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Gendered discourses of entrepreneurialism in Chinese reality dating television

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the entrepreneurial femininities embodied by female contestants on the Chinese reality dating show *New Blind Date Conference*. The show stages an entanglement of traditional and progressive elements: family members appear on set to advise and evaluate potential matches, while privileged young women are portrayed as empowered post-feminist subjects. Framing gender as discursively and performatively constructed and dating as a competitive media spectacle, the article explores how femininities are shaped by heteronormativity and neoliberal aspirations and anxieties about upward mobility, as well as the mechanisms of reality television. Drawing on textual analysis of the show and interviews with twenty-three female viewers in Xi'an, China, I argue that the show reinforces patriarchal discipline by reinventing traditional matchmaking rituals and encouraging women to perform entrepreneurial sensibilities. The analysis demonstrates how a uniquely Chinese entrepreneurial subject embodies the self-as-project as simultaneously individualised and self-responsible. This article contributes to scholarship on entrepreneurial femininity and feminist audience reception, while interrogating how post-feminism and neoliberalism are represented, embodied and interpreted in contemporary China.

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Introduction

This article examines the emergent forms of femininity embodied by contestants on the Chinese reality dating television programme *New Blind Date Conference* (新相亲大会), and explores how female audiences interpret and negotiate the gendered performances staged within the show. Reality dating shows have reconfigured matchmaking, shifting it from a marriage-oriented practice to a form of social engagement shaped by media entertainment, commodification and gendered performativity. *New Blind Date Conference* premiered on Jiangsu Satellite Television in 2019. A standout feature of this genre of dating show is the active involvement of parents and close relatives in the dating process, with family members present on set to advise and evaluate potential matches.

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Contestants are predominantly urban, heterosexual Chinese individuals in their twenties and early thirties. They have glamorous appearances, media-friendly personas and identification with an emergent urban middle class (Ann Anagnost 2008). Female candidates, in particular, occupy a relatively privileged social position: many are singleton daughters shaped by the demographic legacy of the One-Child Policy in urban China (Vanessa Fong 2002), and have benefited from higher education, often obtained in Euro-American institutions. These young women acquire financial independence and develop self-awareness and cosmopolitan dispositions that set them apart from earlier, more traditional and homogeneous construction of femininity. They exercise consumerist agency and value self-actualisation and personal gratification. This article thus focuses on these ostensibly empowered women and interrogates the embodied femininities they perform and negotiate within the reality dating show's mediated framework.

The meanings of dating and marriage have constantly evolved from the socialist to the post-socialist eras. In post-socialist China, the formation of marriage persists with the continued involvement of both parents and children. Contemporary China witnesses a rise in collective anxiety concerning dating and marriage amidst an unprecedented backdrop of the market-oriented economy (Peidong Sun 2012). From 2013 to 2024, the marriage rate has continuously declined, apart from a slight rebound in 2023 (Helen Davidson 2025). From 2016 to 2023, the birth rate in China has steadily decreased (C Textor 2025). This collective anxiety is reflected in *New Blind Date Conference*, where parental involvement is incorporated into the dating show's format, and intimate relationships are framed not only as personal matters but also as family issues.

Situated within this socio-cultural context, this article asks: what kind of new femininities are embodied by contestants on *New Blind Date Conference*? How do female viewers interpret and reflect on the female subjectivities presented on the dating show? I conduct textual analysis of the show alongside semi-structured interviews with twenty-three female audiences. This article begins by theorising post-feminist sensibilities and the entrepreneurial subject within a transnational framework. It then draws on theories of the masquerade and neoliberal governmentality to conceptualise gendered subject formation in post-socialist China, followed by an outline of the methodology. The discussion and analysis section comprises three themes: how reality dating television constructs the eligible female partner; how it reinforces middle-class imaginaries and incorporates them into representations of sanctioned new femininities; and how dating show contestants engage in the unpaid labour of self-branding by appearing on the show. The conclusion pulls together the main findings and proposes that the uniquely Chinese entrepreneurial subject is simultaneously individualised and self-responsible.

Femininity as masquerade in post-feminist media culture

The theoretical intersections of post-feminism, popular feminism, and neoliberal feminism, as well as the points at which these frameworks diverge offer a useful lens through which to examine the embodiment of entrepreneurial femininities on Chinese reality dating television. Post-feminism represents a diluted, media- and consumer culture-friendly version of feminism that is neither pseudo-feminism nor feminism with an explicitly political agenda. Popular feminism highlights the circulation of feminist ideas across digital and commercial media (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018). Neoliberal feminism

suggests that feminist discourses have not only become widely circulated but have also grown compatible with neoliberal and neoconservative political and economic agendas (Catherine Rottenberg 2018). Rottenberg distinguishes neoliberal feminism from a post-feminist sensibility by its explicit disavowal of the socio-economic and cultural structures that shape people's lives, placing the burden of well-being and self-care squarely on the individual. Rather than challenging normative expectations, it reaffirms reproduction as a central feature of aspirational women's life trajectory, with work-life balance as its ideal (Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Rottenberg 2020). Nevertheless, neoliberal feminism has been developed primarily within the American mainstream cultural landscape and largely framed around powerful, high-profile women such as Anne-Marie Slaughter and Sheryl Sandberg. As such, it falls short of articulating the entrepreneurial femininities of ostensibly ordinary young women who appear as contestants on *New Blind Date Conference*, women whose relatively privileged position was shaped by the One-Child Policy and who have to navigate shifting gender norms and societal expectations amid the socio-historical transformations of post-2010s China.

Growing scholarly attention has been devoted to contemporary femininities and subject formation within neoliberal, market-oriented economies, particularly in relation to entrepreneurial subjectivities articulated through post-feminist discourse (Gill and Christina Scharff 2011; Jia Guo 2022; Sara Liao 2019; Kullanit Nitiwarangkul 2026; Scharff 2016). This article draws primarily on Rosalind Gill's conceptualisation of post-feminism as "a distinctive sensibility" (Rosalind Gill 2007, 147), and Simidele Dosekun's framing of it as a transnational culture. While post-feminism is often recognised as having distinctly Western origins, researchers have increasingly worked to decentre it from the West by adopting intersectional analytical approaches and situating it within transnational contexts (Jess Butler 2013; Simidele Dosekun 2020). Dosekun (2020) contends that post-feminism constitutes a transnational culture, mediated, circulated, and commodified across national boundaries through media networks, capital flows and human migration. Her work challenges the notion of an "authentic" post-feminism as exclusively white and Western, or as belonging solely to white women. Drawing on Dosekun's formulation of de-Westernised post-feminism, this article argues that in *New Blind Date Conference*, female contestants with higher education credentials from Euro-American contexts are shaped by transnational post-feminist formations.

In recent years, researchers have applied the theoretical framework of post-feminist sensibilities entangled with neoliberal, entrepreneurial subjectivities to feminist media studies. However, this paradigm risks merely replicating existing theory in new case studies, rather than generating new theoretical insights from them. Fan Yang (2023) suggests that post-feminism exists in China but differs from its Western counterpart in terms of the "class of its subjects, female elites' relationship with the state, and post-feminism's entanglement with local feminisms" (2023, 1060). Following Dosekun's transnational framework, while acknowledging the pitfalls of transposing post-feminist frameworks onto non-Western contexts, Yang emphasises "post-feminism's discursive circulation in China must be situated within the corpus of Chinese history and politics" (2023, 1060). Given that the term "post-feminism" is largely unfamiliar in China, Yang coins "consumerist pseudo-feminism" as its equivalent. It captures the rhetoric of consumer culture in cultivating middle-class women as conspicuous consumers whose agency is largely tied to their purchasing power. However, this term risks simplifying the internally

ambivalent nature of postfeminism by framing its feminist aspects as spurious. Liang Ge's (2025) conceptualisation of post-(socialist-)feminist sensibilities offers a more nuanced lens, combining the historical legacy of socialist, state-sponsored feminism with transnational post-feminism, which Ge characterises as inheriting "both forward and backward momentum" (2025, 1), with ambivalence as its defining feature resulting from the socio-historical transformations from the socialist to the post-socialist era.

Building on previous research on (post)feminisms and entrepreneurial femininities, this article articulates how a uniquely Chinese entrepreneurial subject exemplifies a self-as-project that is simultaneously individualised and self-responsible. In doing so, it makes an original contribution to research on entrepreneurial femininities and the ways in which female subjectivities are embodied and negotiated within family-oriented, mediated and culturally specific non-Western contexts. The article situates the Chinese entrepreneurial subject within the specific historical, social and cultural context of post-socialist China, where the One-Child Policy and the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign (四自精神运动) have shaped the formation of subjectivity among women born in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

The One-Child Policy, legalised in 1979 and formally phased out in 2015, inadvertently empowered a generation of women, particularly urban only-daughters. Unlike previous generations of women who may have shared parental attention with siblings, only-daughters became the sole recipients of their family's financial resources and aspirational hopes, expected to study hard, achieve professionally, and, in due course, marry well. The entrepreneurial self that emerges in this context is thus never purely individualistic; it remains deeply entangled with familial bonds and expectations. Self-improvement, in this sense, is undertaken not only for oneself but also as a form of reciprocity toward the family of origin.

The Four-Selves Spirit Campaign, initiated in 1983 by the All-China Women's Federation, the state-affiliated organisation that leads the women's movement in China, is equally significant for the formation of new female subjectivity. Its themes of self-esteem (自尊), self-confidence (自信), self-reliance (自立), and self-improvement (自强) resonate powerfully with post-feminist discourses centred on self-empowerment and individual agency (Xintong Jia 2024). The campaign has exerted a wide-ranging and enduring influence on women's self-making. Together, these historical and social conditions provided a conducive environment for post-feminist ideas to take root and operate within a Chinese context.

Angela McRobbie's (2009) concept of the post-feminist masquerade is indispensable for examining the femininities performed by female contestants within the heteronormative sphere of dating shows. McRobbie argues that the performance of exaggerated femininity is characterised by hyperfeminine aesthetics, which are framed as a personal choice and a non-coercive strategy for navigating patriarchal norms. Joan Rivière's (1929/1986 seminal work "Womanliness as a Masquerade" suggests femininity functions as a mask women adopt to gain acceptance and maintain social connections in a male-dominated world. This masquerade acts as a compensatory mechanism, shielding women from male retaliation by turning the threat of retribution into seduction and conforming to societal expectations. Mary Ann Doane further contends that the masquerade challenges patriarchal positioning by exposing femininity as a constructed mask rather than a self-contained "presence-to-itself" (Mary Ann Doane 1982, 81). The female masquerade is a code of being womanly, guiltless, compliant and non-confrontational, performed in

a gender-savvy manner. As Inna Arzumanova suggests, it consists of “excessive flirting, displays of subservience, coquetting, hyper-innocence” and performances of intrinsic contradictions between the woman’s “intellectual proclivities and her chosen mask” (Inna Arzumanova 2012, 119–120). In everyday life, the female masquerade encompasses a wide range of practices, including make-up, dress and lifestyle, particular comportments and dispositions, in short, the said as much as the unsaid. To date, scholarship on the masquerade of femininity has been predominantly situated within feminist psychoanalysis and film spectatorship studies, focusing on embodied performances and hyperfeminine aesthetics. Reality dating shows, however, provide a mediated platform where these sensibilities are made visible and interpreted through textual materials. This article seeks to advance the concept of femininity as a masquerade by conducting a textual analysis of *New Blind Date Conference* and examining female viewers’ reception of its gendered performances.

Neoliberalism and the entrepreneurial self in post-socialist China

As a theory of political economic practices, neoliberalism suggests that human well-being can be advanced by promoting individual entrepreneurial initiative and freedom within a society characterised by deregulation, privatisation, free trade and globalisation (David Harvey 2005). These values may not be universally shared, but they have the potential to cross borders, despite their associated colonial implications. This is evident in post-socialist China, where, as Harvey observes, neoliberalism manifests as “a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control” (Harvey 2005, 120). In *Neoliberalism as Exception*, Aihwa Ong (2006) points out that neoliberal governmentality has been selectively absorbed by Asian governments in building economic zones and imposing market economy ideology among citizens. Ong proposes that neoliberalism is not solely based on an efficient, profit-maximising economic approach, but also foregrounds ethics centred on self-responsibility. She suggests refraining from viewing neoliberalism exclusively as a culture or a structure, but rather as a technology of governance “that can be decontextualised from their original sources and recontextualised in constellations of mutually constitutive and contingent relationships” (Ong 2006, 13). This perspective on neoliberalism as a decontextualised and recontextualised phenomenon is instructive for examining it as a technology of subject-making in post-socialist China, which has undergone market-oriented reforms in the 1980s, the rise of consumer culture in the 1990s, and the refeminisation and further sexualisation of women (Mayfair Yang 1999), the influx of transnational capital following China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, and the ongoing celebration of femininity through beauty and youth over the past two decades (Min Xu and Shiyu Zheng 2023). This framing highlights the potential for neoliberalism to be “translated, technologised, and operationalised” across various situations (Ong 2006, 13), and thus provides rationale for making sense of the entrepreneurial subject in the Chinese context.

The notion of the entrepreneurial self has a well-established critical lineage. Much of the early theorising in this area is rooted in Michel Foucault’s work, in which he conceptualises *homo oeconomicus* as “an entrepreneur of himself,” as one “being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his]

earnings” (Michel Foucault and Michel Senellart 2008, 226). Feminist scholars such as Gill (2010) and Rottenberg (2018) have since extended this framework by attending to its gendered dimensions, while retaining Foucault’s foundational concern with how such self-making operates at the intersection of neoliberal rationality and state power. This critical inheritance informs the present analysis of how the entrepreneurial feminine subject on reality dating shows is constituted through the convergence of market forces within the television industry and transnational post-feminist media culture in post-socialist China.

As a technology of subject formation, neoliberalism constructs individuals as “entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life” (Wendy Brown 2003, 38). Individuals are reconfigured as proactive, calculating, risk-taking, and self-responsible subjects, whose moral autonomy is assessed by their ability to meet their own needs and pursue their own ambitions (Brown 2003). The entrepreneur regards market exchange as an ethic and prioritises traits such as ambition, initiative, efficiency and accountability (Nikolas Rose 1992). Furthermore, Paul du Gay (1996, 181) articulates that individuals are “entrepreneur of the self” as they engage in a life-long project, perceived as both “a single arena” and a unidirectional journey to optimise their existence. Likewise, Ulrich Bröckling employs the notion of “Me-Incorporated” to liken the entrepreneurial self to “a joint-stock company” (Ulrich Bröckling 2016, 20). In this context, working on the self involves enhancing the market value of Me-shares. More importantly, the entrepreneurial self indicates an ongoing procedure of transforming and becoming, an activity instead of a static status. As Bröckling suggests, the entrepreneurial self is “a subject in the gerundive” (Bröckling 2016, 20), implying it is something that ought to be continually brought into existence.

Building on scholarship on neoliberalism and its role in subject formation, this article examines how gendered discourses of entrepreneurialism are articulated in Chinese reality dating television. The entrepreneurial ethos permeates the genre through reality TV’s emphasis on competition, self-optimisation and quasi-survival-game formats, in which contestants must strategically present themselves as valuable assets. Within this framework, women in particular are interpellated as self-responsible subjects who must continually engage in self-improvement in order to become desirable and “eligible” partners. They are expected to operate as “Me-Incorporated,” transforming intimate life into a site of entrepreneurial calculation and self-investment.

Methodology

The analysis draws upon qualitative interviews with twenty-three female viewers of *New Blind Date Conference* in Xi’an, China, and a textual analysis of the dating show. To comprehensively assess audiences’ reception of the femininities embodied by the contestants, I purposefully recruited research participants who share similar demographic characteristics with the show’s female contestants. Recruitment criteria included: Chinese women aged eighteen to forty; university students or individuals with higher education; passionate viewers of dating television or those with prior experience watching *New Blind Date Conference*; and residents of Xi’an at the time of the research.

Anthony Giddens (1973) defines educational and technical credentials as core markers of middle-class identity, positioning them as forms of institutionalised cultural capital. Ann Anagnost’s (2008) research likewise identifies the Chinese middle class as

distinguished by higher-than-average income and advanced educational qualifications. In this research, higher education attainment is therefore treated as an indicator of relatively high socioeconomic status, a key contributor to women's reflexive self-fashioning and a prerequisite for entry into the emerging new urban middle class.

I combined snowball and purposive sampling to recruit participants. I initially approached eleven women via social media; as the fieldwork progressed, previous interviewees recommended the remaining twelve. Most participants knew at least one other participant, which fostered a sense of security, an important factor in ethnographic research on television audiences (James Lull 1990) and in studies of relatively sensitive topics such as female identity and mediated intimacy. The recruitment design also facilitated the establishment and maintenance of rapport with participants. During the fieldwork, participants were given the autonomy to choose the meeting venue; and interviews took place in cafés, restaurants and in some cases, participants' offices. Semi-structured interviews lasted between forty minutes and one hour. The guiding topics focused on female subjectivity, emergent forms of femininity embodied by young women in comparison with previous generations and participants' reflections on reality dating shows. Interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. All participants signed informed consent form, and pseudonyms were used to protect their personal information. The overriding principle underpinning the interview was attentive listening, seeing the world through participants' eyes, creating a safe and non-judgmental space, and offering essential intervention when necessary.

The selection of Xi'an as the research site deliberately decentres studies of gender and (post)feminism away from China's first-tier metropolitan cities and its economically advanced southeastern coastal regions, where the majority of empirical research on these topics has been conducted (Jiang Chang and Hailong Ren 2016; Eva Chen 2012). Scholarly engagement with second- and third-tier cities, as well as northwestern inland regions, remains limited. These areas are often perceived as more socially conservative and shaped by land-based worldviews (Shan Huang and Wanning Sun 2021). As the ancient capital for thirteen dynasties, Xi'an possesses a strong cultural identity rooted in imperial history. Since the 1980s, the city has re-emerged as a cultural, industrial, political and tourist hub in China's central-northwest region. At the same time, Xi'an is a major education centre, hosting many universities. This unique blend of antiquity and modernity makes the city a compelling site for examining re-invented traditions of parental involvement in young people's dating and the emergence of the new female subject in Chinese reality dating shows (Lin Song 2020; Pan Wang 2017). Furthermore, a practical consideration informed this choice: the fieldwork coincided with the global Covid-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022, and travel restrictions and quarantine measures made it feasible to collect data in the city where the researcher was based. By examining Xi'an women's interpretations of the new femininities portrayed in *New Blind Date Conference*, this research illuminates how entrepreneurial ideals are interpreted beyond China's major metropolitan centres. In doing so, it contributes to gender and feminist scholarship by foregrounding the situated and spatially diverse ways in which contemporary femininities are negotiated and contested in China's second-tier inland cities.

Textual analysis was conducted on both the interview data and *New Blind Date Conference*. The study examined three seasons, comprising thirty-six episodes in total. Episode selection was guided by a close textual reading of each episode title; I specifically

chose episodes that highlight female contestants' educational qualifications, high income, entrepreneurial ability and overseas study experience in Western countries. The episodes were viewed multiple times throughout the analysis and writing stages. Although both the episode texts and interview data were subjected to textual analysis, they served distinct analytical purposes. In television studies, textual analysis attends to the full range of audiovisual and representational strategies a program employs, including mise-en-scène, editing, sound and visual framing. The episode texts were accordingly analysed to examine how entrepreneurial femininities are discursively constructed across these dimensions within the program's format, while the interview transcriptions were analysed to capture how participants interpreted and negotiated these representations in their everyday lives. Together, the two data sources address complementary analytical questions: the former illuminates the representational patterns of the show, and the latter reveals how female subjectivity is experienced and contested beyond the screen.

The three embodiments of the entrepreneurial subject on *New Blind Date Conference* emerged inductively through repeated engagement with both the episode texts and interview transcriptions. Drawing on transnational postfeminist and neoliberal feminist frameworks, I approached the material with a broad sensitising focus on how femininity is constructed in relation to enterprise, self-improvement and capital accumulation. Recurring themes were grouped into provisional categories and refined through iterative close reading, ultimately crystallising around the performance of eligibility, middle-class aspiration and the self-branding labour demanded of female contestants, each of which is reflected in the three section titles.

Finally, the fieldwork and data analysis were conducted between 2020 and 2022. Although *New Blind Date Conference* is no longer in production, earlier episodes continue to be rebroadcast at 10:00 pm on Sundays on Jiangsu Satellite TV, sustaining its ongoing visibility and cultural relevance. As a pioneering dating programme that foregrounds highly educated urban women and incorporates parental participation on set, its format has been widely adopted and adapted by subsequent reality dating shows. This article therefore intervenes in ongoing debates on entrepreneurial femininity and female subjectivity by examining how these are articulated within this influential sub-genre of reality dating television.

Women behind the masquerade: performing the “little woman” over the “big woman”

Female contestants on *New Blind Date Conference* often showcase their newfound independence and financial autonomy during the self-introduction segment, frequently embodying the unruly woman persona (Kathleen Rowe Karlyn 1995). For example, one female contestant appropriates a proverb typically associated with feminine virtue, “able to manage both the parlour and the kitchen” (上得厅堂, 下得厨房), to articulate her expectations of a male partner (*New Blind Date Conference*, 2021, Season 5, Episode 1). In doing so, she distinguishes herself from the traditionally passive and compliant woman, whose worth and capacity are measured by the contribution she makes to the patriarchal family system, and potentially invites backlash for deviating from normative gender roles. Similarly, another female contestant states, “I hope to bring the one I like home” (*New Blind Date Conference*, 2021, Season 5, Episode 6). This statement reflects how the show

frames female empowerment through the assertion of female agency and personal choice in heterosexual matchmaking, a gesture that further subverts conventional gender norms. Nevertheless, female contestants' self-manifestos have elicited unexpected reactions from male contestants, as reflected in the recurring comment across episodes: "I can't handle her." This marks a pivotal turning point in the dating show, prompting male candidates to withdraw from the blind date process. In response, female contestants often adopt a "little woman" masquerade, presenting themselves in a non-confrontational manner to avoid unsettling male participants.

In heterosexual dating shows, the remark "I can't handle her" functions as part of a discursive formation that reinforces male dominance over women. It stems from stereotypes that categorise women into two superficial but contrasting types: the "big" woman who prioritises independence, individualism and career development, and the "little" woman characterised by traditional "virtues" such as passivity and obedience. On the one hand, "I can't handle her" operates as both an admission and a complaint. When faced with a woman perceived as controllable, male contestants often express heightened excitement and a sense of competition rapidly saturates the studio, yet they rarely assert, "I can handle her," even when such a claim might plausibly apply. On the other hand, the remark functions as a warning issued by men striving to maintain their dominant position in dating. Female contestants are often ostensibly privileged, since their very selection for the show signals a socially recognised standard of excellence and desirability. Yet, they are repeatedly positioned as insufficiently desirable if they fail to secure a match. As a result, these women are expected to don a little woman masquerade to render themselves more eligible; this constitutes a survival strategy employed by savvy and discerning women navigating the heterosexual dating arena.

Participants in this research expressed clear disapproval of the comment "I can't handle her." Lingling, one of the interviewees, watched the episode featuring Wang Tong, a female contestant portrayed as assertive and professionally successful, in which the same comment was directed at her (*New Blind Date Conference*, 2021, Season 5, Episode 4). Lingling stated,

Male candidates frequently express negative reactions towards "big" woman characters, often stating, "I can't control or handle her." This comment is repeatedly replayed as an excerpt by the show. While relationships are inherently personal and preferences vary, some may prefer assertive women while others do not, and some may enjoy exerting control while others do not, the show consistently amplifies men's aversions. In one episode, for instance, four out of five male candidates repeatedly voiced their disapproval of the "big" women. 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 reality dating shows foreground men's privilege to evaluate, classify and compare women. The distinction between "big" and "little" in this context do not necessarily refer to physical size. Rather, they describe gendered personality traits, dispositions and attitudes towards the self. Here, putting on the female masquerade is a gendered art of balance. It entails a particular form of "feminine strength," which Anna Iskra metaphorically describes as being "soft like water" (2023, 661). This notion of feminine strength differs from concepts of women's power or agency. It primarily involves traits such as flexibility, adaptability and gendered awareness, essentially, women's

capability to navigate and “succeed” within the pathways prescribed by the patriarchal gender order (Anna Iskra 2023). Iskra conceptualises the call for “female softening” as a post-feminist sensibility that obscures structural inequalities. Rather than encouraging women to step forward and challenge existing norms, it redirects attention toward their capacity for self-transformation and conformity to established gender expectations.

Written nearly a century ago, Rivière’s (1929/1986) work on female masquerade continues to illuminate the psychological construction of femininity and its subordination within patriarchal structures. In applying this concept to reality dating shows, I propose that what young women tend to conceal is neither a symbolic penis nor the possession of masculinity. Rather, women are compelled to hide their ambition, intellectual demeanour, combative spirit and assertiveness, qualities that characterise the “big” woman but are simultaneously diagnosed as unfavourable in the heterosexual dating market. These characteristics are not inherently masculine, even though they are consistently perceived as unfeminine. The impact of the gendered technology of the self on women is particularly striking in this regard. Women find themselves caught in a perpetual game of hide-and-seek: they are encouraged to pursue self-actualisation by embracing the attributes of the “big” woman, while simultaneously mastering the art of concealing these very traits to conform to heterosexual dating norms. The additional labour of self-fashioning imposed on women is both gendered and relentless.

Furthermore, Lingling observed that *New Blind Date Conference* serves as a pedagogical platform, encouraging contemporary women to adopt traditional feminine roles and avoid being perceived as “uncontrollable” by men. This performance of gendered softening is not merely a social script; it can be read as entrepreneurial. By donning the “little woman” masquerade, female contestants consciously modulate their attitudes and dispositions to make themselves more appealing to potential partners, mirroring the way entrepreneurs adapt products or services to meet market demands. It also constitutes a deliberate act of self-optimisation, a micro-level strategy to enhance one’s position in a competitive dating market. By strategically minimising risk while maximising relational returns, the gendered performance of softening reflects the same logic as the $1 + 1 > 2$ dating model, which the following section elaborates.

The $1 + 1 > 2$ dating model and middle-class imaginary on reality dating television

In the 2000s, female contestants on Chinese reality dating television were subjected to misogynistic criticism for being portrayed as pathological and shamelessly materialistic. They were often depicted as setting financial thresholds for men as a prerequisite for dating, as illustrated by *Take Me Out* (非诚勿扰) (2010) (Wang 2017; Jing Wu 2012). Well-known quotes include: “I would rather weep in a BMW than smile on the back of a bicycle.” and “I will not consider dating anyone whose monthly salary falls below RMB 200,000.” These quotes framed such women as “the primary carriers” of the moral panic of modernity in post-socialist China (Wu 2012, 232). Dating shows of that era primarily depicted heterosexual matchmaking as an exchange of men’s socio-economic resources for women’s physical attractiveness, reproductive capacity and homemaking abilities. However, with rising female educational attainment and employment rates, alongside the wider dissemination of feminist ideas across the popular media sphere, this traditional exchange model has been increasingly challenged. On *New Blind Date Conference*, dating

is reframed through an entrepreneurial $1 + 1 > 2$ model that emphasises strategic self-optimisation and mutual enhancement.

The $1 + 1 > 2$ model, frequently referenced by both dating show contestants and viewers when discussing their expectations of dating and relationships, refers to a partnership ideal that generates greater value than the sum of its individual parts. This model conceptualises dating or marriage as a mutually beneficial arrangement in which both individuals seek to enhance each other's personal, emotional or socioeconomic well-being, maximising gains while minimising potential harm. Underlying this expectation is a shared middle-class aspiration that sustains the cultivation of the entrepreneurial self in contemporary China. Dating show viewers highlighted the bourgeois taste embodied by contestants, which resonates with a broader middle-class imaginary. Contestants represent themselves as individuals who relish life's pleasures, engaging in activities such as skiing, wine tasting, fitness and international travel. When asked about contestants' motivations for participating in the show, viewers assert that their glamorous appearances, educational backgrounds and middle-class identities afford them confidence and courage, setting them apart from "ordinary" individuals.

The interviewee, Xin, has been a devoted, knowledgeable and discerning viewer of reality dating shows throughout her twenties and early thirties. She reflected on a notable shift in her attitude toward these shows over time. Before marriage, she was enthusiastic about dating television, viewing it as educational. "I would think about how to improve myself and set standards for men based on my own assets while watching," she explained. After marriage, however, Xin came to regard dating shows as little more than entertainment, something to critique or simply leave on in the background to pass the time.

Xin also compared *Take Me Out* with *New Blind Date Conference*. She described the former as "extremely cruel and realistic" in its portrayal of mate selection and competition, while viewing the latter as progressive for incorporating parental participation on set and showcasing contemporary "brilliant young women." Xin found *Take Me Out* particularly harsh given the high expectations that female contestants held for prospective partners, a point brought into sharp relief when she recalled seeing a male friend she considered impressive and accomplished rejected by every woman on the show. Xin then shared her observations about the invisible hierarchy that structures the world of reality dating shows.

If a male candidate is from Taiwan or is a foreigner, his likelihood of being chosen exceeds 90%. If he comes from a rural area, however, his chances drop to nearly zero. Similarly, if he is working-class, 90% of female contestants are unlikely to consider him as a viable match, whereas if he is middle-class, his chances of finding a partner on the show rise to over 50%.

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 show, stating, "I define myself as an ordinary person (一般人). Those who appear on reality dating shows are at a higher level than us ordinary people." Xin's observation reveals the implicit norms governing the recruitment and selection of dating show contestants. From *Take Me Out* to *New Blind Date Conference*, urban and middle-class culture has come to dominate mainstream media representation. Reality television intervenes in people's lives with "an unstated impetus" to showcase an array of middle-class lifestyles (Laurie

Ouellette and James Hay 2008, 6). In post-socialist China, the middle-class imaginary has been largely shaped by Western and cosmopolitan culture, as evidenced by the bourgeois tastes and hobbies of dating contestants. Conversely, individuals from rural and underdeveloped areas, along with the poor and the working class, have been afforded considerably less visibility in entertainment-oriented television.

Yu, one of the interviewees, highlighted the tendency for the poor and working class to be subjected to humiliation in mass media, particularly with regard to intelligence, ethical standards and moral character. Yu argued,

It is increasingly hard to find characters portrayed positively despite their poverty in contemporary Chinese television dramas. In *Ode to Joy* (欢乐颂), for instance, representation tends to favour the wealthy while depicting the poor in a negative light. Poor girls are often depicted as unintelligent, naïve troublemakers unable to escape from family trauma, with poverty almost treated as their original sin. Wealthy girls, by contrast, are depicted as broad-minded, successful in careers and relationships, kind, generous, quick-witted and morally upright.

Yu, 26, PhD student

In contrast to the negative portrayal of working-class individuals in popular TV dramas, *New Blind Date Conference* 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 imaginary. The dating stage is dominated by an urban, cosmopolitan identity and lifestyles that privilege physical appearance, wealth and elitism. In this context, the middle-class imaginary indicates an updated constellation of aesthetics, cultural capital and modes of dress 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 $1 + 1 > 2$ dating model.

“Don’t put all your eggs in one basket:” the unpaid labour of self-branding

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

On reality dating television, contestants are expected to perceive themselves as flexible commodities with unique branded personas and to 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 (Tom Peters 1997). The relationship between reality television, self-branding and exhibitionism has received considerable scholarly attention. According to Misha Kavka, reality shows are increasingly sensationalist and “packed to the rafters with exhibitionists” (2014, 54). John Caldwell describes televisual exhibitionism as “a stylising performance” and “a presentational attitude, a display of knowing exhibitionism” (John Caldwell 2020, 708). Building on this, Misha Kavka (2014) suggests that gender on reality television is not merely performed but flaunted.

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 presenting them within polished, romanticised narratives designed to evoke the audience's longing for love and intimacy. The show's production team creates introduction videos for each participant, covering basic information such as age, occupation, place of residence, hobbies, family background and relationship history. These videos are meticulously curated, featuring candidates in exquisite outfits and makeup, filmed at carefully selected stylish locations that convey a cosmopolitan aesthetic and bourgeois taste. Marwick (2013, 122) uses "aspirational production" to characterise attention-seeking practices on social media, wherein micro-celebrities endeavour to elevate their status by emulating celebrities. Reflecting this phenomenon, candidates in their introduction videos are often depicted in a high-status light, portrayed as versatile, positive and glamorous world travellers, fashionistas, hip-hop dancers and more. This portrayal aligns with the show's broader aim of cultivating an aspirational atmosphere and captivating audiences with idealised images of love and success.

Dating candidates are bound by an implicit contract with reality dating TV that obliges them to maintain their appearances, dress well, accept guidance and harsh comments from dating coaches, and present themselves in a media-savvy and commercially appealing manner. They are compelled to invest in their participation while embracing the so-called success or failure as their own responsibility. Given the popularity of *New Blind Date Conference*, candidates are aware that their performance will be seen by a national audience, an exposure they perceive as an honour and a privilege. They are also required to incorporate brand mentions subtly into their participation through product placement. For instance, contestants are often shown drinking a branded beverage within the storyline to promote the show's title sponsors. One prominent sponsor, the liquor brand *Langpai Tequ*, is highlighted in each episode as contestants recite its features and benefits and recommend it for wedding celebrations. Using participants as labour to advertise products for corporations is a normalised strategy in the television industry. Although contestants receive payment for appearing on the show, their performative labour is nonetheless exploited through on-screen authenticity deployed to serve corporate sponsors, with the majority of commercial benefits accruing to the brand rather than the participants themselves.

Interviewees also highlighted motivations for contestants beyond finding a partner. They emphasised contestants' entrepreneurial awareness and mindset. From the viewer's standpoint, contestants aim to promote themselves, garner attention and secure online fame, which is a valuable currency that can be exchanged for other resources. Yuan, one of the interviewees, observed a positive correlation between intelligence and physical appearance, suggesting that it influences one's likelihood of entering the media sphere. As Yuan noted, "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 have already internalised market logic as a lens through which to view and evaluate dating candidates on reality TV. Yuan's observation 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 weigh the advantages and disadvantages of appearing on the show, strategically highlighting their strengths while concealing weaknesses to craft a positive persona, and preparing contingency plans accordingly. A successful match is advantageous, but even without one, they gain visibility among viewers who are also seeking partners and leverage the show's platform to grow their social media profiles and advance their careers, particularly in professions where self-branding is a necessary strategy. Contestants are thus portrayed as self-reliant, strategic and autonomous individuals who follow the entrepreneurial tactic of "not putting all your eggs in one basket," exemplifying the approach of maximising gains and minimising risks.

Conclusion

This article has examined the entrepreneurial femininities embodied by female contestants on *New Blind Date Conference* and argued that reality dating shows (re)frame femininity and heterosexual intimacy in contemporary China through the intertwined mechanisms of gendered softening, middle-class aspiration and entrepreneurial selfhood. Drawing on interviews with twenty-three viewers and a textual analysis of the show's content, I have shown that female contestants navigate a tension between displaying independence, ambition, personal choice on the one hand, and adopting a "little woman" masquerade to align with male expectations and heteronormative norms on the other. The show foregrounds a middle-class imaginary, privileging cosmopolitan tastes and lifestyles while marginalising rural and working-class identities. Participation in reality dating television also entails self-branding labour, engagement in attention-seeking practices and strategic self-promotion to gain visibility and online fame. Together, these three themes constitute the gendered discourses of entrepreneurialism in Chinese reality dating television, through which female contestants manage their dispositions and performances of femininity in accordance with an entrepreneurial ethos.

Theoretically, this article advances scholarship on entrepreneurial femininities and post-feminism by articulating a transnational, non-Western perspective. It extends existing frameworks of the entrepreneurial self and post-feminist sensibilities into the Chinese context, demonstrating how female subjectivities are shaped by both neoliberal logics and culturally specific family-oriented norms. The article argues that a uniquely Chinese entrepreneurial subject, exemplified by dating show contestants, is simultaneously individualised and self-responsible. By integrating the entrepreneurial self, post-feminist discourse and post-socialist historical legacies, including the One-Child Policy, the Four-Selves Spirit Campaign and neoliberal transformation, this article offers a nuanced lens for understanding gendered subject formation in contemporary China.

This study is not without limitations. Methodologically, it relied on textual analysis of the dating show and audience reception data, enabling close examination of the performative and mediated dimensions of entrepreneurial femininity and how female viewers

interpret these gendered performances. However, without interviewing dating show producers or contestants, it cannot fully account for the intentions and behind-the-scenes decisions that collectively shape these performances. Future research could incorporate interviews with relevant stakeholders, alongside ethnographic or longitudinal approaches, to explore how entrepreneurial sensibilities are embodied and negotiated in mediated contexts.

The entrepreneurial subject portrayed on *New Blind Date Conference* enriches understanding of how neoliberalism constructs women as entrepreneurial actors across multiple dimensions of life. Reality dating television provides a platform where discourses of gender performance, self-representation and the economy of visibility intersect. These elements are crucial in validating and normalising practices of self-branding and infusing representations of femininity with neoliberal ideologies. While post-feminist rhetoric reframes collective feminist struggles as matters of self-empowerment and personal choice, it simultaneously foregrounds the entrepreneurial woman who cultivates a self-brand as though managing a corporation. In post-socialist China, the individualised family unit is assembled to collectively respond to the neoliberal construction of individualism, engage with middle-class aspirations and navigate increasingly entrenched social hierarchies.

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This research has been approved by the City St George's, University of London Department of Sociology research ethics committee with the Ref: ETH1920-052.

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