sovereign of the world." She earns much more from her side hustle than from her primary occupation at the SOE. In addition, Xinyan expressed a preference for a man with inner strength who would support her to focus on her career over the next ten years, as she plans to work in Africa. This statement carries the subtext that she does not intend to prioritize family life or take on childbearing during this period. In the fifth season, Wang Tong introduced herself as holding a master's degree in finance from the United Kingdom, which she had self-funded through income from part-time jobs during her undergraduate years. Now working as an account director at a consulting firm in Shanghai, she described herself as financially independent. In her self-introduction, Tong encouraged young women to invest in themselves and to maintain a well-groomed, polished appearance. She further demonstrated her initiative and confidence by stating that if attracted to someone, she would actively approach him rather than wait to be approached. Furthermore, Zhao Qi, a contestant in the fifth season, exemplified another typical 'cool girl' image, with a fit, slim figure and striking appearance. She revealed her nickname as "Big Brother Qi" and described herself as having an aggressive personality and a strong work ethic. On the dating show stage, Qi publicly rejected the conventional gender division of labour by quoting the phrase, "Men as breadwinners, women as homemakers" (*nan zhu wai, nv zhu nei*). Overall, these young women reflected a similar attitude towards personal agency and gender norms, emphasising personal independence, career and

self-development orientation, a longing for freedom, and resistance to gender-based constraints.

Paradoxically, male candidates and their family members responded bluntly and negatively to these views, immediately labelling these women as 'alpha women' (*nv qiang ren*), 'big women,' 'too independent,' or 'domineering' (*ba dao*). Men repeatedly made comments like: "I can't handle her." "I can't control her." "She is brilliant, but she is two years older than me." "She seems to be a strong woman who makes me under pressure. I don't like this feeling." "She is a big woman, not a little woman. She seems like an elder sister who can't make me feel impulsive or romantic." "She doesn't have *that thing* a woman is supposed to have." After voicing these opinions, the male candidates withdrew from the competition, unwilling to be paired with the female contestants. These comments suggest that, from the male contestants' perspective, the 'big woman' can be characterised in various ways, such as possessing a strong and ambitious personality, being older than themselves, or lacking certain types of femininity. These descriptions and judgments are centred on the men's positionality, framing heterosexual relationships as arrangements in which men are assumed to have control over women—in short, men as dominant and women as subordinate. Consequently, they are reluctant to participate in dates where their dominance might be challenged.

On the reality dating show, all male candidates were in a separate room, while the female candidate remained on stage with the host, facing six pairs of parents or family members. If a male candidate decided to withdraw from the matchmaking process, he was required to call a family member, usually his mother, and inform her of his decision. The mother would then press the button in front of the electric sliding seat, causing the parents or family members to retract and remain behind the central stage, signalling the family unit's withdrawal from the process. Each withdrawal was accompanied by a dead battery sound effect, heightening the tension. Female contestants were not informed of the male candidates' comments about them until the reality dating show aired. They felt upset and awkward standing at centre stage, unsure of what to say or how to behave. Even in that moment, however, they attempted to manage their facial expressions—maintaining polite smiles and responding to the withdrawing contestants with remarks such as "I fully understand your decision." The tense atmosphere was further amplified by the agitated background music mimicking a heartbeat and by the "Whoa!" sound effect, used to express the spectators' anger and confusion in the studio.

At this turning point, either the host Meng Fei or an elder celebrity acting as the dating 'expert' would break the ice by delivering *a brief lecture* on "how a woman is supposed to behave on a dating show." Through these lectures, the host and the celebrity conveyed ideals of femininity, suggesting that women should present different aspects of themselves to different men. A woman was expected to become a little girl when she fell in love. Having received this tutorial on how to embody culturally constructed and idealised femininity, Qi and Tong became grateful and receptive pupils, transforming themselves to display their 'womanly' qualities on the show. Qi added that her closest friends considered her somewhat naïve, neither independent nor assertive, while her cousin described her as girly (*ruan meizi*) at home. Similarly, Tong revealed that she tended to become very sweet and clingy when entering in a relationship.

The transformation of Qi and Tong's attitudes toward self-representation and gendered performance illustrates how reality dating shows not only offer matchmaking opportunities but also incorporate production mechanisms that accurately direct candidates to develop, perform, and present the 'right' and 'proper' gendered self in order to become an eligible, acceptable, desirable, and approachable dating partner (Jia, 2023, 2025). Within this framework, gendered knowledge becomes essential: understanding femininity and heterosexual dating, its implications for gender and family relations, and the appropriate ways to perform it. The dating show host and invited celebrities, constructed as experts in dating, are portrayed as possessing this knowledge and guiding participants in self-presentation to secure intimate relationships. Female candidates, in turn, are positioned as aspiring students, adopting a learning mode aimed at cultivating gendered performances and shaping their female identities. Meanwhile, for young women, participating in reality dating shows that foreground personal transformation and strategies for managing both the self and relationships requires a substantial degree of self-disclosure. Throughout this process, women are expected to engage in heightened self-reflection by analysing past relationships and considering how their family of origin has shaped their personality and preferred modes of interaction within intimate relationships. These personal and intimate reflections often involve examining the reasons for breakups, acknowledging personal shortcomings, and identifying areas for improvement, particularly in communication and mutual understanding.

Reality dating shows operate as disciplinary apparatuses that invite participants to engage in self-fashioning, recalibrating their self-presentation to align with normative ideals of gender and intimacy. This disciplinary power is so pervasive that across multiple seasons of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, no contestant has publicly resisted or stepped outside the process of self-reflection and transformation prescribed by the show.

A viewer named Lingling commented on the discussion surrounding the image of the 'big woman' that emerged from *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. She had watched the episode featuring the contestant Wang Tong and her matchmaking process. She argued,

> The reality dating show and male candidates consistently cast the 'big woman' characters in a negative light, often repeating phrases like: "I can't control her" or "I can't handle her." While relationships are inherently intimate and preferences vary, some people are attracted to aggressive women, some are not; some enjoy exerting control, some do not. However, the dating show tends to highlight the traits associate with the 'big man' primarily as qualities that men dislike. For example, in one episode with five male candidates, four explicitly stated their aversion to 'big woman.' The underlying message to women is unmistakable: to secure a place within the patriarchal system, they must appear weak and vulnerable or at least perform vulnerability.
>
> Lingling, 36, university lecturer

Lingling pointed out that *Chinese Dating with the Parents* emphasises men's privilege to evaluate, classify, and compare women in a blind date. It operates as intermediaries that articulate and legitimize the perspectives of male contestants. In heterosexual dating, the term 'big' in 'big women' does not necessarily refer to physical size. On some occasions, it may be associated with age, referring to qualities possessed by women who are older. More importantly, the term denotes gendered personality traits, dispositions, and attitudes toward the female self, specifically, women who emphasise independence, take control of their own lives, and resist conformity to patriarchal and traditional expectations. Lingling argued that the dating show serves an educational function, as it invites contemporary young women to adopt traditional feminine roles. It also conveys the implication that women's unintended single status can be attributed to their intelligence and career ambition, or to their failure to properly conceal these traits, which are portrayed as shortcomings in certain dating markets. By featuring parents on set, the show prompts them

to encourage their daughters to undergo self-transformation and align themselves with the patriarchal expectations of dating culture. Furthermore, Lingling noted that among the five male contestants, although one stated, "Why should I control her? I would like to love her," this does not negate the broader message reinforced by the show: women are expected to transform into 'little women,' or at least display the qualities associated with the 'little woman,' in order to enhance their desirability and competitiveness within the heterosexual dating market.

The concept of 'becoming' emphasises constant transformation and adaptability. It aligns with understandings of gender and femininity, as captured by Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (2011: 293). Gender is "as much a process as a fixed state" (Wharton, 2005: 7). It is not merely expressed; it is enacted and performed. Inherently unstable, gender is continually produced and reproduced. Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 277) insightfully propose: "The girl is like the block of becoming that remains contemporaneous to each opposable term—man, woman, child, adult. It is not the girl who becomes a woman; it is becoming-woman that produces the universal girl."

The quote emphasises that the girl is not a fixed entity simply progressing toward womanhood; rather, she exists within the ongoing process of "becoming-woman." This perspective shifts attention from linear conceptions of female development toward relational and performative processes, suggesting that identities are produced through interactions with social categories such as man, woman, child, and adult. In this process, the concept of "woman" shapes how the girl is understood, rather than the girl naturally transforming into a woman. Within popular media culture, the female gender is constructed as flexible, changeable, and knowledgeable. It emphasises the ongoing work of self-fashioning, in which endless processes of becoming shape a woman's relationship with herself. The female self is thus understood as an unfinished project.

On reality dating shows, women are strongly encouraged to display both their independence as contemporary citizens and their dependence on men as approachable potential partners. It is crucial for female participants to exhibit the 'right' dispositions on the matchmaking stage—confident but not aggressive, independent but not domineering. These invisible expectations are reflected in McDermott's concept of the 'cool girl,' who conforms to traditional norms of feminine passivity and beauty while carefully concealing her knowingness (McDermott, 2022). The

'cool girl' image represents a shift from the self-monitoring subject exemplified by Bridget Jones to a postfeminist persona that emphasises agency, defiance, and enjoyment. Female candidates thus not only adhere to traditional standards of passivity and beauty but also seek to showcase their independence and societal competence. Yet, confronted with the potential threat of rejection by male counterparts, they must carefully temper their assertiveness, presenting instead a girly and vulnerable persona.

Here, dating shows function as a mechanism for managing the performance and representation of female subjectivity. Through a series of regulatory and systematic practices, these shows have promoted and shaped a newly upgraded form of feminine subject: a woman who can swiftly alternate between being a 'big' woman and performing as a 'little' woman. Being a big woman responds to the pressures of a competitive social environment, intensified precarity since the Covid-19 pandemic, and deepening inequalities. Performing as a little woman, in contrast, addresses the gendered expectations imposed on women within patriarchal and heterosexual relationships. Women must navigate this duality carefully, donning and removing the feminine masquerade while continuously self-regulating, self-transforming, and engaging in endless processes of becoming.

The makeover paradigm in reality dating shows exemplifies the expectation that women switch between being a 'big' woman for themselves and performing as a 'little' woman for potential male partners. Regardless of a woman's intelligence, she must adapt to the conventions of heterosexual matchmaking, which demand that she turn inward and reveal her vulnerability and perceived shortcomings in a gendered, strategically self-disclosing manner. The transformation of female candidates on reality dating shows offers a new lens through which to understand postfeminist sensibilities in contemporary China. These candidates are relatively privileged, empowered by their urban citizenship, higher educational attainment, and financial independence. Yet, this empowered status often threatens male candidates and undermines their sense of masculinity. Within the patriarchal matchmaking system, women are expected to work on the self to embody an aestheticised form of postfeminist sensibility, carefully concealing their sharpness and assertiveness behind the façade of the 'little woman.' To further examine the process of becoming the 'little woman' on *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, the following section provides an in-depth analysis of the 'female masquerade' and considers how it functions to discipline women on reality dating shows.

## 4.3 Female Masquerade in Reality Dating Shows

### *4.3.1 Womanliness as a Masquerade*

This section examines the concept of 'masquerade' as a gendered technology for constructing and reshaping female subjectivity within the context of reality dating shows. As both a noun and a verb, masquerade refers to the act of pretending to be someone else or to the practice of wearing costumes, masks, and disguises to conceal one's identity. The notion of masquerade has a longstanding presence in feminist psychoanalytic discourse and theories of film spectatorship (Doane, 1982; Mulvey, 1975; Rivière, 1929/1986; Straayer, 1996). It has primarily been employed to theorise the relationship between gender and the performative expressions of gendered identity within media and cultural contexts. In *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, to mitigate confrontation and facilitate matchmaking, female contestants are prompted to adopt the mask of the 'little woman,' camouflaging traits such as independence, assertiveness, and ambition that might be perceived as threatening by men. The 'little woman' persona embodies the ongoing articulation of the concept of 'femininity as masquerade.'

The earliest and most frequently cited work on the masquerade of femininity is by the British psychoanalyst Joan Rivière (1929/1986). Rivière observed a female patient, an academic and intellectual woman, who undermined herself through girlish behaviours and flirtation with male colleagues. The woman donned a mask of womanliness to conceal her symbolic possession of the phallus, using this behaviour as a compensatory mechanism to shield herself from male retaliation while maintaining social connections in the workplace. Through such masquerade, women transformed fear of retribution into seduction, performing femininity to conform to societal expectations and protect themselves. In her case, this strategy allowed her to offset the perceived threat of her intellectual accomplishments, deflecting potential retribution from men and preserving social harmony by concealing aspects of her true self. According to Rivière,

> Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it—much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not stolen the goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine

> womanliness and the 'masquerade.' My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.
>
> (Rivière, 1929/1986: 38)

In the analysis of Rivière's conceptualisation of masquerade, Mary Ann Doane contends that the masquerade challenges patriarchal positioning by foregrounding that femininity is constructed as a mask and not a self-contained "presence-to-itself" (1982: 81). The female masquerade functions as a code of being womanly, guiltless, non-confrontational, and non-threatening. As Arzumanova (2012: 119–120) notes, the feminine mask is characterised by "excessive flirting, displays of subservience, coquetting, [and] hyper-innocence," alongside performances that reveal intrinsic contradictions between a woman's "intellectual proclivities and her chosen mask." Rivière further emphasised women's anxiety about being judged for 'stealing' masculinity from men. Women are compelled to conceal their symbolic and metaphorical possession of the phallus in a gender-savvy manner. The feminine masquerade thus serves as both testimony and self-protection, an act performed out of fear of masculine retribution and as a precautionary strategy. Gillian Rose observes that femininity is a masquerade, "performed by mimicking what being a woman is meant to be about" (Rose, 2016: 167). In everyday life, the female masquerade manifests through multiple forms, including makeup, dress, lifestyle, comportment, and disposition—in short, through both the said and the unsaid.

Arzumanova (2012: 120) examines the construction of gender and femininity in American makeover reality TV shows such as *What Not to Wear* (2003–2013) and *Tim Gunn's Guide to Style* (2007–2008) through the lens of feminine masquerade. She argues that these makeover programmes strategically deploy the "tactics of the masquerade" to construct an idealised version of femininity, one grounded in whiteness, middle-class respectability, and heterosexuality. This feminine ideal corresponds to the postfeminist subject as identified in Western cultural texts (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Gill, 2007). Building on Rivière's work, McRobbie conceptualises the masquerade of womanliness within the postfeminist culture in the United Kingdom. She (2007: 720, 723) proposes the "post-feminist masquerade" as "a strategy or device for the re-securing of patriarchal law and masculine hegemony," "a kind of gender settlement," which carries significant implications for young women. Within

this "post-feminist sexual contract" (McRobbie, 2007: 718), women are offered an abundance of 'choices' and "economies of visibility"—all framed as signs of empowerment and progress (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 21). The postfeminist masquerade operates in a light-hearted, non-coercive, and nostalgic manner within commercial media and consumer culture, presenting itself as a celebration of women's agency and female empowerment. Its effectiveness lies in its capacity to neutralise male anxiety, avoiding any overt evocation of threat or revenge. As McRobbie suggests, through the masquerade, contemporary women have carved out authority in domains such as fashion and beauty, fields that function as compensatory spaces for their "intellectual proclivities" in work, employment, and public life (Rivière, 1929/1986: 36). The postfeminist masquerade is thus both "a knowing strategy" and "a highly styled disguise of womanliness" (McRobbie, 2007: 725). It reflects the renewed demand for women to self-manage through the cultivation of hyper-femininity, now reframed as an expression of personal choice and self-empowerment.

Building on the historical exploration of the concept of masquerade, Jia Tan develops the notion of "digital masquerade" to theorise the "entangled and co-constitutive relationship between technology and gender/sexuality/rights articulations in a specific socio-historical context" (2023: 8). Moving beyond the relationship between gender and identity expression, digital masquerade involves the strategic modification of digital images to depict women's bodies in public arenas while navigating around censorship and the risk of criminalisation (Tan, 2023). In the context of feminist and queer activism, approaching the notion of masquerade through a digitally conscious lens, digital masquerade offers a new framework for understanding how subjects enact, perform, and engage with rights-based, feminist, and queer identities in digital spaces, particularly in contexts where conventional activist or rights-based lexicons are constrained.

Masquerade, carrying the dual implications of with disguise and performance, signifies both compliance with and subversion of dominant social orders (Tan, 2023). It operates through acts of concealment and deception, and its visibility paradoxically draws attention to the very act of covering. This notion resonates powerfully with the Chinese expression *chuilian tingzheng*, literally meaning "reigning behind the curtain." The term historically refers to imperial mothers or empresses who attended to state affairs from behind a screen, as women were forbidden to exercise political authority publicly. The screen or curtain thus operates as

a symbolic equivalent of the masquerade—a compromise that conceals women's power and authority while allowing limited participation in the public sphere. In this respect, the masquerade can be understood as both a patriarchal construct designed to suppress women's power and a strategic performance through which women enhance femininity or conceal their ambition and assertiveness, while simultaneously exerting power behind the screen.

In postfeminist media culture, the female masquerade is portrayed as something that women can consciously put on and take off at will (Zaslow, 2009: 3). The postfeminist subjects are depicted as empowered and autonomous subjects who can decide when to be feminine and when to be ambitious (Jia, 2022). The discourse of female empowerment thus foregrounds notions of choice and free will; however, the postfeminist masquerade remains, in McRobbie's words, "a mask of female submissiveness" (2009: 66). Putting on the female masquerade is a gendered art of balance. It demands a particular form of "feminine strength," which Anna Iskra metaphorically describes as being "soft like water" (2023: 661). This concept of "feminine strength" differs from women's power or agency. It primarily involves traits of flexibility, adaptability, and gendered awareness—essentially, women's capability to successfully adapt to and navigate within the pathways set by the patriarchal gender order (Iskra, 2023). Iskra conceptualises the call for 'female softening' as a postfeminist sensibility, which glosses over structural inequalities. Rather than encouraging women to step forward and challenge norms, it shifts the focus to women's ability to undergo self-transformation and conform to established gender norms.

Meanwhile, the notion of 'womanliness as a masquerade'—something that can be put on and taken off—closely relates to the concept of gender performativity. Butler (1990: 190–191) emphasises that gender is an identity constituted through "a stylised repetition of acts," which are both intentional and performative. Here, 'performative' signifies "a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Butler, 1990: 190). As Arzumanova (2012: 120) notes, "the performance of gender is the process of constant 'becoming,' wherein identity must be maintained through regular and consistent performance." Later, Butler (2011) distinguishes between performance and performativity: the former implies a conscious act, whereas the latter refers to an unconscious and continuous process shaped by social and cultural forces. Building on this distinction, I argue that when female candidates consciously enact the persona of an

eligible 'little woman,' they are performing gender; yet the femininity they embody and internalise is achieved through performativity. "Performativity is a reiteration of norms that precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and cannot be taken as the performer's will and choice" (Taylor, 2022: 12). In this sense, femininity is not simply a mask that women can freely put on or remove; it functions as a form of social regulation. Building on the theoretical understanding of gender as performative, the female masquerade on reality dating shows can be seen as a practical manifestation of these concepts. While femininity is continuously shaped and constrained by social norms, reality dating shows exemplified by *Chinese Dating with the Parents* provide a structured environment in which women are taught to consciously perform and regulate their gendered behaviours, illustrating how the abstract notions of performance and performativity operate in real-world media contexts.

Rivière's work, written nearly a century ago, continues to illuminate the psychological construction of femininity and its position of subordination. She understood femininity and masculinity as two distinct yet coexisting dispositions within a woman's gendered subjectivity. In this book, I argue that what contemporary women conceal is no longer a symbolic penis or the possession of masculinity. Rather, what women are compelled to hide are their ambitions for success, intellectual demeanour, rebellious spirit, and assertiveness—all of which constitute the qualities of a 'big' woman, yet are deemed undesirable within the heterosexual dating market. These characteristics are not inherently masculine, even though they are often regarded as unfeminine. Beyond the binary of femininity and masculinity, the impact of gendered technologies of the self on women is profound. Women are forced into an endless game of hide-and-seek: they pursue self-actualisation through embracing the traits of a 'big' woman, while simultaneously mastering the art of concealing these very traits to remain desirable within patriarchal dating culture. The additional labour of self-fashioning imposed by neoliberalism on women is therefore gendered and relentless. To further examine the mechanisms of reality dating shows that compel female contestants to adopt the female masquerade, I propose the notion of a "pedagogy of femininity," which will be elaborated in the following section.

### *4.3.2 Pedagogy of Femininity*

Reality dating shows are not only prisms reflecting changing gendered values and the zeitgeist of how contemporary people perceive intimate relationships, but also sites where heteronormative power dynamics are enacted and a pedagogy of femininity is disseminated. Acknowledging education occurs across diverse social sites, including but not limited to schooling, and that pedagogy encompasses processes that engage desire, capture imagination, and shape consciousness (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997), this section argues that *Chinese Dating with the Parents* functions as a gendered pedagogical site where dating contestants, the host, and expert commentators jointly enact a pedagogy of femininity, in which the female masquerade operates as its compulsory curriculum. This pedagogy has two primary learning objectives. First, women are expected to perform as 'little women' whose demeanour does not threaten male counterparts during blind dates. Second, these 'little women' are required to embody a multifaceted and versatile femininity, one that is both and knowing and carefully balanced. They must appear passive yet engaging, cute yet seductive, and capable of simultaneously performing multiple social roles, as a suitable candidate for a dating partner, wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, all while adhering to the norms of propriety. Through staged evaluations and expert advice segments, the show instructs both contestants and viewers in what counts as desirable femininity and how to reconcile it with family expectations and neoliberal self-fashioning. In this sense, the programme is not merely entertainment but a structured curriculum that delivers gendered norms and extends its domain from women's bodies to their innermost desires.

*Chinese Dating with the Parents* offers numerous tutorials and case studies on the female masquerade, instructing participants in how to perform culturally sanctioned forms of femininity, even though the contestants themselves would not describe their actions as "putting on a masquerade." These lessons in the performance of femininity and related dating knowledge are primarily delivered by the show's host, Meng Fei. On occasion, an invited celebrity acting as a dating 'expert' assists Meng Fei in facilitating the pedagogical process, ensuring the smooth delivery and reinforcement of the show's gendered discourse. With over a decade of experience hosting reality dating shows on Jiangsu Satellite TV, Meng Fei is widely regarded as an authoritative figure in matchmaking and relationship knowledge. Female participants on the show, in particular, have

expressed admiration for him. He is recognised as a trusted gatekeeper in blind dating, known for his sense of justice, moral integrity, caring personality, and interpersonal acumen. Meng Fei simultaneously inhabits multiple roles: presenter, educator, and instructor on navigating matchmaking on dating television programmes. His presence exemplifies the pedagogical dimension of reality television, providing both dating show participants and audiences with guidelines, while enacting an authorised voice that extends from the television screen into broader social contexts. To complement Meng Fei's role, a younger female host, Zhang Chunye, along with an invited celebrity, facilitates the sub-stage by sitting with the dating candidates in a separate room. Zhang serves as a representative of the perspectives and voices of young women on the show. Regarding celebrity selection, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* favours celebrities who project a positively happy-married persona and who have extensive experience portraying dominant CEO roles in popular TV series, as such individuals are perceived to possess broad knowledge and insight into relationships and marriage.

These celebrity commentators navigate the role of assisting contestants by bringing the perspectives and insights of their represented gender to help participants secure a blind date. For example, in one episode, when four male contestants withdrew from matching with Wang Tong, the invited celebrity Annie Shizuka Inou intervened by posing a question to all male contestants: "So men don't like women being that powerful, right?" Some of the men agreed, explaining that they did not feel an impulse toward a powerful woman. Annie then addressed Wang, saying: "You are independent financially and spiritually, and with an independent personality, I think you are a wonderful woman. But for a man, you are a 'big woman.' However, for women like us, who have independent careers, when we are in a relationship, we often become a 'little woman.' So, I'd like to ask, Wang, will you become another person when you fall in love?" Wang immediately responded that she would become very sweet in a relationship. Annie's intervention addressed the male contestants' complaints about not feeling excited in front of a 'big woman,' successfully evoking their curiosity about another side of Wang's personality and helping to break the ice after several men had withdrawn from the matchmaking process. Her comments also alleviated the tense atmosphere and mitigated Wang's embarrassment. Overall, the invited celebrities often advise female contestants to reveal their inner child—through vulnerability, fragility, and naivety—and to enact a 'little woman' persona as a strategy for facilitating

matches. The dating show affirms women's submissive behaviours while questioning and challenging intractable or domineering expressions.

In this context, femininity becomes an ongoing process of performing and becoming, inherently unstable and vulnerable to external intervention. It is not about simply being oneself; it requires continual guidance, correction, and adaptation. Significantly, the lessons and tutorials on the female masquerade convey to audiences that women are not meant to behave entirely naturally on the dating stage. Although the mantra of postfeminist media culture emphasises "being yourself," the dating show suggests that the original self and authentic attitudes toward intimacy are flawed and in need of correction. Women must be equipped with the female masquerade and the 'right' dispositions. The makeover lessons on reality dating shows thus reveal the processes and strategies of the postfeminist masquerade, in which women are expected to master the knowledge of femininity and develop the ability to strategically display their knowingness. By presenting guidelines for performing femininity, these shows expose the "tricks of the feminine masquerade," challenging the notion that female subjectivity is inherently original, natural, or authentic (Arzumanova, 2012: 125).

### *4.3.3 Authenticity, Aesthetic Labour, and Emotional Gratification*

The previous sections have addressed the performative aspects of gender in reality dating shows, focussing on the enactment of the 'little woman' through the female masquerade. To what extent does this performative and transformative necessity intersect with reality television's construction and framing of the 'real'? From the perspective of female viewers, one of the most contentious aspects of reality television lies in its claim to authenticity. This issue is closely tied to questions of media representation, gender performance, and audience reception. In interviews, several female viewers suggested that reality dating shows often present a glorified and idealised version of life, exemplified by contestants' appearances and their elaborate dating scenarios. Reality dating shows provide a condensed and highly orchestrated romantic setting in which participants are expected to become acquainted and establish intimacy within a limited space and timeframe. Anne, for instance, remarked that "the show is too good to be true," noting that the contestants were unlikely to actually find a partner through televised dating.

> It's not *real* that people find a partner on dating shows. They don't know each other prior to attending the show and they haven't spent time together yet. The show only provides a platform and an approach for candidates to meet new people. Even though they may fall in love at first sight, it is superficial.
> Anne, 34, employee in All-China Women's Local Government Federation

Anne analysed the rationale for starting a relationship, noting that it is based on mutual understanding and trust which takes time. She questioned the authenticity of matchmaking through reality dating TV. As a slippery concept, authenticity is not new in media studies. It is also a recurring theme in philosophy, and scholars have long debated its meaning. Rousseau (2004) argues that authenticity originates from the natural self, whereas inauthenticity results from external influences. Varga (2012: 61) outlines two models for understanding authenticity: "inner sense" and "productionism." The inner sense model posits that the self is natural and given; being authentic means being true to one's nature—you are who you are. The productionist model, by contrast, treats the self as something to be created; authenticity arises through thought and behaviour—you are what you do. Varga's framework is insightful but abstract, and it cannot account for the many possibilities that fall between these binary models. Authenticity is neither synonymous with reality nor the opposite of falsehood. In this sense, it is insufficient to debate simply whether a reality dating show is authentic or not. What truly matters is how participants react to particular scenarios, and how the dating show functions to transform the gendered self in accordance with normative expectations surrounding dating and marriage. Besides, from the reality TV producer's perspective, it is viewers' interpretations rather than any objective notion of reality that define the genre. Reality dating shows are not mere documentaries about matchmaking; they are carefully designed to be perceived as authentic, since authenticity itself serves as one of the genre's primary selling points.

Tian observed that the female candidates on *Chinese Dating with the Parents* were highly self-conscious about managing their personal image. They invest considerable effort in refining their appearance and physical presentation. Tian said,

> Women on the show are very conscious of their image. Nowadays, there are many resources for managing the body and appearance, such as cosmetic

> surgery, skincare products, and online makeup tutorials. As a result, young women pay more attention to their image. Women from my mother's generation already seemed relatively old in their thirties and did not have the same awareness of body management and fitness. But I have had this awareness in my twenties and early thirties, which is better.
>
> Tian, 36, banking professional

Tian's comment focussed on the external appearance dimension of the female masquerade. She highlighted the social and historical context in which young women today appear younger and more attractive than the previous generation at the same age. She argued that women of the previous generation were constrained by the underdeveloped cosmetic industry and limited beauty culture in Xi'an during the late twentieth century. In contrast, contemporary young women have access to a wider range of resources and options to 'delay' ageing and 'maintain' beauty, practices that are often framed as techniques for acquiring and managing femininity. Reality dating shows have further intensified the expectations and disciplines associated with the female masquerade in the postsocialist era. Young women are now expected not only to manage their appearance but also to transform the self in ways that align with the show's normative gaze. The aesthetic labour underlying the female masquerade, however, remains largely invisible.

Why do audience watch reality dating shows? Clearly, they do so because they find them interesting and enjoyable; at the very least, these shows provide a way to pass the time. Female viewers who participated in this project highlighted the visual pleasure and emotional gratification they derive from watching such programmes. They noted that the attractive contestants and the middle-class lifestyles portrayed on reality dating shows evoke feelings of comfort and relatability. In this sense, reality dating shows offer female viewers a pleasurable space of fantasy. As Anne stated,

> Dating shows are entertaining, and the dating candidates are good-looking. Watching them makes me feel comfortable, satisfied, and romantic. They are like TV series—my life cannot reach that level. After a whole day of working and taking care of my child, I feel relaxed when I watch dating shows. I find myself longing for the kind of lifestyle the show represents. I hope that I, too, can dress up and go out for a meal, enjoying the surprises my partner might plan.
>
> Anne, 34, employee in All-China Women's Local Government Federation

Research has shown that female audiences' pleasures are often neither taken seriously nor treated with respect (Van Zoonen, 1994; Wood, 2009). These pleasures are frequently dismissed as a form of 'false consciousness,' as mainstream media perpetuates ideologies that keep women in subordinated positions (Van Zoonen, 1994: 107). Feminist reception studies, therefore, aim to document and validate women's visual pleasure. Anne, for instance, was not concerned with the authenticity of reality TV, stating, "Dating shows are about entertainment." What she emphasised instead were the visual pleasures and gratifications that helped soothe her after a long day of work and childcare. Reality dating shows offered her a window to escape the fatigue and monotony of daily life. Furthermore, the idealised femininity embedded within the romanticised settings identified by female viewers is closely linked to ongoing discussions of the female masquerade. This study extends the understanding of the female masquerade by situating it within the digital sphere and incorporating female viewers' reception.

Rivière (1929) suggests that femininity can function as a social performance strategically employed by women to navigate male-dominated environments. Women adopt a feminine masquerade to prevent men from feeling threatened. However, Rivière's research was conducted in a pre-digital era, before the influence of media technologies and reality television. At that time, the performance of the female masquerade involved only two main actors: the intellectual woman and her male colleagues. In the context of reality dating shows, however, power relations are more complex, encompassing interactions among female and male candidates as well as female viewers. Anne's reflections indicate that the female masquerade, or a glorified version of femininity, can not only reduce men's sense of threat but also provide female viewers with feelings of satisfaction and desire. By watching dating shows, Anne imagined herself on a romantic date after a long day of work, using the media as a means of emotional and imaginative engagement. Her reaction resonates with Herzog's (2004) findings on women's interpretations of soap operas in New York, where viewers "borrow" extraordinary experiences and feelings from media texts as compensation for the happiness and excitement absent in their own lives (Herzog, 2004: 139). Digital technologies have thus reshaped the understanding of the female masquerade, and the aesthetic gratifications it produces should not be overlooked.

## 4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how *Chinese Dating with the Parents* reconstructs the 'new independent woman' into a 'little woman' within heterosexual matchmaking scenarios. The makeover paradigm embedded in reality dating shows functions as a mechanism that guides female contestants toward self-improvement and transformation to become more 'dateable.' This process is framed as necessary for succeeding in the competitive matchmaking format and empowering for women's self-development.

I have developed the notion of a pedagogy of femininity, referring to the guidelines, advice, and evaluations embedded in reality dating shows and delivered by the host and celebrity commentators that teach women how to perform and embody femininity in heterosexual dating contexts. Reality dating shows thus provide a platform for the instruction and circulation of idealised femininity, offering numerous case studies on how to address specific dating and interpersonal situations. I argue that the pedagogy disciplines women in how to look, behave, speak, and feel in ways that conform to socially legitimated ideals of womanhood. On reality dating shows, female contestants are required to turn inward, observe their mentality and emotions, and work on the self in order to present themselves as "knowing subjects"—independent individuals who can also perform as approachable 'little women' with "an aesthetically pleasing manner" (Orgad & Gill, 2022: 161). Within its game-show format, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* updates the makeover paradigm by reinforcing gendered expectations that women perform multiple identities: progressive but not disruptive, independent but not aggressive, modern yet traditional. This reflects that the postfeminist and neoliberal governmentality has extended its reach from regulating women's bodies to guiding them on what dispositions to possess.

To further illustrate the makeover paradigm at work among female contestants, this chapter recontextualised the notion of female masquerade, tracing its conceptual evolution from early psychoanalytic construction of femininity to the "new sexual contract" in postfeminist culture (McRobbie, 2007: 719). I argue that through the pedagogy of femininity, reality dating shows actively facilitate the making of the 'little woman.' Young women are encouraged to carefully conceal their assertiveness, career ambition, and intellectual confidence on a blind date to avoid being labelling themselves as 'big women.'

By integrating audience reception analysis of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, this chapter has enriched the notion of female masquerade by introducing female spectatorship dimension and situating it within the digital media sphere. From the perspective of female viewers, rather than perceiving the female masquerade as women's submission or a non-confrontational strategy to secure a match, they highlight the visual pleasure, aesthetic gratification, and emotional satisfaction derived from watching reality dating shows, which offers spaces of fantasy, aspiration, and affective engagement.

The makeover paradigm evident in reality dating shows requires women to freely shift from being 'big women' for themselves to performing as 'little women' for potential male partners. Regardless of how intelligent or accomplished a woman is, she must adjust herself to fit into the patterns of heterosexual matchmaking conventions, which demand that she reveal vulnerability and even playful naivety in a gendered savvy way. The transformation of female candidates thus offers a new lens for understanding postfeminist sensibility in contemporary China. Female candidates on dating shows tend to be relatively privileged. They are empowered by urban citizenship, higher educational attainment, and financial independence. However, the empowered status can threaten male contestants and destabilise their masculinity. Within a patriarchal matchmaking system, women are required to work on the self to perform an aestheticised version of postfeminist sensibility, carefully masking their sharpness and gumption behind a 'little woman' masquerade.

Moreover, the discourse of "investing in oneself" frequently appears in young women's descriptions of female subjectivity. This reflects the intersection of postfeminist sensibility, neoliberal rationality, and consumer culture in the construction of womanhood in postsocialist China. It is important to note that the popular rhetoric of self-investment is fundamentally commercial, encouraging young women to equate self-worth with consumption and to pursue empowerment through the purchase of goods and experiences that promise happiness and agency. However, this so-called "investment in oneself" ultimately differs from genuine self-investment; rather than cultivating inner growth or critical awareness, it redirects women's aspirations toward consumerist fulfilment and aesthetic self-management. The next chapter shifts to the exploration of female viewers' reception and interpretation of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*.

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CHAPTER 5

# Women Viewers of Reality Dating Show

## 5.1 Judgmental Viewers

### *5.1.1 Dating Candidates' Appearance*

As a mediated spectacle of matchmaking, Chinese reality dating shows tend to represent 'ordinary' individuals in extraordinary ways. Rather than reflecting everyday life, they promote a glorified version of reality, spotlighting privileged, good-looking contestants and foregrounding a middle-class-centred aesthetic and lifestyle. Such glorified and media-friendly representations of dating show contestants result from a complex assemblage of aesthetic labour collectively performed by the contestants themselves, along with the hair and makeup team and the video post-production team. Carefully selected by the show, contestants curate their on-screen appearances through meticulously styled hair, striking outfits, and precise makeup. Meanwhile, the production team employs video filters and post-production techniques to smooth skin and produce a flawless, polished image. This aesthetic labour is informed by prevailing beauty standards and further reinforced by digital technologies, particularly screen filters that accentuate youth, pale skin, slimness, and, above all, an idealised sense of perfection.

This chapter explores female viewers' reception of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. The data were collected through texts-in-action viewing sessions, during which viewers and I watched selected segments of the reality dating show together. This method, developed by Helen Wood, offers an engaging approach to capturing the dynamic nature of television

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viewing by treating it as "an event occurring within a specific moment in time" (Skeggs et al., 2008: 12; Wood, 2007). During texts-in-action viewing sessions, viewers commented on female candidates' appearance, height and weight, age, occupation, dressing style, the way they behave on dating TV, and on the same aspects for male candidates, but with more attention paid to their height. The dating candidates' appearances were the first thing to capture female viewers' attention, eliciting a range of responses. Many viewers enthusiastically expressed approval of those they found attractive. For instance, viewer Lisa commented on the female contestant Li Zihan, saying, "This girl is pretty. She is the prettiest among all the female candidates." Jieyu further added, "My granny also watches the show. She once asked me why young women nowadays are so pretty. I told her it's because dating shows always recruit the pretty ones." These remarks about the female contestants' looks reflect viewers' subjective feelings and judgments. While some appearances were praised, others were met with disapproval. Lisa, for example, commented on contestant No. 6, Tang Wenjun, a young woman whose weight was mentioned in the episode's headline, saying, "Well, she is good-looking, I mean facially. Just a little bit overweight" (see Table 5.1).

In Table 5.1, it is evident that the female candidate Wenjun's weight serves as a central theme and a source of humour during the ice-breaking conversation between her cousin and the male candidate, Chu Jin. The activity depicted in this dating show segment, where the man holds the woman in a princess carry (*gong zhu bao*), originates from the traditional Chinese wedding ceremony, in which the groom carries the bride in his arms from her home to the car or sedan chair that will take them to the ceremony venue, during which the bride's feet are not supposed to touch the ground. This practice is suggested to prevent the bride from transferring dust from her parents' home to her husband's home (Hershatter, 2011). In the traditional wedding, the bride is often seen as property being transferred from her parents' home to her husband's home. Although the origin of this arrangement is not widely known by the public, it continues to be followed as a cultural ritual in contemporary traditional wedding ceremonies in China.

On *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, Wenjun's older female cousin suggests that the male candidate rehearse the wedding ritual by holding Wenjun like a princess. During this process, Wenjun's body shape is placed under scrutiny. She is remembered and referred to as "the plump one" by the male candidate's mother. The male candidate Chu Jin, his parents,

**Table 5.1** A muscular male contestant performs deep squats while holding a 75-kilogram woman

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Viewers' comments* |
|---|---|---|
| Tang Wenjun's elder female cousin sits with a can of milk powder from the title sponsor placed in front of her. Dressed in a tight, off-the-shoulder black dress, she smiles as she speaks to the male contestant, Chu Jin, and then presses her palms together in a gesture of devotion | Wenjun's cousin: The male contestant is a good match for Wenwen (Wenjun's nickname), as she is 1.7 metres tall and he is 1.9 metres. I can't wait to see you carry her like a princess | Lisa: But she (Wenjun) is 75 kilos! [chuckles] |
| The female presenter, Zhang Chunye, sits with Jin's parents, with a can of milk powder placed in front of them. Jin's mother sits in the middle, flanked by the presenter on one side and Jin's father on the other | Zhang Chunye asks Jin's mother: Do you remember No. 6?<br>Jin's mother: Yes, the plump one | |
| The male presenter, Meng Fei, turns to look at Jin to gauge his reaction. Wenjun smiles in surprise as a caption appears beside her reading, "Why so keen?" The other three female contestants clap and cheer | Chu Jin: Of course. Of course | Lisa: Haha |

(continued)

**Table 5.1** (continued)

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Viewers' comments* |
|---|---|---|
| Wenjun leaves the small room where all female contestants are gathered and walks onto the studio stage wearing a mask.[1] Her cousin smiles and claps. Jin's mother looks Wenjun up and down; her head is digitally magnified on screen. She opens her mouth as a crying emoji appears beside her, accompanied by the caption, "I'm worried for my son." Jin's father claps while frowning | Meng Fei: Not many people can do this | Lisa: Look! He just said, "Oh my God!" Hahaha<br>Researcher: Do you think Wenjun will be a good match for him?<br>Lisa: Perhaps not<br>Xiaoli: He looks like he really works out a lot |
| Jin appears embarrassed and concerned upon seeing Wenjun in person. A few other family members laugh and clap. Wenjun covers her mouth with her hand, laughing shyly | Wenjun's cousin: Wenwen, take a deep breath—that'll make you lose ten kilos!<br>Wenjun says to Jin: I'm worried about you—hugging me like this! [blushes]<br>Meng Fei: He's also worried about himself. Be careful, and don't drop her! | Lisa: She is good looking, I mean facially. Just a little bit overweight |

*Data source* Episode 5, Season 4 of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, May 24, 2020

[1] In *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, female and male candidates are not permitted to see each other in person until the final selection procedure.

the show's presenter Meng Fei, the viewer Lisa, and even Wenjun herself all appear awkward and embarrassed about her weight, implying that an overweight body is considered undesirable according to contemporary standards of female beauty in China.

The traditional wedding ritual is thus framed for entertainment purposes on the reality dating show stage, where the female body that deviates from normative beauty standards becomes subject to constant surveillance, judgment, and even humiliation. Women's body weight functions as a cue for eliciting affective responses from audiences, amplified through montage sequences highlighting different people's facial expressions and enhanced with visual effects, emojis, and captions. For instance, Chu Jin's mother's head is digitally magnified like a cartoon character when she sees Wenjun in person, emphasising her shock and disapproval of the female candidate's body. While reality dating shows predominantly recruit contestants with attractive and slim bodies, recruiting contestants who do not conform to beauty standards can be seen as a progressive move toward diversity. Nevertheless, the deviant body functions like a discordant note in a melody—easily drawing discussion and generating promotion-oriented visibility.

When Chu Jin lifted Wenjun in his arms, viewers were impressed by his strength. Xiaoli commented, "He really works out a lot," which related to Chu Jin's profession as a fitness blogger in Shanghai. Wenjun did not appear offended by comments about her weight; rather, she seemed timid and cautious. She also worried that Chu Jin might not be able to lift her due to her weight. As noted earlier, viewer Lisa was touched by Wenjun's caring character, as reflected in her comment about Wenjun's face, reflecting some compassion for her. However, Lisa implied that having a pretty face alone is insufficient to meet the expectations for female contestants, suggesting that women must also possess a slim body to succeed on a dating show.

Meanwhile, viewers judged female contestants' appearances in terms of authenticity, regarding authentic beauty as innate and naturally given rather than achieved through plastic surgery or Photoshop. Consequently, they sincerely complimented women whom they believed were genuinely attractive. Conversely, they quickly criticised candidates they suspected of having undergone cosmetic procedures or of using filters on their profile photos. In these moments, viewers paid little attention to the contestants' words or actions on the show; their focus was entirely on assessing whether a candidate had undergone cosmetic surgery and, if

so, speculating about what procedures might have been performed (see Table 5.2).

Viewers' preoccupation with female candidates' appearance and bodies is particularly noteworthy. In the previous chapter, I argued that female candidates are expected to undergo self-transformation to become upgraded versions of themselves, in line with patriarchal expectations of ideal femininity and eligibility as partners. In this chapter, through viewers' responses and comments on dating candidates during text-in-action viewing sessions, the pervasive and often harsh discipline imposed on women's appearance becomes clearly evident. As noted earlier, the on-screen representation of dating candidates is already the result of extensive aesthetic labour. However, viewers' comments on contestants' appearances reveal that expectations extend beyond surface beauty—they also evaluate whether that beauty appears natural or has been enhanced through cosmetic technology. In Table 5.2, for example, while watching the segment depicting the conversation between Zihan and Chu Jin on

**Table 5.2** Female candidate with an internet-celebrity appearance (*wanghonglian*)

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Viewer's comments* |
|---|---|---|
| Female candidate Li Zihan stands on stage and speaks to the male candidate, Chu Jin. Zihan is shown in a medium close-up, wearing an off-the-shoulder white dress. Behind a can of milk powder, Zihan's mother and cousin sit together, smiling and clapping | Zihan: I'm an independent girl, and you're a sunshine boy. We complement each other well. I hope we can become a truly complementary couple if we get together<br>Background music: *Meet You in Youth* | Lisa: She has an internet celebrity face (*wanghonglian*) and may have undergone minor cosmetic surgery |
| The final two female candidates are shown standing side by side in a medium long shot. Zihan wears an off-the-shoulder white dress, while Huiying wears a denim dress adorned with rhinestones | Chu Jin: If you could choose one thing from me as a souvenir, what would you choose?<br>The male presenter: What do you have?<br>Chu Jin: No cash. Haha<br>Zihan: Your white shirt. You are good looking in this white shirt | Lisa: She must have had plastic surgery, as most people's faces are not naturally that symmetrical |

*Data source* Episode 5, Season 4 of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, May 24, 2020

*Chinese Dating with the Parents*, viewer Lisa's attention was solely on Zihan's face. She underwent a cognitive transformation, moving from initially suspecting the female contestant, Zihan of having had plastic surgery to concluding that this was indeed the case. This intense focus on women's appearances not only dominates viewers' immediate reactions to dating shows but also reflects a form of *cosmetic vigilance,* which is associated with the rise of cosmetic surgery and the booming beauty economy in China since the 2010s (Dippner, 2018; Wen, 2009). The term cosmetic vigilance derives inspiration from the concept of "aesthetic vigilance" coined by Simidele Dosekun (2020: 72), which describes women's deliberate and rationalised practice of managing their spectacularly feminine appearance in response to neoliberal ideals of self-improvement and personal capacity development. This practice "entails keeping a watchful, reflexive eye on one's attachment to, and employment of, cruel feminine beauty technologies, as well as scheduling and taking 'aesthetic rest'" (Dosekun, 2020: 72). Cosmetic vigilance, however, extends beyond self-surveillance and refers to a mode of looking in which the observer attentively scrutinises others' appearances to detect traces of cosmetic intervention. It represents a cultural awareness of beauty technologies that is not exclusive to women but primarily reinforces the moral and aesthetic boundary between "natural" and "artificial" beauty.

Through cosmetic vigilance, viewer Lisa identified that the female contestant Zihan as having an internet-celebrity face (*wanghong lian*). The term *wanghong*, referring to online celebrities, is the Chinese equivalent of Instagram influencers on Western social media. The stereotypical internet-celebrity face has become one of the most discussed buzz phrases on Chinese social media since 2016. It describes primarily a hyper-feminine, eye-catching appearance characterised by large eyes with European-style double eyelids, Korean-style semi-permanent eyebrows, a high-bridged nose, a pointed chin, and pale, flawless skin. This online-celebrity face is generally achievable only through plastic surgery. Individuals with such a face are seen as possessing the prerequisites for becoming internet celebrities. However, public perception of the internet-celebrity face goes beyond viewing it as merely exceptionally attractive; it is more often regarded as a stereotypical, mass-produced, and inauthentic appearance, enhanced by beauty filters.

Online celebrities are predominantly active in the realms of fashion, makeup, lifestyle, and entertainment, generating income through social media platforms such as Weibo and *Xiaohongshu*. Their internet-celebrity

faces amplify their visibility, allowing them to transform symbolic capital into tangible economic profit via e-commerce and online advertising. Consequently, they have promoted postfeminist and neoliberal notions of body capital and femininity as embodied properties (Gill, 2007). More importantly, online celebrities shape popular fashion and beauty trends, defining ideals of femininity and guiding how young women should apply makeup and dress to signal middle-class taste. In addition, online celebrities convey the idea that female beauty is not merely innate but can be attained through aesthetic labour, including plastic surgery and makeup. This neoliberal notion of self-advancement and self-perfection is reflected in the well-known Chinese saying, "There are no ugly women, only lazy ones." This widespread *wanghong* culture helps explain why female candidates on *Chinese Dating with the Parents* often embody the online-celebrity aesthetic. It also clarifies why female audiences identify with this trend and enact cosmetic vigilance when watching reality dating shows.

### *5.1.2 Dating Candidates' Age*

Viewers of dating shows have observed that contestants are increasingly younger, most of them in their early twenties, reflecting shifting perceptions of blind dating (*xiang qin*) within the television sphere. *Chinese Dating with the Parents* features a form of heterosexual blind dating, in which a male and female are introduced by a third party. In China, blind dating has traditionally been a conventional step toward marriage and is often regarded as a "prelude to marriage" (Wang, 2022: 547). This differs from forms of courtship in which couples meet independently, without third-party involvement. In contemporary society, blind dating has evolved to encompass modern practices, including matchmaking agencies, mobile dating apps, and television matchmaking shows. Reality dating programs have further transformed the practice, shifting its meaning from a formal, marriage-oriented activity to one that is "less marriage-oriented, less formal, more entertainment-driven, and self-directed" (Wang, 2022: 549). By embracing this new interpretation of blind dating, reality dating shows emphasise both their Chineseness and their innovative approach, as reflected in programme titles such as *New Blind Date Times* (*xin xiangqin shidai*) (Jiangsu Satellite TV, 2018) and *New Blind Date Conference* (*xin xiangqin dahui*) (Jiangsu Satellite TV, 2019).

From the perspective of female viewers, blind dating is not seen as a modern practice, as it carries connotations of arranged marriage—a practice formally abolished by the 1950 Marriage Law. Viewers tend to associate blind dating with individuals in their late twenties or early thirties, perceiving it as a last resort for finding a partner. However, reality dating shows often feature contestants in their early to mid-twenties. Female viewers frequently express surprise at the youth of these candidates when they introduce themselves on screen (see Table 5.3).

Table 5.3 shows viewers' reactions to the ages of various female dating candidates during the self-introduction segment. The two viewers, Yu and Anne, watched the same episode separately but had nearly identical reactions and comments about age at the same moments. Their responses provided rich and detailed data on the transformation of blind dating and the age norms associated with it.

What does a blind date mean for young female viewers? Table 5.3 shows that blind dates are often perceived as occurring when someone feels a sense of urgency to find a partner, typically in their late twenties or early thirties. Female viewers used words such as "hurry," "reluctant," "resistant," "embarrassing," and "serious" to describe their feelings about blind dating. Anne, for example, views a blind date as a serious step in preparation for marriage; from her perspective, a blind date is successful only if it ultimately leads to marriage. Both viewers highlighted the cognitive gap between blind dating in real life and on reality dating shows, evaluating the shows against the practical function of dating in everyday life. For instance, they questioned whether relationships formed on the show could extend beyond it and whether blind dates could realistically lead to marriage. When Anne asks, "Do these dating shows aim for blind dates?" she signals her belief that a blind date should be a prelude to marriage, rather than mere entertainment or performance. Overall, viewers held a somewhat pessimistic view of blind dating on reality dating shows. They considered the female candidates too young both to participate in blind dates and to marry, suggesting that these young women might attend the show out of fear of being "left on the shelf" if they did not act early enough—thus driven by anxiety. Male candidates were judged differently: viewers noted that men in their early twenties lacked stability and were not yet ready for marriage.

Featuring the format of parents on set, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* redefines the meaning of blind dating. The show suggests that as a traditional Chinese practice, blind dating can also be fashionable and appealing

**Table 5.3** Candidates in their early twenties

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Viewers' comments* |
|---|---|---|
| Female candidate Zhao Kaiyu sits between her parents, positioned in front of a soy sauce logo. She wears tassel earrings and a white tulle dress. A caption beside her reads: "Zhao Kaiyu, 25 years old, Beijing." | Zhao Kaiyu: I'm Kaiyu, and I'm back. I left with regret in the last episode—I only managed a secret glance at the guy I liked, never getting the chance to meet him in person or express my feelings. Today, I'm ready to throw caution to the wind, bravely pursue love, and let my heart shine | Yu: Is it time to start blind dating at the age of 25?<br>Anne: These girls are way too young! Only 25! Why are they in such a *hurry*? Are they really here for a blind date? |
| Female candidate Zhang Zhaohan sits between her parents, with a soy sauce label in front of them. She wears tassel earrings and a Disney-princess-style, skinny, off-the-shoulder white dress adorned with bows. A caption beside her reads: "Zhang Zhaohan, 23 years old, Beijing."<br>Female audience members on set smile and applaud Zhaohan<br>Zhaohan's father holds up a photo of the invited celebrity's husband as an example of a handsome man | Zhang Zhaohan: I never give up and never get discouraged. When I meet a guy I like, I'll still take the initiative<br>Zhaohan's mother: The value of a pretty face (*yan zhi*) is good for family harmony. We've brought an example | Yu: 23 years old? Oh my God! Why so young? You can do a master's and meet someone at university!<br>Anne: The value of a pretty face (*yanzhi*)? [chuckle]<br>Yu: [pulls a face] Are these candidates for real? |

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Viewers' comments* |
|---|---|---|
| Female candidate Zhang Ziwei sits between her parents. She wears an off-the-shoulder pink organza dress with purple trim. She appears in a standard close-up, with a caption beside her reading: "Zhang Ziwei, 22 years old, Guangzhou."<br>Six male candidates are shown in a long shot with the caption, "Have had no relationships before?"<br>The female celebrity looks worried when she hears Ziwei has not dated before | Zhang Ziwei: After the last episode, I saw the first snow in Nanjing but didn't find my first love. I hope to meet a boy with a youthful outlook—not just in appearance, but also someone with genuine intentions and a positive attitude toward relationships, career, and life | Yu: 22?<br>Anne: Only 22? Perhaps she's still an undergraduate student. I'm curious that if these people successfully find a match during the reality dating show, will they be able to continue after the show?<br>Researcher: Perhaps not<br>Anne: Do these dating shows aim for blind dates? There are not many candidates who can start a serious (*zheng jing*) relationship<br>Yu: In real life, people go for a blind date in their *late 20s or early 30s*. I think Chinese people are reluctant to go for a blind date. I feel *resistance* to a blind date and don't want that. But I think this dating show is trying to persuade the public that young people can also go on a blind date. There is nothing embarrassing about a blind date<br>Researcher: The dating show also implies that parents' opinion is important for your relationship<br>Yu: Yeah, it is quite important in China |

*Data Source* Episode 3, Season 5 of *Chinese Dating with the Parents,* February 7, 2020

to the new generation of urban, middle-class youth. The involvement of both young people and their parents highlights the continuing importance of parental opinions and evaluations in shaping their children's relationships. The popularity of *Chinese Dating with the Parents* should be understood within the context of contemporary Chinese society. China announced its Three-Child Policy in 2021 in response to the accelerating trend of population ageing. This policy followed the two-child policy launched in 2015. However, findings from both previous research and the present study indicate that young people's fertility desires remain low. The marriage rate in 2020 fell to its lowest level in nearly three decades, and the number of newborns that year also hit a new low (Beijing News, 2021). *Chinese Dating with the Parents* reflects an interest in reinventing Chinese matchmaking traditions—reasserting matchmaking as a family affair jointly decided by couples and their parents (Wang, 2017). The show seeks to modernise the notion of blind dating, transforming it from a traditional and somewhat outdated practice into a popular, entertaining, and distinctly Chinese-style dating experience that responds to the country's declining marriage rate.

Second, understanding this new format of blind dating on reality television requires situating it within the broader dating culture of Chinese youth. I propose that *Chinese Dating with the Parents* functions as a kind of "dating summer school" for young people with limited experience in intimate relationships. Within this 'school,' participants are given opportunities to practise dating potential partners under the supervision and safeguarding of both dating "professionals" and parents. They learn how to dress, converse, and express themselves in romantic contexts. From the parents' perspective, it is their duty to guide their children in dating, as doing so contributes to the well-being of the entire family. Viewing the show through this lens helps explain why many dating show candidates are recruited in their early twenties. Table 5.3 shows that viewers were often surprised by the young age of the dating candidates. For instance, candidate Zhang Ziwei expressed her hope of beginning her first romantic relationship on the show. In response, viewer Anne remarked that Ziwei should have started dating during university instead, since campus romance is generally seen as real, pure, and sincere—free from parental interference—whereas finding a partner on a reality dating show is viewed as less serious (*bu kaopu*) and more uncertain.

Third, viewers' reactions to the candidates' ages should be understood within the broader dating norms of contemporary China. The belief that

certain life events should occur at specific ages remains deeply ingrained. Many viewers felt that being in one's early twenties was too young to participate in a blind date show, suggesting that the early thirties would be a more appropriate stage for blind dating. This perception may also reflect parental restrictions on teenage dating, which often delay young people's romantic experiences until after university.

The expression *zaolian* is used to describe courtship or dating among minors. Literally meaning "early love," *zaolian* carries the negative connotation that one is too young to begin a romantic relationship. Although social attitudes toward *zaolian* are gradually changing in contemporary China, it continues to be viewed as an issue that warrants attention rather than encouragement. It is commonly believed that *zaolian* is supposed to be controlled through school regulations, family pressures, and state policies, in order to safeguard adolescents' "morals, hygiene, and promising future" (Shen, 2015: 86). Moreover, adolescents are often perceived as lacking emotional self-control, and romantic involvement is thought to inevitably have a detrimental effect on their studies. As viewer Yu noted in the interview, "Parents do not expect you to date while you are doing a master's degree. However, once you start working, they expect you to get married as soon as possible, have children, and ideally have twins." *Chinese Dating with the Parents* provides a "dating summer school"–type environment for both young contestants and their parents. Parents are given the opportunity to safeguard their children—who often lack dating experience—by accompanying and guiding them through this process. The show's dating format can thus be traced back to the logic underpinning the prevention of *zaolian*, in which parental authority and responsibility in guiding children's relationships are emphasised.

### *5.1.3 Dating Candidates' Self-Promotion Strategies*

Against the backdrop of neoliberal discourses of self-management and self-optimisation, dating show contestants can be understood as entrepreneurial subjects who sustain the self and approach dating as though managing an enterprise. The candidates strategically manage and promote their media personas in autonomous and calculated ways. During the texts-in-action viewing sessions, viewers commented on the candidates' self-promotional strategies within the dating show. This

section examines viewers' responses to how candidates and their family members introduce and promote themselves on screen.

In Table 5.4, viewer Yu comments on and provides feedback regarding the way a candidate and her father introduce themselves and their family. Yu offered advice on how candidates should present and express themselves. Her role as an active viewer illustrates that women not only acquire dating knowledge from reality dating TV but also actively engage in the matchmaking process by evaluating candidates' behaviour and self-presentation. Yu emphasised the importance of speaking in a proper sequence and highlighting what one can contribute to a potential partner, suggesting that the blind date should operate according to principles of equal-value exchange. This competitive mindset permeates viewers' immediate responses to dating show texts, blurring the line between attending a dating show and participating in a job interview. Candidates are expected to gain an advantage by foregrounding their core strengths. Within the context of the show, the boundaries between dating, marriage, and fertility are therefore ambiguous. Yu also noted that mentioning a high intelligence quotient as a genetic advantage could be beneficial, implying that candidates are evaluated not only as potential partners but also as providers of desirable traits, reinforcing the competitive, transactional logic of the dating process.

The following two extracts illustrate different viewers' responses to dating show texts at the same moment. Recordings of both the reality dating show and viewers' comments create a real-time communicative event, constituting a "mediated conversational floor" where meanings are co-constructed by the show and its viewers (Wood, 2009: 147). In texts-in-action viewing sessions, there is an interactive relationship between the broadcast and viewers, rather than a unidirectional sender–receiver format. Viewers responded to the dating show on multiple levels, ranging from minimal cues such as "um" or "err" to interrogating the broadcast text. They also drew upon personal experiences and knowledge to interpret and engage with the show.

In Table 5.5, the female candidate's elder cousin described her as both cool and cute (*keyan ketian*). Since 2016, *ke yan ke tian* has emerged as a catchword on Chinese social media. Originally used by fans to describe idols who can seamlessly switch between different styles, the phrase literally translates as "being able to be both salty and sweet," signifying a combination of coolness and cuteness. The two characters, *yan* and *tian*, which typically describe tastes, are used metaphorically to represent

**Table 5.4** Wang Jiawen's self-introduction

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Viewer's comments* |
|---|---|---|
| Female candidate Wang Jiawen is introducing herself while standing next to her parents | Wang: I'm doing a master's at University of Sydney. The simplest way for a man to show love for a woman is to spend money on her. I am willing to spend money on you as well | Yu: This girl is too direct. She mentioned money the minute she appeared on the stage |
| Female candidate Wang Jiawen's father is talking. He is in a black suit | Wang's father: Our family is very reasonable. Our family is very harmonious | Yu: Self-introduction is very important. You should let others know what you bring to the table as early as possible. For example, you could say, "I'm an intellectual, which means I'm smart—at least my children will have good genes," or "I have a stable job and a steady income." You need to highlight what you can contribute to a relationship. Saying you like traveling doesn't count—it's just a hobby |

*Data source* Episode 3, Season 5 of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, February 7, 2020

personality traits. *Yan* indicates that someone can showcase a cool, aloof, and commanding side, while *tian* refers to a cute and endearing nature. The phrase reflects the multifaceted characteristics of a person, demonstrating that they are not confined to a single image but can appeal to diverse tastes and preferences. It portrays an omnipotent young female figure in popular media culture and indicates that young women are eager to showcase multiple, contradictory aspects of their personalities, rather than conforming to the traditional image of being "demure and coy" (Hooper, 1998: 171).

On *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, the female contestant's cousin used the phrase to portray an omnipotent young woman figure when recommending her. She described the contestant as capable of managing public affairs and household duties (*shang de tingtang, xia de chufang*), while also being cool, cute, and romantic (*keyan ketian ke langman*)—possessing all the qualities that men find appealing. Dating shows reflect

**Table 5.5** Female contestant presented as cool and cute

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Ping's comments* | *Xiaoli's comments* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Female dating candidate Peng Huiying's mother and her older female cousin sit together, with a can of milk powder in front of them. The cousin speaks to the male candidate while occasionally glancing at her prepared notes, which are hidden behind the milk powder can | Huiying's mother: Hey young man! We're fellow townspeople from northeastern China<br>Huiying's cousin: Our sweetie (Huiying's childhood nickname) is beautiful and has a great figure. She can manage both public affairs and household duties. Being cool, cute, and romantic, she offers everything you could possibly want! | Ping: Um, it sounds like her mother's tongue is attached to her mouth<br>Ping: See! The guy suddenly becomes very excited and hopeful, do you see that?! | Xiaoli: She's too good at expressing herself. It sounds like she's reciting lines |

*Data source* Episode 5, Season 4 of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, May 24, 2020

the mechanism of commodifying individuals as eligible partners. In this context, being both cool and cute is a media-friendly buzzword that encapsulates the gendered and sexual scripts of versatility and attractiveness. It functions as a tagline for self-branding on TV dating shows. The incorporation of technologies of subjectification and the constitution of desire to cultivate a distinctive personality, as reflected in the phrase, illustrates the aspirations for the idealised subject in contemporary China.

In texts-in-action viewing session, viewer Ping observed that the male contestant became excited and hopeful after hearing a string of compliments. However, viewer Xiaoli commented that using buzzword to praise contestant is like reciting lines, implying that such expressions feel scripted and performative rather than genuine, highlighting the tension between authentic self-presentation and media-influenced personas on the show.

Table 5.6 shows two viewers' simultaneous responses to the dating show when a male candidate revealed his father's bankruptcy. In Chen Zhao's self-introduction video, he stated that his father's bankruptcy forced him to grow up quickly, transitioning from a boy to a man.

Emotional disclosure by dating candidates is common in reality dating shows. For example, other dating contestants have shared experiences of parental divorce, personal hardship, and difficulties in establishing a career. In these moments, the camera often captures audience members in tears, reflecting the resonance of the candidates' emotional disclosures and helping them build emotional connections with others.

In Chen Zhao's episode, a female candidate was deeply moved by his sense of responsibility and his caring attitude toward his father, and the two matched at the end of the episode. During texts-in-action viewing sessions, viewers were also touched by Chen Zhao's experience. At the same time, they questioned the authenticity of his narrative, noting that he wore a luxury-brand jacket while recounting his hardships. From the viewers' perspective, there appeared to be a contradiction between bankruptcy and luxury brands. Their comments on candidates' self-promotion strategies offer a new lens for examining contestants' behaviour on reality television. Viewers actively evaluate not only the content of candidates' stories but also how they present themselves visually and materially while recounting emotional experiences. This scrutiny

**Table 5.6** Male contestant reveals his father's bankruptcy

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Shan's comments* | *Hua's comments* |
|---|---|---|---|
| In the self-introduction video, male candidate Chen Zhao walks along an abandoned shopping street. He wears a denim jacket adorned with numerous small LV logos. A close-up shows his worried expression | Chen Zhao: There are always highs and lows in life. We can't always be victorious. I knew my father was suffering, and I felt his pain. I couldn't criticise him as his son. What I could do was empathise with him, love him, and understand him in the same way he had understood me when I was young [chokes back tears, eyes brimming] | Shan: He's wearing a LV, isn't he? I can see the logo<br>Researcher: Yeah, it's obvious<br>Shan: He's from a well-off family—a rich second generation<br>Shan: [touched] Oh, he's so emotional while talking about his father<br>Researcher: Perhaps he wouldn't say this to his father in person, but he said this on the programme | Hua: Err, his jacket is full of logos<br>Researcher: His father experienced bankruptcy<br>Hua: Really? Then how can he wear a branded jacket? |

*Data source* Episode 1, Season 5 of *Chinese Dating with the Parents,* January 24, 2021

highlights the interplay between emotional storytelling and personal image management, as viewers are sensitive to perceived inconsistencies between a candidate's narrative and their material symbols of status. Such inconsistencies may arise from the perception that sharing emotional stories signals vulnerability and sincerity, whereas wearing a luxury brand conveys a high-profile, status-conscious image. Viewers' responses to both the auditory and visual elements of the show demonstrate how they co-construct meaning in real time, negotiating the boundary between authenticity and performance on reality dating shows.

## 5.2 Self-Involving Viewers

### *5.2.1 Adopting the Female Candidate's Role: "If I were her, I would…"*

Women viewers' reception of *Chinese Dating with the Parents* showed their indulgence in referential viewing (Liebes & Katz, 1993). They related their subjective experience and feelings to the dating show texts, not only identifying with dating show candidates as real people in real life but also substituting themselves into the dating process—imagining if they were candidates on the show, how would they react and respond in different situations. These self-involving viewers exemplify what I call *participatory viewing*. Women viewers participated in the blind date process by placing themselves in a female candidate's position, as illustrated by the comment, "If I were her, I would…".

In Table 5.7, three female candidates employed different expressions to attract the male candidate's attention. Their approaches included referencing princesses from romantic fairy tales, using popular love songs to convey their passion, and self-censoring to avoid appearing as the stereotypical high-maintenance girlfriend. Another viewer of the same episode, Anne, also commented on the specific language used by candidates during the final selection session. From Anne's perspective, the reality dating show is a language show.

> Although this is a dating show, it is almost a language show. It depends on what people say and how they express themselves. Candidates haven't had any common experience before – they are complete strangers. They can only portray what they wish to ideally happen in a relationship to attract attention from potential partners.
> Anne, 34, employee in All-China Women's Local Government Federation

Viewing the dating show as a language-based performance helps explain why contestants employed rhetorical, romanticised, buzzword-laden, and self-promotional language to express personal interest and passion toward a potential date. In *Governing the Soul*, Nikolas Rose (1999: 257) argues that people articulate psychic needs by means of "a language and a technique, a way of selecting, mapping, and interpreting certain modes of interchange." He further suggests that "personal desires have been caught up in social networks of power and control, shaped and organised through the images and criteria provided by professional technicians of subjectivity and intersubjectivity" (Rose, 1999: 155). This explains why dating show contestants operate within an ordered sequence in which confessions of 'love' must be staged creatively and distinctively, avoiding repetition of what others have already expressed. However, viewer Lisa regarded these expressions as overly elaborate and contrived. She suggested that were she a contestant, she would adopt a more straightforward approach, simply

**Table 5.7** Three female candidates compete for one male candidate

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Viewer's comments* |
|---|---|---|
| Male candidate Hu Dengqiu and three female candidates are on stage. Hu Dengqiu wears a grey suit. Chen Xin wears an off-the-shoulder pink dress, Yi Jing is dressed in a white voile gown, and Jian Linjie wears a Han Chinese costume with a traditional high chignon | Female candidate Chen Xin: Every girl is a princess, no matter if she lives in an attic or a castle. I hope that I will be cherished by someone<br>Female candidate, Yi Jing: I didn't have any hope for today until you appeared. The moment I first saw you, I was already captivated. I'm someone who smiles a lot in life, and I like to bring happiness to the people around me<br>Female candidate, Jian Linjie: I'm very tolerant in relationships. I have my career so I won't bother you or interrupt your life. I think you are a very sincere person. I can accept your disadvantages | Lisa: If I were them, I would just say, "I like you. I want to be with you." |

*Data source* Episode 5, Season 4 of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, 24 May 2020

telling the male participant, "I like you. I want to be with you." Lisa's reaction indicates that she imagined herself as a dating show contestant while simultaneously distancing herself from the show's competitive setting. I call this reaction gendered self-differentiation, referring to a mode of performing the self as unique while still operating within recognisable cultural and gendered scripts of femininity. This reaction also reflects the intersubjective relationship between text and viewer: audiences not only receive and interpret the dating show's content but also actively engage in the ongoing matchmaking process. Besides, gendered self-differentiation can be observed in a popular social media trope known as "not that kinda girl." This trope often subverts the phrase "I'm not like other girls" but does so with humour and irony. For example, a post might read, "I'm not that kinda girl who likes matcha, skincare, and early-morning yoga—I party every day." Posts like this enact gendered self-differentiation by highlighting individuality while still operating within recognisable gendered scripts.

Women are expected to be intrinsic bearers of certain psychological characteristics (Litosseliti et al., 2019). One such trait that women are particularly required to demonstrate on reality dating shows is emotional intelligence. Broadly defined, emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, regulate, and evaluate emotions (Goleman, 1998). While emotional intelligence is often valued in professional and service-oriented settings, reality dating shows offer a new lens through which to understand it—one that intertwines with issues of gender performance, generational dynamics, and the mechanisms of reality television. Within this context, emotional intelligence encompasses the ability to respond appropriately to questions and challenges while expressing oneself in a gentle, non-threatening, and aesthetically appealing manner. Candidates demonstrate this by articulating their opinions without offending or alienating those with differing views. High emotional intelligence is particularly emphasised during moments of conflict or competition among contestants. The three female candidates cited in Table 5.7 demonstrated their emotional intelligence by deploying symbols encoded with femininity, childishness, and romance. They used these strategies to gain an advantage and entice the male candidate to choose them. However, the viewer perceived these displays as excessive and, in doing so, rejected the expected performance of emotional intelligence. This response can be read as a form of resistance against the patriarchal ideologies embedded in dating show scripts. Yet, the structural format that

requires every contestant to compete for the male candidate's attention remains unchallenged.

Table 5.8 shows that the viewer related to the female candidates on the topic of *wen jing*. It is a gendered term primarily used to describe girls and young women as gentle, refined, demure, and quiet. On the dating show, when the male candidate expressed his preference for this type of femininity, both the female candidates and the viewer expressed disapproval of this expectation. The viewer engaged in the matchmaking process by first resonating with the female candidates' resistance to being labelled as gentle and demure, and then providing reasoning to justify their stance. This suggests that the figure of the new independent woman, as articulated in Chapter 3, represents both a shared model and an aspirational identity among young women. Meanwhile, female viewers' engagement with the dating show, particularly through imagining themselves in the position of a female candidate, demonstrates a form of resistance against the common disciplinary pressures imposed on young women. Such gendered oppression, embedded within the show's texts, is at times recognised and challenged by both the female candidates and viewers. It is manifested, for example, in resistance to being gentle and demure. At other times, when female candidates are constrained by the dating show and unable to challenge these gendered expectations publicly, female viewers intervene by placing themselves in the candidate's position to voice what goes unspoken.

### 5.2.2 *Adopting the Male Candidate's Role: "I think men like/dislike…"*

Female viewers not only placed themselves in the position of a female candidate but also imagined themselves in the male candidate's position while watching reality dating shows. In doing so, they responded to the show as spokespersons on behalf of men, demonstrating to a certain extent their knowledge of men-ology. The term "men-ology" was coined by Gill to describe a repertoire featured in the UK's best-selling women's magazine *Glamour*, which educates women to "understand, please and reassure men" (2009: 534). Within this framework, women's own feelings and interests are often subordinated, as they "are exhorted to construct themselves as a fantasy partner for the man" (Gill, 2009: 355). Gill further notes that this 'expert' discourse plays a central role in the repertoire: sometimes men themselves are positioned as the 'experts' of men-ology,

**Table 5.8** Female contestants refuse to be gentle and demure

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Viewers' comments* |
|---|---|---|
| The female candidate Wang Jiawen's mother sits by the stage, with a bottle of soy sauce placed in front of her. She is framed in a medium shot | Wang's mother: Do you have any requirements for your other half?<br>Chen Zhao: I quite like the sweet and demure (*wen jing*) type<br>All female candidates: Goodbye! Bye! We can't be sweet, gentle, or quiet | Hua: Nowadays young women don't like to be described as gentle and demure (*wen jing*). Personally, I see "demure" as a relatively neutral and somewhat laudatory term, yet contemporary young women often reject it<br>Researcher: What do they like? Gentle but determined?<br>Hua: Yeah, young women dislike and avoid being demure, as this type of girl is often associated with marriageability and a lack of personal agency or distinctiveness |

*Data source* Episode 1, Season 5 of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. January 24, 2020

while at other times expertise is provided by sex therapists, psychologists, counsellors, and authors of self-help books, offering guidance on how to communicate with men, form relationships, or address issues such as male impotence.

In texts-in-action viewing sessions, female viewers responded to reality dating show texts from an imagined male perspective, often prefacing their observations with phrases such as "I think men like/dislike…" As shown in Table 5.9, when a 181 cm female candidate appeared on the show, the dating expert, the male candidate's father, and the parents of other candidates all expressed concern, highlighting the challenges tall women face in finding a partner on the dating show.

The female viewer Yu commented on the tall female candidate's height as "too tall" for men. Although the 181-cm-tall candidate did not express a preference for men taller than herself, the norm of tall men pairing with shorter women was shared by both the dating show contestants, their parents, the invited celebrity as dating expert, and viewers. This norm does not necessarily require the woman to be short; rather, it emphasises that a woman should not be taller than her male partner. Yu articulated

**Table 5.9** A 181-cm-tall female contestant

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Viewers' comments* |
|---|---|---|
| Female candidate Yu Hongyu stands on stage with her father and a friend. A long shot reveals that she is the tallest of the three, as well as taller than the show's presenter. Hongyu wears a slim black dress. When she announces that she is 181 cm tall, three parents express concern and helplessness, while the male candidate's father shakes his head slightly. Meanwhile, three female candidates smile cheerfully | Dating expert: It's hard for her to find a boyfriend<br>Yu Hongyu: I am 181 cm, 23 years old, and from Harbin. I can go to the party hall, but I cannot cook in the kitchen. I enjoy holding an umbrella indoors. If you are not more motivated than me, not more optimistic than me, and not bolder or more courageous than me, you cannot stand by my side under my umbrella<br>Male candidate's father: She is too tall<br>The host: You are already 181 cm. What is the height requirement for your partner?<br>Yu Hongyu: Above 170 cm is fine. One house only needs one pillar | Ruby: This girl doesn't care about a guy's height<br>Yu: *I think men will care*. Do 175 cm tall men want to be with 180 cm women? A 180 cm woman is too tall. It's rare in life |

*Data source* Episode 1, Season 5 of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. January 24, 2020

this norm by imagining herself as the male candidate rather than as a female candidate, raising the rhetorical question: "Do 175 cm men want to be with 180 cm women?" Her response illustrates that women are still called upon to safeguard men's esteem and masculinity.

In this context, women face a dilemma. If the tall female candidate asserts a preference for a taller male partner, there may be no eligible candidates available in her episode. Conversely, if she disregards men's height, as she indicated on the show, her unusual tall height is still perceived as a threat to masculinity. This case further extends the interpretation of the 'little woman' figure discussed in Chapter 4, where I argue that female candidates are expected to adopt the "little woman" masquerade by concealing career ambition and assertiveness in order to present themselves as approachable and eligible dating partners. The regulation of female behaviour in matchmaking scenarios has expanded from

disciplining personality traits to controlling women's bodies, requiring them to be "little" and non-threatening not only in dispositions but also in physical size. This is exemplified by the concerns expressed over the tall female candidate's ability to find a match on the dating show.

Female viewers' responses, imagining themselves in the positions of both female and male candidates while watching reality dating shows, are deeply intertwined. Their immediate perceptions of the show's texts reflect both feminist and misogynistic sensibilities. Banet-Weiser (2018) notes that popular feminism and popular misogyny are expressed and circulated across media platforms, constantly contesting one another in the contemporary cultural landscape. However, female viewers' responses reveal that women's resistance to the patriarchal ideologies embedded in the dating show is often individualised, whereas patriarchal oppression remains monolithic and structural, forming common-sense knowledge shared among women.

## 5.3 Viewers as Dating Professionals

In addition to the aesthetic and emotional gratification derived from watching reality dating shows, viewers' pleasure also stems from their imagined role as matchmakers, through which they actively participate in the matchmaking process. In Chapter 4, I argue that reality dating shows function as a pedagogy of femininity, packaging guidelines on dating and gender performance in the form of public lectures and tutorials. The show's host, along with invited celebrities, assumes the role of dating experts who safeguard and legitimate the dating process. Through texts-in-action viewing sessions, I found that viewers likewise participated in the matchmaking process by evaluating and speculating on potential matches. They situated issues of dating and marriage within broader social and historical contexts and assessed candidates according to their own standards and preferences. This section focuses on viewers' active engagement with the show through their imaginative participation as matchmakers or dating experts.

This research was conducted during the Covid-19 global pandemic. Since its outbreak in 2020, an increasing number of studies have examined the pandemic's impact on dating practices and intimate relationships across diverse social contexts (Choi et al., 2022; Duguay et al., 2022; Yarger et al., 2021). During the pandemic, topics such as long-distance relationships and advice on maintaining them frequently trended on

Weibo. Bumble (2021) even declared 2020 "the year of the virtual date" Duguay et al. (2022: 15) argue that dating app companies actively facilitated and promoted virtual dating by "shifting socio-technical arrangements, producing new user prescriptions, and curating success stories." In this book project, female viewers described the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on Chinese young people's dating and relationship practices by emphasising a growing yearning for security, stability, and reliability (see Table 5.10).

Dating show contestant Chen Zhao comes from Wuhan. In his self-introduction segment, he shared the postcards he had written to medical

**Table 5.10** A dating contestant discusses the Covid-19 pandemic

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Viewers' comments* |
|---|---|---|
| Male candidate Chen Zhao stands beside the presenter. Several individuals are shown in medium close-ups, their expressions serious and concerned. The studio audience applauds | Presenter Meng Fei: We can't imagine how people in Wuhan felt during the outbreak of Covid-19<br>Chen Zhao: The only thing we could do was pray and cooperate during the lockdown. Thanks to your perseverance, we believe that Wuhan and China as a whole will recover | Yu: I think the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced many people's views on dating and marriage. For example, many of my friends got married this year (i.e., 2021). In times like this, you might think, "I want to settle down. I want to feel secure."<br>Researcher: Oh really?<br>Yu: Perhaps we've reached a certain age for marriage—24, 25, 26 years old. A few of my friends got married over the past year<br>Researcher: The pandemic has also had an impact on people's personalities<br>Yu: It has made us reflect on what is truly important in life. Many people now prefer to choose stable jobs. For instance, more people are taking the civil service exam. People have come to value life itself as the most important thing |

*Data source* Episode 1, Season 5 of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. January 24, 2020

staff in Wuhan, expressing gratitude for their devotion and sacrifices during the Covid-19 pandemic. Chen also conveyed a mixture of despair and hope he experienced when reflecting on the pandemic. The feeling of despair arose from fear and uncertainty, while hope reflected the need to remain positive and optimistic. Additionally, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* Season 5 included a special segment promoting nurses who had worked during the pandemic, featuring them in matchmaking opportunities prior to the main programme's broadcast.

The viewer's reaction to this is noteworthy. Viewer Yu effectively linked the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic to people's views on dating, marriage, and career choices, suggesting that the pandemic brought greater uncertainty into people's lives and prompted a tendency to pursue stability, such as pursuing marriage and civil servant jobs. In this context, marriage is associated with stability and is perceived as something appropriate at a certain age. Civil servant positions, primarily provided by the government, are considered "iron rice bowls," guaranteeing stable income and lifelong benefits that are largely insulated from the effects of the pandemic or other social disruptions. Yu stated that both she and her peers wanted to "settle down and the feeling of security." This desire for security was repeatedly emphasised by viewers during interviews and texts-in-action viewing sessions. In this research, the feeling of security is conceptualised along two dimensions: the first pertains to the career domain, reflecting how individuals can feel safe and secure within society; the second pertains to the relationship and marriage domain, where adopting a serious attitude toward marriage is understood as settling down and embodies the pursuit of stability.

In Chapter 3, I argue that presenting oneself as lacking a sense of security in heterosexual relationships can be understood as a common way of expressing vulnerability on reality dating shows. This perceived lack of security has been framed as a female-gendered deficiency and is primarily employed by female candidates to describe their mindset regarding dating and relationships. Data collected from texts-in-action viewing sessions reveal that the understanding of security extends beyond the individual psychological level to encompass broader spheres such as marriage and career, both of which continue to play a significant role in fostering a sense of security, especially in the post-pandemic times. Furthermore, viewers also evaluated male candidates in terms of their reliability (*kao pu*). A male candidate's reliability was primarily assessed based on his career and personality—that is, whether he held a stable, well-paid job

and whether he demonstrated commitment to monogamy, a topic that will be examined in the following section.

Table 5.11 presents conversations occurring both on the dating show and in texts-in-action viewing sessions, centred on the male contestant, Jiawei's job as a travel blogger. Yuan and Ping's comments reveal how they voiced disapproval of the contestant's occupation. While female candidates and their family members in the studio also expressed concern about Jiawei's job, they did so more subtly, avoiding direct dissent. For example, one mother asked him about his plans for marriage after learning of his intention to travel around the world. Unlike the contestants, viewers were free from public scrutiny and moral pressure, allowing them to speak more directly and boldly. As noted earlier, the dating show invited celebrities to act as dating experts, offering candidates guidance on how to behave and promote themselves. These celebrities primarily functioned as moderators and generally refrained from expressing personal preferences regarding the candidates. In contrast, viewers responded to the show in a more personal, straightforward, and candid manner, often voicing what went unspoken. While their role parallels that of the celebrities, the key difference lies in the private nature of their commentary, delivered without concern for public judgment.

In Table 5.11, viewers expressed contrasting viewpoints on Jiawei's job as a travel blogger. On the one hand, they considered a travel blogger to be engaged in a precarious and unstable occupation, and therefore viewed the candidate as unreliable. On the other hand, the role of a travel blogger carried romantic connotations. The male candidate's suggestion of traveling around the world was interpreted by viewers as an escape from the routine and monotony of married life. These perceptions reveal that viewers actively connect the scenarios presented on the show to their own personal experiences and reflections.

**Table 5.11** Male contestant who is a travel blogger

| *Image* | *Dating show subtitles* | *Viewer's comments* | *Viewers' comments* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Male candidate Lin Jiawei wears a black-and-white colour-block suit. He holds a microphone in one hand, while his other hand rests in his trouser pocket | Lin Jiawei: I'm twenty-three years old, and you can also call me Lin Jinhuan. We should make the most of life. I'm currently a travel blogger, and I'd like to find a girl who can travel the world with me<br>The mother of a female candidate: When will you plan to get married?<br>Lin Jiawei: Around twenty-five to thirty | Yuan: He looks like a high school student. Do you think a guy like this could be good marriage material? I don't think he will get married within the next five years<br>Yuan: Err… a travel blogger? Oh my God! Such an unstable job! Perhaps I'm being too realistic. A guy like this might be suitable for dating, but not for marriage. Marriage is not just about love. You also need him to take responsibility for the family. He should have either the time or the financial resources to care for a child. This travel blogger—will you carry a baby on your back while traveling, or would you choose a DINK (Double Income, No Kids) lifestyle? | Anne: Travelling around the world is so romantic<br>Ping: He is not reliable (*bu kaopu*)<br>Anne: You think he is not reliable?<br>Ping: I don't want to wander around the world<br>Anne: If you get married and someone suggests travelling around the world, it would feel romantic |

*Data source* Episode 3, Season 5 of *Chinese Dating with the Parents*, February 7, 2020

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented detailed and nuanced empirical data collected from texts-in-action viewing sessions with women viewers who watched *Chinese Dating with the Parents* between 2020 and 2021. As a viewer-centred data collection method, texts-in-action investigates viewers' media use and participation by closely examining their everyday and

taken-for-granted experiences of watching dating television. By classifying and analysing viewers' various responses to the reality dating show, I identified three types of viewer involvement: the judgmental viewers, the self-involving viewers, and the viewers as dating professionals. These three categories illustrate how female viewers actively engage with and respond to reality dating shows.

First, the judgmental viewers actively comment on the dating contestants' appearance and age, while also evaluating their strategies of self-presentation and self-promotion. This is the most common and frequent type of reaction among reality dating show audiences. While feminist media studies have long criticised the persistent association between women's physical appearance and the aesthetic labour required to maintain it, this audience reception research reveals that, in everyday viewing experiences, contestants' physical appearance remains the most common topic that viewers focus on and comment upon. This ongoing preoccupation with women's looks reflects the postfeminist notion of "femininity as a bodily property" as a pervasive and predominant feature of popular media culture (Gill, 2007: 149). The audience reception research in this book was conducted between 2020 and 2021, a period marked by the booming beauty economy and the normalisation of plastic surgery. Viewers enact what I term *cosmetic vigilance*—typically perceiving natural appearance as authentic beauty while actively identifying contestants who have undergone cosmetic procedures during their viewing. They regard cosmetic surgery as a form of beauty investment—a pursuit of media visibility and financial gain through becoming an internet celebrity, shaped by the aesthetic ideal of the internet-celebrity face (*wanghonglian*). Furthermore, viewers' comments on contestants' age reveal a tendency for reality dating shows to recruit younger participants with relatively limited experience in dating and relationships. *Chinese Dating with the Parents* reinvents the traditional notion of blind dating (*xianqin*) by presenting a pre-arranged "dating summer school" for young people in their early twenties—those who have just completed their undergraduate or postgraduate studies and are beginning their careers. Within this format, participants practise dating under the supervision of the show's authorised host and dating experts, while being observed by their parents. The reality dating show thus renders blind dating both approachable for the younger generation and fashionable by situating it within the entertaining framework of a reality dating game show.

Second, the self-involving viewers engage with reality dating shows by shifting between identifying with a particular female contestant and adopting the perspective of a generalised male participant. Female viewers often comment, "If I were her, I would…," taking on the role of the female contestant at moments when several women vie for the attention of a male contestant. Such comments reflect a gendered mode of self-differentiation, through which viewers perform the self as unique and position themselves at a distance from the male contestant's evaluative gaze. This reaction typically occurs when women recognise the disadvantageous situations commonly imposed on female contestants, prompting them to respond in a subtly resistant way. However, adopting the role of the female contestant still operates within recognisable cultural and gendered scripts of femininity.

At the same time, female viewers also assume a generalised male perspective when evaluating female contestants, demonstrating their possession of what I call "men-ology"—a form of lay expertise in understanding men's preferences and speaking on behalf of men. This is exemplified by comments such as, "I think men like/dislike…" The responses of self-involving viewers thus reveal an entanglement of feminist and patriarchal notions embedded in contemporary viewing practices of reality dating shows.

The self-involving viewers reveal the ambivalent position of female viewers. On the one hand, they engage in acts of feminist self-expression by subtly critiquing disadvantageous situations imposed on women and imagining alternative courses of action. On the other hand, these expressions are largely individualistic and constrained within the heteronormative logic of mate selection. In assuming the male perspective, even unintentionally, viewers reproduce the very patriarchal frameworks they may seek to critique, demonstrating how feminist resistance is circumscribed by the competitive and scripted nature of the dating show format. Female spectatorship in this context reflects a tension between agency and constraint: women speak and act on behalf of themselves, yet their evaluative practices remain intertwined with, and sometimes complicit in, sustaining male authority.

Finally, female viewers enact the role of dating professionals while watching reality dating shows. Compared with the invited dating experts, they incorporate more personal experience and preferences, offering responses that are more subjective, candid, and boldly articulated. These evaluations not only reflect individual tastes but also highlight broader

social and cultural norms. Findings further indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic has shaped both dating behaviours and career decisions, as the desire for security, stability, and reliability become more pronounced among dating candidates and viewers.

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CHAPTER 6

# Conclusion: Chinese Postfeminist Sensibility and Feminist Futures

The book explores media representations and audience reception of new female subjectivities embodied by young women contestants on the Chinese reality dating show, *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. The audience for this study consists of 23 young women, who were active viewers of reality television shows and based in Xi'an, China. In this book, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* refers to a new format of reality dating programme that premiered in 2016. The dating show's format is defined by the on-set presence of contestants' parents, who participate in the selection and evaluation of potential matches for their children. It features young heterosexual individuals who are typically urban citizens with higher educational attainment.

Taking *Chinese Dating with the Parents* as a prism, the book aims to address three interrelated questions. How do the processes and practices of reality dating shows construct and signify what it means to be a woman in postsocialist China? How do female viewers interpret and respond to representations of female subjectivity in dating shows? In what ways are reality dating shows reshaping understandings of heterosexual relationships and contributing to new conceptions of gender and female subjectivity?

The book draws on comprehensive and detailed data from multiple sources, including reality dating show texts, texts-in-action viewing sessions, and semi-structured in-depth interviews with 23 young, highly educated Chinese women who were aged between 23 and 36 years

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and based in Xi'an, China. The fieldwork was conducted between 2020 and 2021, providing rich empirical materials that underpin the analysis throughout the book. Across these chapters, the central argument is that the format of *Chinese Dating with the Parents* reinforces patriarchal discipline on women and reproduces gender inequality by reinventing traditional matchmaking rituals and inciting women to perform and sustain a postfeminist sensibility which conceals systemic, structural, and taken-for-granted gender inequalities.

The empirical and analytical chapters have critically responded to the key questions of this book. First, how do the processes and practices of reality dating shows construct and signify what it means to be a woman in postsocialist China? Taking *Chinese Dating with the Parents* as an example, I have suggested that reality dating shows embed a *pedagogy of femininity* within their mechanisms, encouraging young women to actively don a 'little woman' masquerade and strategically conceal their career ambition, rebellious spirit, and assertiveness in order to become eligible partners (see Chapter 4). The effect of the 'little woman' masquerade is widespread, extending from blind dating to intimate relationships. This pedagogy of femininity is manifested within the makeover paradigm of reality television and is jointly conveyed by the dating show's presenter and special celebrity guests, who perform as dating experts possessing socially sanctioned knowledge of matchmaking and femininity. Meanwhile, the competition and elimination system of reality dating shows works to assess the delivery of this pedagogical instruction. As a result, young female contestants who assert an independent and empowered persona at the beginning of the show are transformed into normative, approachable dating candidates who emphasise girly personalities and inner vulnerability to secure a match. The "before and after" effect reinforces the idea that the female self is inherently deficient and in need of continuous, all-encompassing transformation and improvement.

Second, how do female viewers interpret and respond to representations of female subjectivity in dating shows? Through audience reception research conducted with 23 young women, I have identified three forms of audience involvement in reality dating shows: the judgmental viewer, the self-involving viewer, and viewer as dating professionals (see Chapter 5). These forms of involvement are interconnected and offer an analytical framework for future research on female spectatorship in reality television programmes related to dating and relationships. Significantly, female viewers often shift between two roles by imagining themselves in

the position of a specific female contestant or an imagined male contestant. Their responses to the ongoing dating show are respectively, "If I were her, I would…" and "I think men like/dislike…" These typical responses indicate that women's efforts to resist the unequal system are individualised and personal, while their awareness of patriarchal norms is shared and collective.

Impressed by the privileged status and independent characteristics of female contestants, viewers resonate with the contestants' statements about their new female identity, praising their courage to openly state their preferred relationship mode and resist traditional gendered expectations placed on women in dating scenarios. They intervene in the show by taking the female contestant's position and perspective when situations appear disadvantageous for women. Simultaneously, they also evaluate female contestants through an imagined patriarchal gaze when contestants do not align with the expectations of an eligible dating partner. This illustrates a distinctly female dilemma: both the discipline and oppression imposed upon women, and the gender-based social norms that regulate them, are recognisable to female viewers. The moment a woman appears on a heterosexual dating show stage, her self-worth, attractiveness, and dignity cannot be affirmed if she fails to win the dating game, the rules of which are dictated by men. Female viewers' involvement in reality dating shows reflects both feminist and anti-feminist ideas. It further demonstrates a postfeminist sensibility embodied by women, characterised by contradictory discourses that simultaneously engage with and, at times, inadvertently disavow feminist principles.

Third, in what ways are reality dating shows reshaping understandings of heterosexual relationships and contributing to new conceptions of gender and female subjectivity? I have argued that *Chinese Dating with the Parents* reinvents traditional matchmaking practices by featuring the parents of dating contestants on set to help young people evaluate potential partners, thereby normalising parental involvement in contemporary dating and marriage. Reality dating shows promote this new format as a marker of Chineseness. Moreover, it reinforces the concept of match-door marriage (*men dang hu dui*), guided by the belief that partnership is supposed to occur between families of similar social standing. By encouraging mutual selection between family units, *Chinese Dating with the Parents* redefines and reinforces the notion that marriage is not merely a matter between two individuals but a union that binds two families.

Meanwhile, neoliberal ideas have profoundly shaped young people's perceptions of dating and marriage. Dating contestants are framed as entrepreneurs of the self, who are proactive, calculative, and self-responsible. Their expectation of a 1 + 1 > 2 model of intimate relationship is noteworthy. This model suggests that an ideal relationship is conceived as a mutually beneficial exchange governed by the principle of maximising advantage for both parties (see Chapter 3). The entrepreneurial and neoliberal mindset manifests not only in contestants' multiple motives but also in female interviewees' deliberate and cautious attitudes toward dating and marriage. Dating show contestants are typically good looking and often pursue careers that rely heavily on social media exposure. Beyond seeking a match on the show, they engage in self-branding to gain media visibility and online fame, reflecting the neoliberal mantra of "not putting all your eggs in one basket." Viewing intimate relationships as processes of self-upgrading and self-optimisation, young middle-class women prioritize maintaining their autonomy and living standards to avoid exploitation by male partners.

Overall, the analytical chapters provide a nuanced and detailed account of how young women understand female subjectivity, how reality dating shows (re)produce the figure of the 'little woman' within heterosexual relationships, and the interplay between reality dating show texts and viewers' comments. Themes of feminism and anti-feminism repeatedly emerge in both the dating show and viewers' interpretations. None of the participants in this book had heard of postfeminism; nevertheless, all expressed opinions related to feminism and postfeminism and demonstrated concern for gender issues, sharing similar feelings of anger and distress about everyday experiences. At the same time, participants consciously or unconsciously positioned themselves within an imagined male gaze, reflecting the ways in which patriarchal and misogynistic cultural norms shape and govern those navigating such social environments. Using reality dating shows as a channel, this book has gathered and documented a group of young women's insights on female subjectivity and intimate relationships, who candidly share their perspectives with this feminist study. It captures a distinct historical moment in which young women are awakening to, articulating, and resisting both recognisable and yet-to-be-named forms of gender oppression in everyday life.

The book makes a theoretical contribution by conceptualising the Chinese postfeminist sensibility. This sensibility has been shaped by the historical legacy of state feminism, exemplified by the socialist-era

slogan "women hold half of the sky," while also being influenced by the transnational and cosmopolitan dimensions of postfeminism that circulate in parallel with neoliberalism and consumerism in postsocialist China. Approaching postfeminism as a critical object rather than a perspective, I have argued that postfeminism has a peculiar alignment with the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign (*sizi jingshen yundong*) launched by All-China Women's Federation in 1983. The campaign's wide-ranging and powerful influence on the formation of new female subjectivity created fertile ground for the postfeminist sensibility to take root and germinate in postsocialist China. Comprising self-esteem (*zizun*), self-confidence (*zixin*), self-reliance (*zili*), and self-improvement (*ziqiang*), the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign calls on Chinese women to emancipate and empower themselves by enhancing their ethical standards as well as scientific and cultural quality (*suzhi*). Its emphasis on women's self-liberation uncannily echoes the themes of self-empowerment, individual agency, and the rhetoric of personal choice that underpin Western postfeminist discourses. Meanwhile, the cosmopolitan subject and the postfeminist subject are deeply entwined and mutually reinforcing in postsocialist China. The postfeminist subject has been incorporated into the cosmopolitan subject, as (post)feminist ideas have travelled across borders alongside the global capitalist economy. Consequently, the Chinese postfeminist sensibility is a hybrid formation shaped by the historical legacy of state feminism, the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign, and the transnational circulation of postfeminist and cosmopolitan discourses in tandem with neoliberalism and consumerism in postsocialist China.

My exploration of the Chinese postfeminist sensibility builds on Rosalind Gill's (2007) conceptualisation of postfeminism as a distinctive sensibility and Simidele Dosekun's (2020) understanding of it as a transnational culture. As Dosekun insightfully suggests, "postfeminism is transnationalised or rendered transnational culture readily and easily via the media, commodity, consumer, migratory, and other connectivities that today crisscross the world more widely, more densely, and more rapidly than ever before" (2020: 14). The transnational perspective is significant in challenging rigid binaries of "the West and the Rest" (Hall, 1996: 185). This perspective also destabilises the meaning of "post" in postfeminism, disrupting the historical linearity that frames postfeminism as the inevitable, updated progeny of feminism (Projansky, 2001: 88). Approaching postfeminism as a transnational culture, I have further elaborated the meaning of "transnational" by distinguishing it from the notion

of the "global." I argue that an artefact or phenomenon is transnational when it transcends borders while being shaped by different territories and is imbricated in multiple spatial dimensions. In this sense, postfeminism is transnational, given its entanglement with neoliberalism and the associated series of individualised, commercialised, and entrepreneurial discourses circulating within popular media culture.

This book makes further theoretical and empirical contributions by articulating the emerging Chinese postfeminist sensibility as embodied by a group of young women in contemporary China. I delineate the Chinese postfeminist sensibility by tracing its parallels and distinctions with that described in research on Western societies. First, both the Chinese postfeminist sensibility and postfeminism in Western literature are confined to a small club of women. This group is limited to a select segment characterised by the "centralisation of an affluent elite" (Tasker & Negra, 2007: 2), which in turn reinscribes class privilege and heteronormativity. The young women who appeared on *Chinese Dating with the Parents* and participated in this book project are predominantly urban, highly educated, and able-bodied. Most of them are members of the generation shaped by the One-Child Policy or have benefited from the absence of male siblings during their upbringing. They are relatively privileged, belonging to middle-class or aspiring middle-class status.

Postfeminism claims to be "universally accessible" (Tasker & Negra, 2007: 2), or at the very least, universally appealing to all women. As a cultural phenomenon operating within popular media, postfeminist discourses encourage women to empower themselves and derive happiness through material consumption, perform femininity as a bodily property, and embody positive and self-assured dispositions. Nevertheless, the women who can fully attain these qualities are strictly restricted by intersecting factors such as race and ethnicity, class and caste, sexuality, and physical ability, let alone the point raised by Tasker and Negra that postfeminism is largely exclusive to "white and middle class by default" (2007: 2). To situate the postfeminist subject in postsocialist China, rather than considering social class as a fixed threshold for entry, I have applied three interrelated factors. They are the distinction between urban and rural household registration in mainland China, the significance of higher education in shaping the emerging middle class, and the impact of the One-Child Policy in empowering only-daughters. Consequently, the group of women who embody and represent a postfeminist sensibility are predominantly urban, young, highly educated only-daughters.

Second, the Chinese postfeminist sensibility that manifested in this book is distinctive in that it builds upon an acknowledgement of entrenched and persistent gender inequality, particularly the discrimination against girls (*zhongnan qing nü*) in contemporary China. This common awareness of gender inequality raises the fundamental question of how to understand postfeminism in the Chinese context, given that its emergence in English-speaking countries was shaped by young women's rejection or neglect of gender inequality following the second-wave feminism (McRobbie, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2007). In China, discrimination against daughters is a pervasive cultural phenomenon, especially in rural areas. It reflects a patriarchal conception of gender inequality that prioritizes the rights and interests of men while defining women as subordinate, thereby restricting their freedom and limiting their opportunities for development. In response to this discrimination, families of only-daughters often encourage their daughters to study and work hard to demonstrate that girls can outperform boys and bring honour to the entire family. I have argued that the Chinese postfeminist sensibility unexpectedly emerged from the One-Child Policy and is characterised by a common recognition of entrenched gender inequality, in particular the discrimination against girls. It is represented both as an ephemeral status of gendered and classed welfare for urban only daughters and as a reflexive subjectivity shaped by the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign since the 1980s.

Fieldwork for this book was conducted in Xi'an, a northwest inland second-tier city. By examining the Chinese postfeminist sensibility as embodied by young women in Xi'an, this book seeks to broaden the scope of postfeminism research and provide inspiration for future studies on (post)feminist dynamics beyond first-tier metropolitan cities, highlighting how local, less cosmopolitan contexts shape female subjectivity and enactments of postfeminist ideals. While most previous research on postfeminism has focussed on first-tier hubs such as Beijing and Shanghai, as well as southeast coastal cities (Chang & Ren, 2016; Chen, 2012; Guo, 2026; Ma, 2025), studying Xi'an provides insight into how postfeminist sensibilities are negotiated in a second-tier urban setting, where regional and traditional culture, economic conditions, and social opportunities for women differ markedly from those of China's major metropolises.

This book makes a methodological contribution to the study of audience viewing experiences and television programmes by combining analyses of reality dating show texts with audience reception. In researching

audience reception, I employed texts-in-action viewing sessions alongside qualitative interviews with dating show viewers. Texts-in-action provide an opportunity for viewers to watch ongoing dating shows in the presence of the researcher, allowing for the capture of live moments of television reception and engagement. As a viewer-centric data collection method, texts-in-action situates viewers' engagement with the TV programme in real time and within "the sequencing of texts" (Wood, 2007: 493). The method also examines how viewers interact with media and immerse themselves in the dating show experience. This approach addresses a gap in audience reception studies, which have previously relied mainly on viewers' retrospective descriptions of television texts through interviews or focus groups and employed the tripartite model of text, readers, and contexts (Moores, 1990). It redefines the relationship between television programs and female viewers, moving beyond a simple text–reader or encode–decode framework to a multidimensional understanding situated within ethnographic contexts. Although conducting texts-in-action sessions can be time-consuming and labour-intensive, they provide valuable insights into how different contexts, including everyday life practices and the locations where the sessions take place, shape viewers' behaviours and interpretations of reality dating shows.

The unexpected Covid-19 pandemic posed unpredictable challenges for cross-border fieldwork in the early 2020s, making discussions of uncomfortable reflexivity even more significant than in pre-pandemic times. Conducting fieldwork across borders during the pandemic required me to practise reflexivity within constantly changing and precarious contexts and to approach the research with a sense of self-care. Drawing on the notion of "uncomfortable reflexivity" (Pillow, 2003: 188), I navigated new ways of understanding and addressing difficulties in the research process, transforming feelings of confusion and despair into self-reconciliation, healing, and solidarity (Jia, 2023). This book contributes to the understanding of power relations between the researcher and participants in the context of pandemic-era fieldwork by promoting a non-exploitative interviewing relationship grounded in trust and interactive, communicative dialogue. With its focus on cross-border fieldwork and audience reception studies, this book aspires to open space for continued dialogue on difficult conversations and uncomfortable reflexivity in feminist research praxis (Ryan-Flood et al., 2023).

Findings of this book revolve around the production mechanism of reality dating shows, female viewers' reception of such programmes and

their reflections on female subjectivity, as well as the three modes of viewers' involvement in dating shows. The theoretical and empirical contributions of this book, together with its findings have implications for the production teams of reality dating shows, their audiences, and people who are interested in reality television, dating cultures, mediated intimacy, and the dynamics of gender and (post)feminism in contemporary China.

I call on production teams to consider women's standpoints and to incorporate more feminist voices and perspectives into the design and scripting of dating programmes. By listening more closely to audience needs and experimenting with culturally creative formats, reality television has the potential to move beyond the repetitive reproduction of gender stereotypes and instead contribute to more nuanced representations of intimacy and selfhood. I also urge audiences to adopt a more critical and reflective stance toward what they watch, recognising how entertainment shapes, and is shaped by, gendered ideals of intimate relationships and self-making. Finally, this book sincerely invites readers interested in female subjectivity, gender relations, mediated intimacy, and the dynamics of (post)feminism to continue interrogating and expanding these fields through future research and dialogue.

Beyond its implications, while this book has sought to provide a comprehensive account of gender and female subjectivity as represented in reality dating shows and received by audiences, it has its limitations. The first limitation arises from the unexpected Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on conducting fieldwork across borders. The pandemic posed challenges such as restricting access to potential research sites and shaping participants' more cautious attitudes toward self-care and public interaction, which may have influenced their engagement during the texts-in-action viewing sessions and in-depth interviews.

The second limitation concerns the relatively homogenous composition of this study's participants. When the research was presented at conferences and academic events, questions were frequently raised: Why focus on a group of urban women? Why not rural women? Why select highly educated participants? Why not include women who are less privileged or less formally educated? These are all constructive questions that highlight the need for further research to broaden the demographic scope of inquiry into gender and feminism. Human beings are at the centre of all social science research, and every single project inevitably develops through the researcher's own lens. The decision to focus on

young, highly educated urban women was guided by three key considerations: the feasibility of conducting research within the specific social and temporal context of the study; the appropriateness of this group for achieving the research objectives; and the importance of selecting a research focus that genuinely interests and motivates the researcher to engage with data collection, analysis, and writing (Goodman, 2024). The participants in this study share similarities with the female contestants featured on reality dating shows in terms of age, higher education attainment, which allows them to resonate more closely with the forms of female subjectivity represented on screen.

Over the years of conducting this project, the gender landscape in China has undergone gradual yet profound transformation. A growing body of theoretical and empirical research on Chinese (post)feminism has emerged in recent years (Guo, 2026; Ingebrigtsen & Zeng, 2024; Ma, 2025; Zhu & Xiao, 2021). Following the transnational #MeToo movement that gained prominence in 2017, feminism has become increasingly visible and accessible through Chinese social media, despite the threats of "constant surveillance, vigilant censorship, and possible criminalisation" (Jia, 2024: 58). Public discussions around feminism, gender inequality, and the unequal gendered division of labour have expanded, posing challenges to the status quo and signalling a shifting terrain of gender politics in contemporary China.

Since the 2020s, popular television series and programmes in China have increasingly incorporated gendered issues into their storylines. These include narratives of survivors of sexual assault seeking justice, girls helping girls, and women challenging misogynistic norms. Scriptwriters of popular dramas have crafted everyday dialogues that work to redefine femininity and the female gender. New reality television shows such as *Sisters Who Make Waves* (2020–present) have emerged, featuring female celebrities aged thirty and above competing in singing and dancing, explicitly challenging societal norms around female ageing. Such feminist narratives have been disseminated to wider audiences through popular culture and social media. At the same time, feminist podcasts that combine theoretical discussion with social immediacy have gained popularity since the 2020s (Xie & Li, 2024; Yang, 2022; Yuan & Wang, 2025).

The Covid-19 pandemic introduced an unexpected episode to this project, as it did for the world at large. We are now living in post-pandemic times, in which the experience of pandemic life has profoundly

shaped the construction of subjectivity and influenced people's perceptions of intimate relationships. In recent years, the rapid development of AI technologies has further transformed how individuals form, experience, and imagine mediated intimacy. The interplay between post-pandemic sensibilities, technological mediation, and gendered subjectivity underscores the urgency of continuously re-examining what it means to be a woman in an age marked by accelerating change and uncertainty. In this complex and evolving landscape, feminisms—as gender politics and lived practices—must remain cohesive, responsive, critical, and imaginative, persistently rearticulating new possibilities for agency and intimacy in China and beyond.

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