From the 'right' choices to the 'right' dispositions: The subjective and psychological construction of postfeminism in Chinese reality dating shows

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Introduction

Research into postfeminism in the early nineties has focused on the individualistic, consumption-oriented, self-empowering female subject and the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist narratives[1]. Postfeminism has been transformed into a psychological discursive strategy by cultivating the 'right' kinds of dispositions, such as confidence, resilience, positivity, and optimism[2]. Illuminated by the current and ongoing "luminosity and popularity" of feminism in popular culture, postfeminism has intensified its hold over the contemporary society and exerts disciplinary power as "an always available hegemonic response to feminism"[3]. Understanding postfeminism as a set of contradictory discourses which "respond to, disavow, and individualise feminist politics", this chapter explores the subjective and psychological construction of postfeminism in contemporary Chinese reality dating shows[4]. The data is derived from textual analysis of *New*

[1] Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, London, Sage, 2009; Rosalind Gill, *Postfeminist Media Culture*, in "European Journal of Cultural Studies", 2007, no. 2, pp. 147-166.

[2] Rosalind Gill, *The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years on*, in "European Journal of Cultural Studies", 2017, no. 6, pp. 606-626; Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020; Shani Orgad, Rosalind Gill, *Confidence Culture*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2022.

[3] Orgad, Gill, *Confidence Culture*, p. 145; Gill, *The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism*; Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, New York and London, New York University Press, 2001, p. 88.

[4] Catherine McDermott, *Feel-Bad Postfeminism: Impasse, Resilience and Female Subjectivity in Popular Culture*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, p. 3.

Matchmaking Conference (xin xiangqin dahui) produced by Jiangsu Satellite TV since 2019 with a focus on the representation of femininity and conversations about female subjectivity and intimate relationships on the show. This chapter asks: What kinds of *dispositions*[5] do reality dating shows expect female participants to project? In what way are the 'right' dispositions related to postfeminist discourses in post-socialist China?

New Matchmaking Conference is a reality dating show dedicated to heterosexual matchmaking. In the Chinese language, *xiangqin* means "matchmaking" or "setting up blind dates". The term describes the process by which a female and a male are introduced to each other by a third party to make a match. *Xiangqin* is historically and traditionally seen as a "prelude to marriage"[6]. In contemporary China, *xiangqin* has been adopted by dating practices such as matchmaking agencies, mobile dating applications, and dating TV. *Xiangqin* has been transformed from a marriage practice to an economic activity which is "less marriage-oriented, less formal, more entertainment-driven and self-dominated", as illustrated by *New Matchmaking Conference*[7].

New Matchmaking Conference has three features. It firstly focuses on dating candidates who are urban and highly educated. The female candidates are presented as postfeminist subjects who are empowered by their only daughter status, higher education received at Euro-American universities, and their ability to personify the current femininity ideal in contemporary China. This is characterised by glamourous appearance, slender figure, pale skin tone, and remarkable eyes. The show, secondly, adopts a game show format with a competitive atmosphere. Candidates are supposed to compete with others to win the matchmaking 'game'.[8] Thirdly, the show follows a makeover paradigm that imposes certain expectations on female candidates, requiring them to embody an upgraded feminine disposition. This entails striking a balance between a modern and independent sense of self and the traditional concept of the dependent "little woman".

[5] In this chapter, disposition is an umbrella term of a person's character, behaviour, and gender performance. It also contains aspects of affect, referring to the way people feel and make other people feel.

[6] Pan Wang, *The cultural economy of Xiangqin: an analysis of the "intimate business" on Chinese television, date-renting sites and mobile phones*, in "Continuum", 2022, no. 4, pp. 546-561: 547.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 549.

[8] Xintong Jia, *Intimate Activism and A Chinese Postfeminist Sensibility: Female Viewers' Responses to Reality Dating Shows*, in Elisabeth Engebretsen, Jinyan Zeng (eds.), *Feminist Activism in Post-2010 China*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023.

Previous research into dating TV has mainly focused on aspects of gender performance and authenticity, feminist sensibilities, dating and marriage norms, soft power, and the resurgence of matchmaking traditions.[9] This chapter focuses on the subjective and psychological construction of postfeminism in Chinese reality dating shows and how dating shows offer a way of performing, being, feeling, and thinking about female subjectivity. The chapter seeks to contribute to the literature on the interrogation of how postfeminism is lived, represented, and projected by contemporary Chinese women.

Guidelines for selfhood in reality dating shows

Reality TV has opened up new public domains for the performance, representation, and interrogation of individuals' "extraordinary subjectivity" via evaluating, rewarding, and advising the scenarios of the self[10]. 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[11]. Reality dating TV contains the format of makeover TV via guiding female candidates to perform the 'right' and 'proper' disposition in a blind date.

The "makeover takeover" with an explicit target on women has dominated reality TV[12]. The transformation narrative in makeover TV offers audiences with refreshing and cheerful spectacles as the closing sequence, leaving a message suggesting "Follow the show's guidelines, you can do this too". In this respect, self-transformation not only serves for the moment of spectacular makeover as a visual splendour but also suggests women to take on this approach as a response and a solution to the dilemmas, confusion, and precarity of their lives.

[9] Donna Chu, *An (un)romantic journey: Authentic performance in a Chinese dating show*, in "Global Media and China", 2020, no. 1, pp. 40-54; Wei Luo, Zhen Sun, *Are You the One? China's TV dating shows and the Sheng Nv's predicament*, in "Feminist Media Studies", 2015, no. 2, pp. 239-256; Pan Wang, *Inventing traditions: Television dating shows in the People's Republic of China*, in "Media, Culture & Society", 2017, no. 4, pp. 504-519.

[10] Jon Dovey, *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television*, London, Pluto, 2000, p. 4.

[11] Rosalind Gill, *Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility*, in "European Journal of Cultural Studies", 2007, no. 2, pp. 147-166: 156; Helen Wood, Beverley Skeggs, *Notes on ethical scenarios of self on British reality TV*, in "Feminist Media Studies", 2004, no. 2, pp. 205-208.

[12] Rachel Moseley, *Makeover takeover on British television*, in "Screen", 2000, no. 3, pp. 299-314: 299.

The Chinese makeover show *You Are So Beautiful* (Mango TV, 2019) demonstrates how reality TV intervenes in subject-making with a preoccupation with women. It recruited a group of claimed to be ordinary women who were identified as flawed and problematic, demanding both professional rescue and self-transformation. On the show, these women were evaluated, mocked, and even humiliated by five 'experts' in the fields of appearance management, fashion style, interior design, eating habits, and intimate relationships. 'Experts' firstly diagnosed and informed them about their problems – advising what knowledge and skills they should master and develop. 'Experts' then actively encouraged these women to engage in self-transformation until they represented the 'right' dispositions – possessing proper middle-class taste and aesthetics and feeling confident about themselves.

This profoundly classed and gendered self has been made through consciousness-raising and lifestyle improvement in reality TV. Slogans of "being yourself", "making a better self", and "searching for a real self" are ubiquitous in postfeminist culture. They have been appropriated by reality TV to encourage people to take control of their lives by making lifestyle choices in pursuit of happiness and fulfilment. The self is "a reflexive project" which develops from the past to an expected future and the individual is responsible for the "trajectory of development"[13]. For Giddens, "we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves"[14]. Giddens suggests that "in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose"[15]. An individual's decision to adopt specific daily routine is an expression of self-identity – it is not only about what to wear, how to behave, and what to think but also whom to become. Nevertheless, Giddens did not specify how gendered this process is – as if projects of selfhood are evenly spread or required.

In postfeminist media culture, *personal choice* has been packaged with the idea of pleasing oneself, within which women are positioned as autonomous subjects who can empower themselves via catering to the narrow standard of femininity. On dating TV, women's engagement in gender performance is seen as a personal choice instead of a requirement of patriarchal culture. Women's

[13] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 75.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 75.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

choice to engage in self-transformation is seen as "an individualised responsibility" and an efficient solution to the personal plight, which is counter to the idea of personal-as-political[16]. Work on the self has not only been taken as "the quest for a path" and "the search for authenticity" but also has been offered as "an antidote to the anxiety-provoking uncertainties of a new economic and social order"[17]. This chapter thus examines the makeover paradigm of femininity in *New Matchmaking Conference* with a focus on the affective and psychological dimension of postfeminism. This chapter reveals how this dating show offers guidelines and advice on the 'right' dispositions which women should embody in order to *become* the eligible and proper dating partner in heterosexual relationships.

The becoming of a little woman

New Matchmaking Conference has recruited a group of urban and highly educated young women as dating candidates. These women featured in glamorous appearance and independent character. Zhao Qi is a female candidate in the fifth season. Qi is typical having a fit slim figure and stunning appearance. She revealed her nickname to be "big brother Qi". She bluntly stated that she has an aggressive personality and works exceptionally hard. Qi also publicly disagreed with the conventional gender division of labour, summed up by the norm, "men outside the home, women inside". Wang Tong is another female candidate in the fourth season. She introduced herself as holding a master's degree in finance from the UK and being able to earn well. Tong encouraged girls to invest in themselves physically and psychologically. Tong also advised that if she is attracted to someone, she would actively approach him, rather than waiting to be approached.

Ironically, most male candidates responded negatively after hearing these views. Men repeatedly made comments like: "I can't handle or control her"; "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

[16] Wood, Skeggs, *Notes on ethical scenarios of self*, p. 206.
[17] Orgad, Gill, *Confidence Culture*, p. 12.

thing a woman is supposed to have". Having expressed these points of view, the male candidates quit the competition, not wishing to be matched with the female candidates. Female candidates were not told what the male candidates said about them until the show broadcasts in the show format. Qi and Tong did notice some candidates leaving the matchmaking selection process. They became upset and awkward standing centre-stage, not knowing what to say or how to behave. The ambience was made even more disturbing by the agitated background music that simulates a heartbeat and expressions of anger and confusion from spectators on the set.

At that moment, either the host or an older celebrity who act as the dating expert broke the ice by giving in effect a public lecture on "How a woman is supposed to behave on a dating show?". The host and the celebrity imparted their lecture on femininity by suggesting that women showed different aspects of themselves in front of different men. A woman should become a little girl when she falls in love. Having received the tutorial on how to represent a culturally constructed and idealised femininity, Qi and Tong became grateful and willing pupils who were able to promote their "womanly" dispositions on the dating show. Qi added that her closest friends thought she was quite stupid, neither independent nor aggressive. Qi's cousin said that Qi is girly (*ruan meizi*) at home. Likewise, Tong revealed that she will *become* very sweet and very clingy in heterosexual relationships.

The transformations of Qi and Tong's attitude toward self-representation are typical of contemporary reality dating shows, showing how dating shows not only provide matchmaking opportunities but also contain mechanisms for transforming candidates to possess, perform, and represent the 'right' and 'proper' gendered self to *become* an eligible, acceptable, favourable, and approachable dating candidate on the show.

The concept of becoming highlights constant transformation and flexibility. Gender is "as much as a process as a fixed state"[18]. Gender is not merely expressed; it is enacted and performed. Gender is unstable – it is being continually produced and reproduced. Deleuze and Guattari 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

[18] Amy Wharton, *The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to Theory and Research*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 7.

becoming-woman that produces the universal girl"[19]. The quote is significant in the way that it breaks the linear understanding of the development of a girl's track of development, which is not from a girl to a woman. The female gender has been constructed as flexible, changeable, and knowing. It stresses the self-fashioning work of endless becoming which shapes a female's relationship with herself. The female self is seen as an uncompleted project.

On the dating show, women were strongly encouraged to demonstrate both their independence as contemporary citizens and their dependence on men as approachable partners. For women, it is important to master the skills required for self-transformation conditional on setting. They are expected to show the 'right' dispositions on a blind date – confident but not aggressive, independent but not dictatorial. The contradictory and invisible requirements for women are reflected on the figure of "cool girl", who conforms to traditional feminine passivity and beauty norms, and elaborately conceals the knowingness simultaneously[20]. The cool girl image signifies the transformation from the self-monitoring subject that Bridget Jones enacts to a knowing postfeminist persona that highlights agency, defiance, and enjoyment. Female candidates not only conform to traditional feminine passivity and beauty norms, but they are also eager to demonstrate their independent personality and the ability to survive in society. However, confronted by the potential threat and fear of not being chosen by a male counterpart on a dating show, women have to carefully conceal their sharpness and demonstrate a girly and vulnerable persona.

Dating shows work as a device to manage the performance and representation of female subjectivity. Employing a series of regulatory and systematic modes, dating shows have promoted and moulded a newly upgraded form of feminine subject – a woman who can swiftly switch to being a "big woman" whilst simultaneously performing as a "little woman". Being a big woman is a response to the competitive social environment and intensifying precarity after the Covid-19 pandemic and the deepening inequalities. Performing a little woman is a reaction to the gendered requirement and expectations for women in patriarchal and heterosexual relationships. Women have to navigate carefully, traversing between the dualism of gender, put on and take off the female masquerade, and never ceasing to self-regulate and self-transform, as well as constantly becoming.

[19] Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1987, p. 277.

[20] McDermott, *Feel-Bad Postfeminism*, p. 40.

Conclusion

This chapter analysed how reality dating shows reframe female gendered subjectivity by promoting a newly upgraded female subject for matchmaking events. Female candidates are required to turn inward, observe their mentality and psyches, and work on the self to represent themselves as a knowing subject who is capable of being an independent individual but also capable of performing an approachable little woman with an "aesthetically pleasing manner"[21]. Along with its competition game show format, *New Matchmaking Conference* has updated the makeover paradigm of promoting the gendered expectations for women to perform multiple characters, which are featured as progressive but not disruptive, independent but not aggressive, modern whilst also traditional.

The makeover paradigm on reality dating shows is typical in the requirements for women to switch from being a big woman for herself to performing as a little woman for dating male partners. No matter how intelligent the woman is, she must adjust herself to fit into the patterns of heterosexual matchmaking conventions, which require women to turn inward and self-disclose her vulnerability and stupidity in a gendered savvy way. The transformation of female candidates in reality dating shows provides a new way to understand postfeminist sensibility in the context of contemporary China. Female candidates on dating shows are relatively privileged. They are empowered by urban citizenship, higher educational attainment levels, and financial independence. However, the empowered status has made male candidates feel threatened and their masculinity undermined. Within a patriarchal matchmaking system, women are required to work on the self to perform an aestheticised version of postfeminist sensibility and carefully conceal their sharpness and gumption with a little woman's masquerade.

[21] Orgad, Gill, *Confidence Culture*, p. 161.