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**“WOMEN CAN BE YOUNG AT ANY AGE”:
A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE REALITY SHOW SISTERS WHO MAKE WAVES**

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Xiaoxu Zhang

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Abstract

The thesis aims to gain insight into the discourses used in the Chinese reality show *Sisters Who Make Waves*. The show appears to be China's first show featuring middle-aged female celebrities as participants. These celebrities explicitly seek to expand the discourse of what is possible for older women. In the context of traditional constructs of middle-aged female identities in China, this presents the possibility of a "new identity" for women in this age bracket. Therefore, this thesis wants to understand how the reality show constructed the potential new identity for middle-aged Chinese women, and to examine if the show transferred the coherent information to its claimed purpose.

To address these aims, a discourse analysis of a whole season of *Sisters Who Make Waves*, supported by semiotic analysis of some of the visual content of the show, was performed to 1) identify the discourses constructing age and gender for Chinese women and 2) the linguistic strategies used by these middle-aged celebrities in the show with a focus on the subject positions constructed in their talk, and how the non-celebrity ordinary female audience was invited to understand themselves through these subject positions. I adopted FDA as my main research method to understand how the reality show constructed middle-aged women's subjectivity. I also applied DP's discursive devices/tools to examine how the rhetorical strategies used in the show invite the female audience to take the subject positions affectively.

Four main discourses are described, these are, "age is a problem for women", "age is only a problem if you let it", "embrace knock-backs as they make you stronger", and "you can only rely on you". These discourses reframed age as an advantage for women; middle age could not be a problem if women adopted a young mindset and self-confidence; middle-aged women could be beautiful if they exerted constant effort. These discourses also created ideal subject positions of

confident women, young mindset women, forever young women, fighting sheroes, truly brave women, relentlessly positive women, independent women, and family-oriented women. The analysis identified the repeatedly used rhetorical strategies that affectively addressed the female audience to take these subject positions. Women who are invited may feel empowered and devote themselves to meeting the ideals, but they are likely to self-blame for failing to achieve these goals.

In the context of stigmatized identities about older women, these “sisters” make waves to provide potentially empowering ways for older women to think about themselves. However, this potential is often negated through individualist discourses that ignore social inequalities.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In June 2020, the reality show *Sisters Who Make Waves* (乘风破浪的姐姐) became popular all over China without any pre-publicity. For a time, discussions about the show swept the most influential Chinese-language websites, and the images of the female celebrities participating in the show could be seen across China. According to the data released by South China Morning Post, *Sisters Who Make Waves* received 370 million views within three days after its premiere aired on Mango TV, the official video platform (Zhang, 2020). This reality show, as the name suggests, is about women. It invited middle-aged female celebrities as participants, which is likely the first reality show in China shed light on that age cohort. Middle-aged women are usually not featured in the entertainment industry, especially in China, because their stereotypical image does not conform to contemporary cultural trends.

In Chinese culture, women over 30 can be roughly categorized as middle-aged. Due to social stereotypes and gender inequalities, women tend to experience enormous social pressures after turning 30s. For example, unmarried women in their 30s and above are stigmatized as “leftover women” (To, 2015), implying their unfavourable status in the marriage market; the term “dama” (大妈) is used to disparage middle-aged women, which literally means “big mother”, referring to middle-aged or older women whose fashion styles and mannerisms are outdated (Huang, 2021). In addition, the identity of middle-aged women is also related to “overweight”, “ignorant”, “penny-wise but pound foolish”, “set in life”, and “housewives” (Ho, 2007, pp.249-250). Therefore, it seems that the cultural stereotypes of older women tend to have a negative impact on Chinese women, especially in contemporary China, where youthful beauty is highlighted. Chinese contemporary culture is also known as the era of face-judging (看脸时代). In this era, an attractive appearance is considered one of women’s most important values, through

which women gain more social power and numerous benefits (Ma, 2022). Conversely, age is likely to decline the socially constructed beauty standard, making it harder for middle-aged women to achieve the ideal.

Against the background of the devaluation of middle-aged women, *Sisters Who Make Waves* shouted its affective slogan, “life begins at thirty; youth is never costly” (三十而骊, 青春归位), claiming that its purpose is to smash age stereotypes and encourage middle-aged women to pursue dreams, which might imply that the show intends to construct new identities for older women. This thesis wants to understand what these identities are and whether the show ultimately achieves its stated purposes.

To achieve this aim, the thesis locates *Sisters Who Make Waves* within a postfeminist sensibility, as early analysis of the show identified a range of postfeminist tropes. Chapter 1, therefore, reviews the literature reflecting on the development of post-feminism and the impact of postfeminist media discourse on female subjectivity. This chapter contains five sections: first, I elaborate on the six elements of Postfeminist sensibility identified by Rosalind Gill (2007a) and review past studies that reflect these elements; second, I draw attention to the impact of postfeminist sensibility on ageing women, especially in the celebrity culture; then I discuss postfeminist sensibility’s transnational feature and review the studies based on non-white women in different countries; next, I focus on the development of postfeminist sensibility in modern China and how it shapes Chinese women's subjectivity in China’s neoliberal and consumerist cultures; I finish with my research aims and the reasons I chose the research subject.

Postfeminist Sensibility

Postfeminist sensibility is a term coined by Rosalind Gill, a scholar who contributed significantly to the field of gender and media studies, to describe a particular kind of media culture that circulated an understanding of ideal femininity that has now become part of everyday understanding in many parts of the world. In this section, I review the literature on post-feminism, describing six elements of postfeminist sensibility and outlining its importance for analysing contemporary Chinese media aimed at a female audience.

The term post-feminism has been used frequently in both academia and media since the 1990s (Kavka, 2002). However, the definition of this term in academia is unclear as its meaning can vary for different people. Gill and Scharff (2011) suggested that post-feminism can be applied in four broad domains, including post-feminism as an epistemological position within feminism; a historical shift after Second Wave feminism; a backlash against feminism; and a sensibility characterising significant parts of contemporary culture, such as media products that can be characterised as a “postfeminist media culture” (p.98). In this thesis, the concept of post-feminism mainly employs the meaning of postfeminist sensibility, coined by Gill (2007a) as the thesis highlights the power of postfeminist sensibility as a media address or set of ideas circulating in contemporary media that shapes women’s understandings of their subjectivity. It means that Postfeminist sensibility affects women’s internal feelings about themselves, or how women make sense of themselves, and thus how they behave accordingly. For example, postfeminist discourses may construct ideal femininity as a work on slim body, and affected women tend to approach the ideal femininity by taking multiple actions to lose weight.

Rosalind Gill (2007a) outlined the main themes of a postfeminist sensibility in her pioneering work, which, she argued, are often reflected in contemporary media culture through

discourse and visual information. These themes include: femininity as a bodily property, reflected in contemporary media's obsession with female bodies; the shift from sex object to desiring sexual subject, in which women actively present themselves as sexual subjects from a male gaze; individualism, choice and empowerment, a theme emphasises contemporary media culture's attribution of women's practices of achieving ideal femininity to their own choices, and then inspires women through empowerment discourses; the importance of self-surveillance and self-discipline, that is, women actively self-discipline to approach ideal femininity without any external surveillance; a makeover paradigm, a theme that reflects contemporary media's assumptions that women are naturally flawed, and they need to change themselves to be miraculously transformed; and the reassertion of sexual difference, a theme legitimises the resurgence of patriarchy and sexual difference (Gill, 2007a). However, these themes do not stand alone but often interact with each other. Below, I will elaborate on these themes as each is central to a postfeminist media culture.

Femininity as a Bodily Property

Postfeminist sensibility defines femininity as a bodily property. In this definition, women's bodies are seen as the embodiment of their qualities. Gill especially addressed postfeminist media culture and its obsessional preoccupation with women's bodies (Gill, 2007a). Compared with male bodies, female bodies are more commonly presented in mass media, and female bodies are not only evaluated by men but also scrutinised by women. Although Gill identified this theme over 15 years ago, and much has changed in media content, the main premise of a preoccupation with women's bodies still stands. For example, Riley et al. (2022) argued that the body is a central element in contemporary media through which women have a sense of worth and identity. Postfeminist discourse in the media often associates women's power and success with their appearance; "better appearance" tends to lead to a higher power and greater chances of success.

Consequently, improving appearance is seen as a means for women to achieve a better life (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006). The “better appearance” measure reflects how close a woman’s appearance is to socially constructed beauty standards. While these standards, such as thinness, are often promoted and perpetuated by female celebrities through their bodies in various forms of media. Therefore, celebrity culture is not just a form of entertainment; it can reinforce and change gendered practices and expectations (Evans & Riley, 2013).

However, achieving beauty standards is never easy; these standards have become more demanding over time. For example, Wolf (2002) tracked a consistent reduction in the average body weight of American models over time, from 8 per cent less than the average American woman to 23 per cent less. Ordinary women affected by these narrow beauty standards try to approach the ideal via a wide range of beauty practices. It is not uncommon for women to restrict their diet to lose weight. Still, the immaculate figures presented by female celebrities in the media can be an impossible mission, and the comparison often brings frustration and helplessness to ordinary women (Evans & Riley, 2013). Women are likely to think they eat too much, or they are too fat. The incapable feeling leads to self-blaming or more obsession with controlling their bodies. For example, in her book *The Beauty Myth* (2002), Naomi Wolf discussed the normalisation of hunger among young women and the disproportionated female gender in patients who suffer eating disorders, which she connects with the contemporary media culture. The focus on bodily property that intensifies women’s body image concerns, also connects to the idea that women should not only be able to work on their appearance but to transform their appearance. This links to another element of postfeminist sensibility — the makeover paradigm.

Makeover Paradigm

Makeover paradigm is another element of Postfeminist sensibility; it relates to the rising trend in makeover TV shows (Gill, 2007a). This theme is based on the belief that women are naturally flawed in some way, so they need to change their old routines and adopt a new lifestyle or mindset for miracle transformations. Makeover shows primarily target the female audience with various topics, such as relationships, lifestyles, fashion, rejuvenation, etc. Among them, body transformation is the commonly seen genre. Makeover shows often focus on “helping” ordinary people to approach celebrity-like perfection. According to Riley et al. (2022), makeover shows celebrated individual transformation through better consumption and appearance work, which was tied to expectations of psychological improvements, such as increased self-esteem. For example, the plastic surgery makeover show, *Extreme Makeover* claimed that they changed the participant Amy’s life and transformed her from a shy person into a confident version after post-makeover. “The makeover thus answered Amy’s cry for recognition by inscribing intelligibility onto her body through large breasts, a bright smile, and a pert nose” (Weber, 2009, p.2). Another makeover show, *Ten Years Younger*, focuses on transforming older women or ageing female bodies. The show aimed to reconstruct femininity for those women and enhance their self-esteem through surgery, dentistry, makeup, and fashion advice (Tincknell, 2011). However, academia has been critical of these makeover shows. For example, Wearing (2007) argued that rather than a natural process, ageing was pathologised and disavowed in postfeminist media culture, so ageing was not inevitable but an individual choice, the rejuvenation of the body was a necessary cure. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006) also criticised that makeover shows tried to normalise cosmetic surgery as a means for ordinary women to approach the ideal.

Riley et al.' (2022) study on YouTube makeup tutorials showed that as a contemporary version of makeover paradigm, YouTube makeup tutorials provided viewers with more intimacy and sociality than traditional TV shows. They indicated that both TV makeover shows and YouTube makeup tutorials articulated a transformation imperative, a normative expectation for women to transform themselves to meet the cultural beauty ideals through working on their bodies and mind so that women could live an optimal life. Riley et al. (2022) argued that this transformation imperative reiterates the importance of women's appearance, which leads to anxiety, body distress and social comparison among women, while the narrow beauty ideals only value some women and marginalise others. Thus, the transformation imperative reinforces the hegemony of beauty and reaffirms gender differences. These reinforcements make post-feminism heteronormative, which is connected to the pervasiveness of the sexualisation of culture. Under the influence of this culture, a new sexual subjectivity is generated.

From Sex Object to Desiring Sexual Subject

Women's bodies are often objectified by the media as sex objects. While under the influence of post-feminism, women appear to actively objectify themselves, which Gill calls sexual subjectification. This concept refers to the ideal that women actively exhibit themselves as desiring sexual subjects in a seemingly objectified manner in the media to resemble the heterosexual male fantasy found in pornography (Gill, 2007a). Gill (2007a) also pointed out that this shift reflects women's interpretation of themselves "from an external, male judging gaze to a self policing narcissistic gaze" (p. 151). Put another way, women internalise the objectifying male gaze and then form a new disciplinary regime for themselves, and this regime constructs women's subjectivity of sexualisation.

The prosperity of the porn industry in the late twentieth century, promoted by the sexual revolution and free-market capitalism, has a considerable social impact on the content of women's beauty practices (Jeffreys, 2014). "The values and practices of pornography extended outwards from magazines and movies to become the dominating values of fashion and beauty advertising, and the advertising of many other products and services" (Jeffreys, 2014, p.61). The normalisation of the porn industry promotes the contemporary aesthetic porn chic, which permeates in media through sexual representations and discourses in western societies (Gill, 2014a). Female celebrities play an important role in normalising this porn chic via their hypersexual performances and styling in media. For example, young female celebrities perform sexually suggestive pole dancing on a public stage (Lamb et al., 2013) and present self-sexualisation in music videos (Andsager & Roe, 2003). According to Holland and Attwood (2009), celebrities who present sexualised performance/images see self-revelation as a sign of power, independence, and confidence.

The sexualisation of culture can influence ordinary females' understanding of ideal femininity from a very early age and then incorporate it into their identities. For example, Jackson et al.'s (2013) study on pre-teen girls in New Zealand found that young girls are overly exposed to postfeminist fashions that promote sexual, desirable and savvy identities; girls who adopt these identities tend to engage but also criticise hypersexual clothing and consumerist culture. Similarly, Dobson' (2015) study of MySpace showed that, as the most active group on that social media, girls and young women performed postfeminist femininity through sexualised self-representation, which was seen as a means of gaining a sense of sexuality, freedom and agency. However, Evans et al. (2010) discussed the complexity of this agency, arguing that women's sexual subjectification is less a free choice than an internalised regime of disciplinary power that regulates women through individualist and neoliberal discourses.

Individualism, Choice and Empowerment

Postfeminist discourses emphasise individualism. It attributes women's practices to meet ideal femininity to their own choices, then inspires them through empowerment discourses, such as "being oneself" and "pleasing oneself". According to Gill (2007a), the emphasis on self-choice makes women's beauty practices, such as cosmetic surgery, a means of pleasing themselves so that women's diligent work on their bodies is no longer driven by external pressures but by their own needs. These discourses circulate in the contemporary western media culture, such as reality TV shows, makeover shows and advertising. Affected women may have an illusory agency fueled by a sense of freedom and choices. As the previous section mentioned, women presented with porno-chic fashion often consider it an authentic self-choice to please themselves. However, past studies indicate that rather than an autonomous choice, women's clothing preference is likely the outcome of repeatedly external influences, such as cultures and religions (Duits & Zoonen, 2006; Gill, 2007b). Gill (2007a) also questioned this authentic self-choice by asking that if women just follow their own will and have the free agent to please themselves, why do they usually represent similar aesthetic standards? This question implies that media messages can be internalised and affect how ordinary women understand and interpret themselves.

The normalising of discourses, such as pleasing yourself and self-choice, is further strengthened because they also reflect the individualist ideology under the influence of globalised neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a political and economic theory that proposes deregulation and individual entrepreneurial freedoms (Gill, 2007a). This ideology assumes everyone's agent, that is, everyone can choose freely. As a result, people take full responsibility for their behaviours; people's current social conditions are the consequences of their previous choices. Individualist ideology overestimates the importance of individuals' choices while downplaying the preexisting

social inequalities and power imbalances. This leads to self-shaming and stigma for people who fail to meet the social normality/ideals. Put it together, the intersection of post-feminism and neoliberal policies advocates personal determination and self-responsibility. This theme of postfeminist sensibility links women's beauty practices to their own choice. Consequently, it is women's obligation to meet the desirable femininity.

Self-surveillance and Discipline

In order to know whether one meets desirable femininity, women need to survey themselves and then work, or discipline, the body towards meeting that ideal. Postfeminist media culture constructs the ideal femininity through female celebrities' bodies, while women interpellated by post-feminism attempt to meet the ideal through various beauty practices. Consequently, abiding self-surveillance and discipline are required. The ideal femininity exists as the social norm, on which women constantly evaluate themselves. Also, under the influence of postfeminist discourses, women believe that everything they do to approach the ideal is a result of self-choice rather than external pressure or social power.

Therefore, the ideal femininity always regulates women's beauty practices, and women do it without realising the external power. This reminiscent of Foucault's panopticon theory (Foucault, 1995). Foucault's panopticon is an institutional building in which a single security guard can observe all the inmates' cells; since the inmates cannot tell if they are being observed, they must always behave as if they are being observed. In other words, inmates internalise the guard, making them guards and regulators of their own behaviours. Foucault's panopticon theory implies power, that is, power is invisible, meanwhile, everywhere, constantly producing people in particular ways.

In this thesis, I argue that postfeminist media culture acts as a panopticon, allowing the ideal femininity to be seen in every corner of contemporary women's lives, from TV shows and

advertisements to social media. It constantly reminds women to work on their bodies to make up for their “imperfections”. Meanwhile, various commercialised beauty products, such as skin care, body waxing and weight control, bombard women with the promise of a way to become closer to the ideal. As a result, women tend to work on their bodies via these beauty practices, attempting to meet the ideals, and they do so through self-surveillance and self-motivation.

Gill identified self-surveillance and discipline as a theme of postfeminist sensibility more than a decade ago. This theme has continued and intensified in the development of digital health today. Women’s contemporary lives are influenced drastically by digital health and fitness technologies, such as mobile apps, wearable lifestyle technologies and social media, through which women can self-monitor and self-track their health practices. These seemingly innocuous and health-beneficial technologies are widely used in women’s personal lives. However, Rich (2018) questioned the role of digital health in women’s health, arguing that digital health reflects postfeminist and neoliberal expectations, which invite girls and young women to reinvent themselves and keep changing; women who share their digital data on social media tend to be obsessed with losing weight or improving their bodies. Moreover, contemporary digital health, which embodies self-surveillance and discipline, governs not only women’s bodies but their subjectivity. This also reflects the development of postfeminist sensibility, that is, the focus from women’s bodies to their inner minds.

Confidence Cult(ure) and Self-help

Another contemporary development of postfeminist sensibility relates to the personal responsibility and self-determination that forms the element of self-surveillance and discipline is what Gill has called the confidence culture (Orgad & Gill, 2022). This contemporary development shifts attention from working on women’s bodies to working on their minds. In the section above,

I have shown how the ideal femininity constructed by celebrity culture has never been easy for ordinary women due to the extremely narrow aesthetic standards, yet an expectation to both meet these ideals and to understand the desire to meet these as driven by individual choices. As a result, ordinary women are easily frustrated due to incompetent feelings by emulating the impossible ideal shaped by female celebrities (Evans & Riley, 2013). Paradoxically, under the influence of individualism and neoliberalism, women are assumed to have the agency to achieve every goal they want, so they are often encouraged to work hard persistently to approach the ideal. This process requires women to adopt a psychological state that maintains them positive, resilient, and confident, so women can constantly chase their goals without complaints or negativities, while women possessing these positive traits are considered desirable and attractive (Gill & Orgad, 2015; Gill & Kanai, 2019; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020).

In recent developments on this issue, Orgad and Gill (2022) argued that while women still suffer profound inequalities at work, and women's appearance pressures are intensified by exposure to media's unrealistic body ideals, the contemporary confident discourse targets women disproportionately, attempting to convince them that their problems are due to confidence deficit. Women are indoctrinated with self-confidence as a solution to the problems. For example, the postfeminist film suggests that women can achieve anything when they believe in themselves; optimism and resilience, as desirable attitudes, are prescribed to women when confronted with gender inequality in the workplace (Orgad & Gill, 2022).

Orgad and Gill (2022) also suggested that women-specific confidence culture could be seen as part of a political project to quell women's complaints. Rather than shedding light on gender and structural inequalities, confidence culture foregrounds psychological changes as the "one-size-fits-all" solution for women. For example, positivity imperatives are suggested to address social

issues, especially women's issues, during the Covid-19 pandemic; with the Covid-19 pandemic disproportionately affected women in many aspects (Andrew et al., 2020; Scott, 2020), women are interpellated with individualistic identity to adopt "right" mindsets, such as calm and resilience, to cope with the injustices they face instead of delving into the causes of injustices. The proliferation of positivity imperatives can be seen as a reflection of the growing significance of self-help culture (Gill & Orgad, 2022).

Self-help culture is driven and propagated by individualistic discourses that are primarily directed at women, the problematic objects in need of improvement (Riley et al., 2019). Self-help discourse constructs self-focused subjects who constantly work on themselves as a strategy to cope with difficulties; self-help discourse is also in relation to psychological language (Riley et al., 2019), which advocates that people achieve a better self and life by establishing their internal mindsets. Self-help often connects to neoliberal subjectivity, which produces self-motivating, risk-taking, and self-reflective individuals fit for the market economy. The ideal subjects of neoliberalism are those who push their limits and manage to make sense of their failures via positivity and then become resilient. These psychological traits are desirable as they act as a buffer against the market economy's brutality.

In summary, confidence and self-help cultures focus on women disproportionately to shape women's psychological states, through which women learn the "right" mindset and the appropriate/acceptable feelings to adopt when faced with difficulties. The culture of confidence and self-help downplays the preexisting gender inequalities while highlighting the importance of a personal mindset that works together to dampen women's anger and complaints in the face of inequalities. Thus, confidence and self-help cultures indirectly reinforce these inequalities. Another way to reinforce inequalities is the reassertion of sexual difference.

Reassertion of Sexual Difference

Postfeminist sensibility legitimises the resurgence of patriarchy and sexual difference. This is reflected in two aspects: first, postfeminist discourse emphasises that women are natural mothers or caregivers from the biological perspective; second, the appearance-oriented priority of post-feminism overlooks female equality (in education, politics and family life) that feminism advocates in favour of heterosexual attractiveness. Postfeminist sensibility highlights femininity as the crucial value of women and re-traditionalises femininity (Gill, 2007a). Postfeminist ideology is combined with the commercial beauty-fashion complex that encourages women to constantly work on their bodies because they are “imperfect”. Femininity is considered a tool to oppress women in the patriarchal society (Elias et al., 2017), although women perceive their beauty practices as self-choices. In the patriarchal society, since the unequal distribution of social resources between men and women, women’s value often ties up with their appearance, which increases their competitiveness in the marriage markets, so women’s social power depends on the management of their beauty asserts (Goldman, 1992).

Conversely, postfeminist discourse is not simply opposed to feminism but more like a contradictory discourse, which takes feminism into account while repudiating it (McRobbie, 2004). For example, Lazar (2011) investigated the postfeminist discourse in beauty advertisements and showed how commercial advertisements use language to connect beauty products with women’s freedom and power. This characteristic makes postfeminist discourse seem innocuous, affective, and even ostensibly inspiring. Thus, its adverse effects are usually not directly perceived by women.

Due to the influence of neoliberalism and feminist movements, women have been inspired to be financially independent. However, women participating in male-dominated workplaces may

threaten the patriarchy. McRobbie (2009) explained that women's participation in traditionally male-dominated workplaces could destabilise the patriarchal structure, but this potential is nullified when women perform the postfeminist masquerade. The concept *Postfeminist Masquerade* was introduced by McRobbie (2009) to describe a strategy that strengthens the patriarchal structure and masculine hegemony even as women enter domains once considered male. *Postfeminist Masquerade* instils hyper-femininity imperceptibly in women and relocates women to the traditional gender hierarchies. For example, women wear elaborate makeup, high-heeled shoes and pencil skirts in the office that accentuate their feminine features. This hyper-feminine appearance, therefore, is seen as a means to maintain the gender order.

The section above reviewed the concept of postfeminist sensibility through a discussion of Gill's (2007a) six elements. I explained each element and how they have informed scholarship on postfeminist media culture and its implications for the women who consume this media. However, it is worth noticing that girls and young women are the main subjects that are well studied in this field, while middle-aged and older women are relatively absent. In the following section, I focus on ageing women in postfeminist media culture, discussing how postfeminist sensibility impacts their understanding of ageing.

Postfeminist Sensibility in Ageing

Unlike young women who have received much attention from postfeminist scholars, middle-aged and older women are relatively absent in this field. One potential reason is that older women tend to be invisible on public screens. Compared with their male counterparts, older female celebrities are far less likely to appear on screen since the male-dominated entertainment industry is obsessed with a "girling" aesthetic (Dolan, 2014; Jermyn, 2012). However, in recent years, older women have become more visible in the media, such as in TV series and films, than ever before,

although most of them still represent ideal femininity in some way (Dolan, 2014). Jerslev (2017) explains that the increasing visibility of older women in the media can be linked to neoliberal consumerist culture and its advocated successful ageing; women can age without noticeable ageing appearance. This consumerist culture combines post-feminism, reflecting on various advertisements, often promoting anti-ageing products and cosmetic technologies to women. Women who adopted postfeminist subjectivity often actively work on their bodies through these commercial products to maintain youth. For female celebrities, having a young appearance can be crucial to their careers, so it is not uncommon for middle-aged and older female celebrities to look younger through cosmetic surgeries (Fairclough, 2012). The representation of older female celebrities in media, for this reason, is often ageless, in line with the ideal femininity. Tasker and Negra (2005) stated that “in postfeminist representational culture, age is only acknowledged to the extent that its effects can be erased by cosmetic surgery” (p.109). The increasing visibility of these female celebrities offers ordinary women the possibility of an idealised ageless appearance through the “right” products and contemporary health lifestyle. Moreover, these female celebrities also remind the viewers what the 40s and 50s should look like. Negra (2009) argued that the cult of youth is being facilitated via various technologies; mass media legitimises the rejuvenating transformations and the ageless fantasy through beauty practices, such as cosmetic surgery, exercise, and diet. Within this discursive framing, women can be young regardless of age, and it becomes women’s responsibility to age successfully.

Additionally, middle-aged and older female celebrities on the screen often embody the postfeminist identity — an independent, powerful, successful, and ageless image (Jerslev, 2017). For example, Jerslev’s (2017) study on the ageing female in US TV series concluded that “in

contrast to the young women surrounding them, they signal power and success in the business world through their slim bodies” (p.76).

Even though post-feminism does not seem to say much about aged women, it “thrives on anxiety about ageing and redistributes this anxiety among a variety of generational clusters while also always extending the promise/possibility of age evasion” (Negra, 2009, p.12). According to Tortajada et al. (2018), in postfeminist culture, women are required to stay young as long as possible, “when looking young becomes a model of success, both age denial and 'age-shaming' emerge as widespread response” (p.2). Consequently, it is not surprising that middle-aged and older women affected by postfeminist ideology are usually under intensified pressure to prevent ageing.

In summary, compared with girls and young women, middle-aged and older women draw less attention from postfeminist scholars. However, as discussed above, middle-aged and older women are likely to suffer ageing anxiety due to declining appearance. Affected women tend to do various beauty practices suggested by consumerist and postfeminist cultures to maintain youth. Given that postfeminist sensibility is now a hegemonic ideology for many young women (Gill, 2017), it is likely that, as generations age, post-feminism would significantly impact older women and their sense of identity.

Transnational Post-feminism

The first section elaborates on Gill’s postfeminist sensibility and the impact of its six elements on women who consume mass media. In this section, I will highlight the scholarship in this field and how the elements of postfeminist sensibility are evident globally, making post-feminism a transnational media address.

Postfeminist sensibility is well investigated in British and North American studies. White, middle-class, and heterosexual women are the main study subjects (Butler, 2013), although it does not mean that postfeminist ideology only impacts the Western socio-historical context. According to Simidele Dosekun, “post-feminism is readily transnationalized, that is rendered transnational culture because it is a fundamentally mediated and commodified discourse and set of material practices” (Dosekun, 2015, p. 961). In other words, the postfeminist discourse has been spreading transnationally through consumerist culture. Western femininity and sexuality embodiment impact women outside the West through transnational beauty-related industries in media.

At the same time, the globalised neoliberal ideology has also placed post-feminism in transnational motion and spread (Dosekun, 2021). Butler (2013) argued that post-feminism, as a neoliberal discursive formation, can cross different social fields and adapt to different forms of culture, economy, and politics while still maintaining its key characteristics. For example, neoliberalism instils ubiquitous “positive” messages in contemporary media for women, which are often subtly combined with feminist sentiments, such as the “fight for your right to own the perfect body” advertising slogan that Lazar (2011) described in Singaporean advertising (p.41). However, the transnational process of post-feminism is not always a simple replication of its parameters in a western culture-historical context, but more often, it is a manifestation that combines the distinctive features of local culture and politics (Yang, 2020).

Previous studies suggest that postfeminist sensibility has become influential in non-western cultures in the past decades, such as India, China, Singapore, Korea, Russia, and Africa (Murdeshwar et al., 2019; Yang, 2017; Lazar, 2011; Kim, 2011; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015; Rens, 2021). Like their western counterparts, non-white women embrace the freedom and independence advocated by postfeminist sensibility through consuming feminine goods and

beauty services. Lazar's (2011) study examined the beauty advertisements in Singapore; the discourse in the ads represented the typical western-originated postfeminist sensibility. For example, "Now I feel completely liberated to live my life because I am hair-free for evermore" (Lazar, 2011, p. 39). The commercialised beauty industry perpetuates a narrow and restrictive definition of beauty, such as hairless bodies, which reflects femininity as a body property, the core element of postfeminist sensibility. Meanwhile, the beauty industry also disseminates the new femininity via the postfeminist discourse, such as freedom and empowerment, used in the adverts. Consequently, beauty practices become the extension of women's right to freedom and liberation; it resonates with the elements of individualism and self-choice in postfeminist sensibility.

Kim (2011) gives another example from her study based in Korea to understand the popular term *Missy* and its impact on Korean married women through TV drama. *Missy* refers to young and attractive married women who present themselves as unmarried female ideals, conforming to the western image of femininity and having liberal sexual attitudes. Thus, *Missy* implies an alternative life for married women who are self-confident, career-oriented, and physically attractive while rejecting the stereotype of the old and dowdy married women. Kim's study shows that Korean married women are impacted by postfeminist sensibility in relation to femininity as a body property, desiring sexual subjects and individualism. These examples above indicated that postfeminist sensibility could influence non-western women through the media and international interactions as it intersects with local cultures.

Even though post-feminism may share key elements when domesticated in non-Western cultures, some of its content can conflict with local social values, allowing this ideology to impact the local cultures greatly. For example, Murdeshwar et al. (2019) investigated the new drinking culture among young middle-class women in Mumbai. They found younger women associated

their drinking behaviours with “freedom”, “cool elite”, and “gender equality”, reminiscent of the “culture of intoxication” in the West (Griffin et al., 2013). This emerging drinking culture reflects the intersection of neoliberalism with post-feminism and its influence on the construction of non-western young women’s identities through sexuality and consumption (Murdeswar et al., 2019). However, the new identities conflict with the traditional female identities as drinking is devalued at the macro-level in Indian culture. It is worth noting that post-feminism circulates in non-western cultures, and when their traditional values do not align with the elements of postfeminist sensibility, the affected women are likely to struggle with the conflict between the two ideologies and then negotiate the contradictory identities. It may put additional pressure on women. At the same time, postfeminist sensibility challenges local cultures and may have wide-ranging effects on the culture, thereby impacting future women’s subjectivity.

A more complex example is Salmenniemi and Adamson’s (2015) study, which explored how post-feminism domesticated in Russia, the post-Soviet society, reflected in the texts of local self-help literature. When post-feminism settled in Russia, neoliberal capitalism and consumerism followed. Salmenniemi (2008) argued that even though the Soviet gender system claims equality, men still dominate social and political power, while motherhood is an important civic duty for women. The ideal Soviet woman is the caregiver of children who can sacrifice themselves for the family (Salmenniemi, 2008). In contrast, post-feminism redefines women’s identities, emphasising self-improvement as an “ethical obligation” and devaluing motherhood and self-sacrificing as obsolete (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015). However, self-love and independence are interpreted as “individualist West” that need to be downplayed as it conflicts with Russian collectivist values (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015).

Similar to its manifestation in Western culture, postfeminist discourse highlights the importance of femininity as women's capital, and the consumption of beauty products represents the "liberation" from the Soviet women's emancipation (Adamson & Salmenniemi, 2017). However, self-indulgent consumerism contradicts Russia's traditional frugality culture. Sexuality is also a key theme of postfeminist sensibility in Russia. The difference is that sexuality is not a way of satisfying oneself but an ethical obligation for women, a means of obtaining love and a good relationship with their male partners, whereby "real women" should fulfil their men's sexual needs (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015).

Western *Hard-working Girl* (McRobbie, 2009) is favoured in Russia as hard work is another key feminine identity in Soviet values, and work was once interpreted as a collective good, but postfeminist sensibility encourages women to achieve self-realisation via a well-paid job. Thus, jobs are no longer equal because of the different benefits. In this example, which analysed Russian women's media, we see how some elements of postfeminist sensibility are linked with local values to make itself seem convincing. In contrast, for the conflicting part, postfeminist discourse makes local traditional values seem outdated. Due to ideological and political differences, the western-originated post-feminism cannot be replicated seamlessly in contemporary Russia. For example, the remnant Soviet values and Orthodox Church propagate the traditional ideals for women, which suppresses the postfeminist assertion of women's independence; it complicates and distorts this ideology in the presentation of post-Soviet culture (Adamson & Salmenniemi, 2017). Or, to put it another way, the powerful influence of traditional values, craftily combined with postfeminist discourse, implicitly strengthens the structure of Russian patriarchal society and consolidates the priority of the male position in heterosexual relationships.

The above section discussed the transnational feature of postfeminist sensibility: postfeminist sensibility can travel to non-western cultures through mass media, and its elements can also be detected in that culture. The postfeminist scholarship reviewed in this section also showed how postfeminist sensibility impacts the subjectivity of non-western women exposed to postfeminist media. Building on these arguments, the next section examines scholarship to date on how postfeminist sensibility exerts its influence in the context of modern China.

Postfeminist Sensibility in China

Postfeminist sensibility is connected to consumerism and neoliberalism. In China, consumerism started to flourish after Deng Xiaoping's economic reform (Thornham & Feng, 2010; Yang, 2020; Liao, 2021). From the period of Mao Zedong's planned economy to Deng's market economy, China ended nearly three decades of isolation and integrated its domestic market with the world. Subsequently, Western neoliberal ideology and individualism entered China with the possibility of reconstructing Chinese women's subjectivity. Although there is not much direct scholarship about post-feminism's history in China, it is likely that post-feminism developed in China with this economic shift to consumerism, or at least consumerism laid the path for it to come in. First, this section briefly describes China's consumerist culture in the post-reform era and the far-reaching impact of neoliberal ideology on gender construction, including how postfeminist sensibility in China has been disseminated through westernised fashion and mass media, presented in postfeminist discourses/representations (Thornham & Feng, 2010; Sun & Chen, 2015). Then, I discuss the beauty industry as a crucial part of consumer culture and its effects on female subjectivity. Finally, I review recent studies on postfeminist discourse in the Chinese context to shed light on the themes of postfeminist sensibility.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese constitution protected women's rights, including divorce rights, electoral rights and maternity leave. During the period, the government discourse "women can hold up half the sky" (Chen & Cheung, 2011, p.271) was widely used to emphasise women's equality with men. However, this gender equality discourse, as a castle in the air, lacked the cornerstone of reality. In other words, it neglected the multiple repression of women in China's deeply rooted patriarchal society. Therefore, the discourse was less a feminist slogan empowering Chinese women to strive for their rights, but more like a political strategy that required Chinese women to join the labour market and support nation-building during the special historical period. Chen and Cheung (2011) argued that women did the same work as men, especially during the Great Leap Forward era and the Cultural Revolution. Still, it did not shake the feudal thoughts about women or change their traditional social roles. As a result, women had to shoulder the dual responsibility of simultaneously working and caring for a family.

After the death of Chairman Mao, mainland China entered the post-Mao period. The successor Deng Xiaoping's economic reform, alongside the open-door policy, enabled the Chinese people to renounce the asceticism of revolution and access to the market economy, which leads China's consumerist culture (Latham, 2006). Undoubtedly, the economic reform has significantly improved Chinese people's material lives. In the first twelve years of reform and market economy, China's urban per capita income doubled and increased by 50% in the following five years (Davis, 2000). As a result, household appliances, such as televisions and radios, entered ordinary people's homes. The following industries were media products, such as television stations, radio stations and newspapers, which experienced rapid growth in the 1980s and 1990s (Latham, 2006). Since the domestic economy became firmly dependent on market transactions and private

entrepreneurship, foreign trade and investment began to locate in mainland China, which ended China's isolation from the world market. The significant amount of commodities and media culture from overseas brought exotic flavours and refined entertainment while inevitably infiltrating individualism and western ideology into China. Chinese authorities, however, still claim socialism to legitimise themselves and maintain the Party rule and political control in many fields, such as media. Harvey (2005) concluded, “China has been the construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control” (p.120).

The neoliberal elements brought about by the market economy have influenced gender relations in China. In the post-Mao era, the market economy instils individualist ideology in China. As a result, women's actions are interpreted as an individual preference based on their autonomy, which legitimises gender inequalities as a natural difference. Sun and Chen (2015) studied gender discourse presented in Chinese mainstream media between 1995 and 2012, or post-reform era; they found that media discourse related women's issues to individual choices and personal features while downplaying the structural constraints or underlying gender inequality. For example, under the influence of individualism, being a full-time housewife is a woman's preference, an alternative lifestyle, so it rejects gender discrimination in the labour market. Media repeatedly adopted neoliberal ideologies and individualistic discourse to shape gender identities while limiting any challenge to gender inequalities. Sun and Chen (2015) concluded that “the reform era has witnessed a puzzling stagnation, if not decline, in women's status in China” (p.1091).

The fashion industry is a prominent part of consumerist culture, which covers a wide range of beauty-related fields, such as cosmetics, clothing, and hairdressing. From the social perspective, fashion is more than just beauty practices; it also shapes gender and social and political identities

(Evans, 2006). In Mao's era, femininity in fashion was obliterated by political policies. Women wore the same grey, green and blue as their male counterparts (Chen & Cheung, 2011). With the opening of China's domestic market and the influence of globalisation, Chinese women have been impacted by the western-led global fashion industry, represented by the western female in the media, such as magazines and televisions (Evans, 2006). Western fashion magazines, such as *Vogue*, *Marie Claire* and *Bazaar*, not only advertise luxury and fashionable lifestyles to Chinese women but also promote the concept of power femininity, that is, independent women who gain power through a consumerist agency (Chen, 2016). China subsequently became the world's biggest consumer of Western luxury fashion products (Chen, 2013). Chinese women embraced the long-lost sense of freedom and "power" that consumerism brought. For example, Chen (2013) indicated that as a crucial technology, westernised fashion constructed the ideal cosmopolitan femininity in the bestselling novel *Go Lala Go*, which portrayed the ideal image of an educated young white-collar urban Chinese woman Du Lala. Du Lala is independent, hard-working, and westernised, eventually getting promoted at an international company. The fictional image of Du Lala reflects the desire of young urban Chinese women in the post-Mao era for the consumer satisfaction that comes with financial freedom.

Li (2015) was interested in understanding the contemporary sociocultural practices of gender in China through the discourses used in China's famous dating show *If You Are the One* (非诚勿扰). This show claimed to provide a platform to help single people solve their "problems". Based on Li's analysis, the show reflected gender inequalities in China's patriarchal society regarding the discourses, program structure and stage design (Li, 2015). Throughout the show, female participants' physical attractiveness was the main criterion by which they were assessed. In other words, female participants who were considered beautiful by social standards, such as

young and slim, were more popular with male participants, whereas popular male participants were those who were more successful in their careers and financially stronger. The different evaluation criteria for men and women are also reflected in the participants' fashion style; that is, unlike male participants, who usually wore casual clothes, female participants all dressed up and wore makeup to meet the glamorous ideal (Li, 2015). Luo and Sun (2015) argued that the female participants in the dating show reflected postfeminist subjectivity portrayed by the global chick-lit; they were beautiful, career successful, and believed in self-choice and agency while still accepting the socially constructed normative gender roles, such as mother and wife. Thus, they reflected postfeminist elements in relation to individualism and gender resurgence.

It is worth noting that *If You Are the One* is produced in the context where the media frequently uses the stigmatised term *Leftover Women* to disavow unmarried Chinese women in their late 20s or older. Even though it is unclear who coined the term, it is clear that the Chinese government has no objection to its use and has actively used the concept of "leftover" to urge single women to marry in order to address China's declining birth rate and consequent ageing problem (To, 2015). Luo and Sun (2015) stated that since the dating show must have passed the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) censored, the content of the show still needed to present normative social and gendered script. As a result, the show maintained social-political power and strengthened male privilege in the transition period to a capitalist market economy.

Several recent studies examined postfeminist sensibility through *Wang Hong* (网红), or internet influencers, which is an emerging profession in China's neoliberal and internet consumerist cultures (Liao, 2021; Guo, 2022; Hou, 2022). These influencers are mainly young Chinese women, who have adopted postfeminist entrepreneurialism, and then pursued careers as

online entrepreneurs. They often promote beauty products to their female followers through posting photos and videos on social media platforms. For example, Liao (2021) studied the female influencers who explicitly or implicitly demonstrated their middle-class lifestyle or above the standard of material life. These female influencers achieved financial independence by promoting fashion/beauty products and commodifying themselves as part of promotions. They almost always presented themselves “perfectly” on screen; their posts contained many bodily practices, such as weight control and photo-shooting techniques, to motivate female viewers (Liao, 2021). These influencers also claimed to be ordinary girls and reached followers through affective activities that in turn influenced their consumption choices (Liao, 2021). Thus, these female influencers represent womanhood as successful, self-monitored, independent, and sexualised young entrepreneurs. Chinese *Wang Hong* shares some similarities with the beauty vloggers in the West, who guide (female) audiences online about their beauty practices, such as makeup (Banet-Weiser, 2017).

However, Liao (2021) argued that, unlike their western counterparts, Chinese *Wang Hong* needs not only postfeminist subjectivity but also political sensitivity to ensure that the content they post is always patriotic/nationalistic and demonstrates the post-socialist “positive energy”. “Positive energy” (正能量) is a prominent ideological discourse advocated by the Chinese government, which aims to shape the subjectivity of citizens rather than directly persuading them to think positively in the face of difficulties caused by social inequalities. Meanwhile, “positive energy” is a tactic to alleviate the negative comments/complaints online (Chen & Wang, 2019). It resonates with Orgad and Gill’s (2022) indication that the emphasis on a confidence culture for women could be seen as part of a political project to quell women’s complaints. Therefore, the success of *Wang Hong*’s career is influenced not only by free-market choices but also by political policies (Ni, 2021).

Liao's (2021) study focused on female influencers in metropolitan areas of China, while Hou (2022) investigated the female influencers who were housewives in rural China. Likewise, they adopted postfeminist subjectivity and worked as entrepreneurs to promote beauty products on a TikTok-like Chinese social media; their target audience was women in rural areas. These influencers emphasised the importance of physical attractiveness and financial independence to married women as men were unreliable; female viewers were indoctrinated that physical attractiveness was crucial to a successful marriage, which required women to actively pursue through beauty practices (Hou, 2022). This postfeminist language appears paradoxical, inspiring women to be independent while linking them to their traditional gender roles, encouraging them to work hard for appearance to keep a man in marriage. It echoes the feature of postfeminist discourse discussed by McRobbie (2004), that is, postfeminist discourse is contradictory, which takes feminism into account while repudiating it. The emphasis on physical attractiveness was reflected in both the discourses of these female influencers and the makeup transformation videos they posted. Rather than questioning patriarchal marriages when married women encountered gender inequality, these female influencers asked women to adopt resilience, individualism, and self-regulation, helping themselves save their marriages through a consumerist lifestyle. Therefore, even if not intentional, these videos objectively reinforce the subordination of women in patriarchal marriages and consolidate the institutions of Chinese patriarchal society.

Like the two scholars above, Guo (2022) also studied Chinese female influencers on *Xiao Hong Shu* (小红书), a famous Chinese social platform with the slogan "inspire lives". These online influencers shared information about consumption, romantic life, travel and other personal aspects of life. An influencer's work often includes creating ideas, producing videos and interacting with followers affectively. Female influencers considered the individualised work as a means of

combining a promising career with domestic responsibilities. In other words, flexible working hours allow influencers time to take care of their families. As mentioned above, Chinese women's role as an important part of the labour market has not changed their traditional family responsibilities, and women still undertake the main housework (Chen & Cheung, 2011). On the other hand, the work of female influencers is not as free as it presented; influencers need to follow the algorithm monitoring the rules of *Xiao Hong Shu* as they determine the exposure rate of their posts among viewers and the economic benefits that follow.

As shown above, postfeminist sensibility has been exerting its effect in China via consumerist culture. It seems that women who achieve social beauty standards have more access to postfeminist power, through which they can even affect other women's subjectivity. To understand how young Chinese women interpret women's physical beauty, Ma (2022) interviewed relevant participants and found that the participants considered physical beauty as an important and the most common way for women to gain social power. Hence, women often actively engaged in beauty practices to improve external beauty, reflecting postfeminist sensibility in relation to femininity as a body property and self-monitoring. Ma argued that the emphasis on physical beauty could lead to age anxiety in women because ageing makes it difficult to meet beauty standards. When women are over 30 years old, they lose the "gender and age bonus" and are stigmatised as "no longer being valuable" (Ma, 2022, p.9). However, as research on Chinese women over 30 is still lacking in this area, it is unclear how women in that age group interpret age or, in other words, how women over 30 negotiate ageing and physical beauty in a social context that defines beauty as crucial for women.

In conclusion, this section has discussed how postfeminist sensibility travelled to China from the West via consumerist culture in the post-reform era and its impact on shaping

contemporary Chinese women's subjectivity. Past studies suggested that Chinese women who adopted postfeminist subjectivity often emphasised the importance of self-help, self-monitoring and being financially independent. However, these seeming individualist ideologies have not prevented Chinese women from accepting their traditional social roles because under China's deeply rooted patriarchal society, women have no intention of challenging men's social positions, including the traditional position in marriage. On the other hand, Chinese women believe that physical beauty is an essential factor in their success, as beauty can bring social benefits to women, especially in the marriage market. Consequently, Chinese women actively apply beauty practices to maintain or enhance their external beauty. Like other studies of transnational post-feminism, the research shows how elements of postfeminist sensibility, including contradictory elements, such as valuing independence and heterosexual attractiveness, are circulated in ways that intersect with local gender norms and cultural histories. Since current studies in this field are still limited, and the findings are all based on young Chinese women, there is a significant gap in the analysis of postfeminist sensibility for older women in China. Given the significant viewing figures of *Sisters Who Make Waves* and the TV show explicitly addresses older women, an analysis of *Sisters Who Make Waves* offers a unique and important opportunity to understand how middle-aged and older Chinese women may interpret their age and the disadvantages of ageing in postfeminist culture.

Research Aims

Therefore, my thesis aims to fill the gap in this research and investigate how postfeminist sensibility impacts middle-aged Chinese women through the discourses used in a recent Chinese reality show, *Sisters Who Make Waves*. This show has attracted a lot of attention since its launch. One of the most important reasons is the show's novel theme. Unlike Chinese reality shows that normally only focus on young people in their 20s, *Sisters Who Make Waves* invites thirty female

celebrities who are over 30, an age range considered middle-aged in Chinese culture. Based on the show's official description, *Sisters Who Make Waves* presents the tenacity and charm of middle-aged women through their dream pursuing process, encouraging more ordinary women to “bravely pursue their dreams” and get rid of the age constraints (Mango TV, 2021). In the context of traditional deficit constructs of middle-aged female identities in China, this presents the possibility of a new identity for women in this age bracket.

In addition, as discussed above, past research based on Western culture showed that postfeminist sensibility could lead to ageing anxiety in women, especially in female celebrities, whose appearance is significant due to the nature of their occupation (Negra, 2009; Jerslev, 2017). For these reasons, studying how Chinese middle-aged female celebrities construct middle age may contribute useful information in this field. Thus, this reality show is likely to provide the relevant data to meet my thesis aim.

I am also interested in understanding the reality show's potential influence on its female audience's subjectivity and gendered practices. Studying postfeminist sensibility through celebrity culture is relatively new in the context of China, but similar studies have been done in western culture (Genz, 2015; Klazas, 2015; Chatman, 2015). Celebrity culture not only reflects gender norms but also can change gendered practices by altering the audience's attitudes. Evans and Riley (2013) stated that “gendered norms are produced through the socio-economic and consumer-oriented conditions of their time; and, through reiterations and developments of these gendered norms, celebrity culture can reinforce and change gendered practices and expectations” (p.268). For example, female celebrities' hypersexualised performance can change the public's attitudes towards self-sexualisation (see the section From Sex Object to Desiring Sexual Subject). The result of Evans and Riley's (2013) study also suggested that the ordinary female audience in the UK

could understand the female celebrities' postfeminist subjectivity through their performance in media and gave it positive comments; the female audience admired female celebrities' immaculate appearance and the efforts made for it but comparing their own appearance to the female celebrities' left them feeling frustrated and powerless. It seems that exposure to postfeminist celebrities' representation in the mass media is likely to influence the ordinary female audience's attitude towards ideal femininity and their understanding of their own subjectivity. Thus, in this thesis, I also aim to understand the implications of *Sisters Who Make Waves* on its Chinese female audience.

To address these aims, a discourse analysis of a whole season of *Sisters Who Make Waves*, supported by a semiotic analysis of some of the visual content of the show, was performed to 1) identify the discourses constructing age and gender for Chinese women and 2) the linguistic strategies used by these middle-aged celebrities in the reality show, with a focus on the subject positions constructed in their talk and how the non-celebrity "ordinary" female audience was invited to understand themselves through these subject-positions. This analysis also met a secondary research aim, to examine if *Sisters Who Make Waves* transfers the information that is coherent to its claimed purpose.

To address these aims, I asked the following research questions:

Q1. How did *Sisters Who Make Waves* construct middle age for women?

Q2. What subject positions are provided by *Sisters Who Make Waves*?

Q3. What discursive strategies are used to invite the ordinary female audience to adopt the subject positions constructed by the reality show, and with what potential implications for subjectivity and practice?

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I present the methodology adopted for this study. First, I briefly overview the object of my study — *Sisters Who Make Waves*, a reality show that has recently become popular in China. Second, I discuss the rationale of the methodology, including the epistemology that I subscribed to understand the show, the importance of language and Foucault's theory of discourse. Then, I elaborate on the research method for the study and its two versions. Next, I outline the procedure of the data collection preparation. After that, I describe the processes of data analysis and also give some examples to explain how I did it. I finish the chapter with ethical considerations and reflexivity.

Background

The object of this research is the show *Sisters Who Make Waves*. It is one of China's most popular reality TV shows in recent years. So far, the show has two seasons (season 3 will begin in 2022). The first season was broadcast on the official media Mango TV (a Chinese online video platform controlled by Hunan Satellite TV) from June to September 2020; the second season was from January to April 2021. The reality show gained massive attention immediately since it premiered. According to the South China Morning Post data, *Sisters Who Make Waves* boasted 370 million views within three days after the premiere aired on Mango TV (Zhang, 2020). Since the female audience accounts for more than 70% of all the Mango TV users (Thomala, 2021), plus the reality show's female-focused theme, it is safe to assume that most of the audience of *Sisters Who Make Waves* are female.

Unlike similar reality/talent shows that mainly focused on younger people in their early 20s, *Sisters Who Make Waves* invited older participants, with thirty female celebrities invited each season who are in their 30s, 40s and 50s, an age range considered middle age in Chinese culture.

The main purpose of the show, based on its official description, is to present the tenacity and charm of middle-aged women as they pursue their ambitions win this talent show and receive public validation of their performance skills; encouraging more ordinary women to “bravely pursue their dreams and get rid of the age constraints” (打破标签定义，勇于出发逐梦) (Mango TV, 2021). In the context of traditional constructs of middle-aged female identities in China, this presents the possibility of a new identity for women in this age bracket. Therefore, this study wants to understand how the reality show constructed the potential “new identity” for middle-aged Chinese women and examine if the show transferred the coherent information to its claimed purpose.

Methodology Rationale

Epistemology: Social Constructionism

In his paper *Social Psychology as History*, Gergen first discusses the application of social constructionism in social psychology; he argues social psychology is a historical inquiry rather than natural science (Gergen, 1973). It means that social psychology is a subject investigating the impact of historical, social, and cultural factors on human behaviours; human behaviours cannot be explained or predicted via cause-effect relationships. Thus, it is important to go beyond the individual and into a bigger context, such as political and social realms, for a better understanding of social life (Gergen, 1973; Burr, 2003).

Developing Gergen’s work, Willig (2008) discussed human perceived “reality” from a social constructionist perspective, saying that “social constructionism draws attention to the fact that human experience, including perception, is mediated historically, culturally and linguistically” (p.7). It means the "reality" that people perceive and understand does not necessarily reflect an exclusive reality of the world but is the result of a particular language in the culture of a certain historical period. Therefore, social constructionism challenges positivism that mainstream

psychology often adopts; the latter assumes that there is an exclusive truth out there, which can be directly accessed by people.

From this social constructionist perspective, Gergen (1985) points out four assumptions of human knowledge (1) social constructionism challenges the taken-for-granted knowledge; for example, from the social constructionist perspective, two genders, as the commonly accepted binary category, are socially constructed rather than an objective knowledge (2) the knowledge is cultural and historically specific, for example, the concept of middle-aged women can vary in different socio-historical periods (3) knowledge is sustained by social practices, that is, knowledge is not naturally existed but prevailed through social interactions, especially in language (4) knowledge itself constitutes forms of social action, for example, throughout human history, being thin for women does not always mean attractiveness, but when thinness begins to be seen as the ideal in contemporary society, women accept this “fact” and work hard to lose weight, which in turn, reinforces the aesthetic standard as a “fact”.

Social constructionism thus argues that knowledge, including “common sense”, is socially produced through communication rather than a fact that naturally existed. Language, as the most privileged medium of communication, constructs our understanding of ourselves and others. So, language is a crucial part of social constructionism. In the next section, I discuss the rationale behind the understanding that language constructs the world, which influences our understanding of ourselves and others.

Rationale of Language

From the constructionist perspective, language is more than a simple medium through which people’s thoughts and feelings are available to others, but it is a system of representations that gives meaning to the world.

Social constructionism draws on a range of philosophical and linguistic theories, including Saussure's structuralist theory. The influential concepts “signifier” and “signified” contributes to this structuralist theory (Saussure, 2011). Signifier is the language that refers to either the material existing things, such as apple, or the abstract ones, such as intelligence, while signified refers to the concept/meaning that the term embodies. The link between signifier and signified is relational and arbitrary. In other words, “the concepts themselves are arbitrary divisions and categorisations of our experience” (Burr, 2003). This theory echoes Hall’s (1997) concept of representation — “representation connects meaning and languages to the culture” (p.15). It means that it is not language itself through which we understand and communicate with each other, but the representations embedded in the language we share within a culture. For example, the English word “red” is a linguistic sign which refers to the specific light wavelength perceived by human eyes, while the representation is the meaning in our mind through the language — can be happiness and luck in Chinese culture, whereas danger and caution in other countries. All these representations form a conceptual map in our mind, through which we make sense of ourselves and others. The conceptual map can differ from person to person, especially when the representations relate to obscure and abstract concepts, such as love (Beall & Sternberg, 1995). When we say, “I feel/understand you”, it implies that we have shared part of the conceptual map. People from the same culture often share broadly the same conceptual maps, leading them to interpret and understand things in roughly similar ways (Hall, 1997).

As it is discussed above, structuralists made the case that the link between the signifier and signified was an arbitrary, but once it was created, it was relatively fixed. Developing these insights of structuralism, post-structuralism argued that those relationships are not just arbitrary but also dynamic because they can change over time even in a same culture. In other words, there are often

multiple meanings circulating/competing of a signifier. For example, the colour red may have symbolised danger and aggression in a historical period, but in contemporary times it can mean sexiness and excitement.

In summary, from the social constructionist perspective, language is an important medium through which we create the meanings of the world. Also, the meanings presented by language are relational and dynamic, made in relation to each other and subject to change. In the next section, I will furtherly discuss the relations that determine our language.

Foucault's Discourse

Discourse is not just language. According to Burr (2003) “a discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events” (pp. 74-75). Put another way, a discourse is a set of ideas/presentations that come together to create the concept of the thing that we then treat as real (e.g., gender and age). From a social constructionist perspective, discourse does not specifically highlight the meanings but also emphasises the broader context beyond the immediate context in which the speaker uses certain language (Burr, 2003). This concept is heavily influenced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who foregrounded the impact of power and knowledge on constructing our language. Foucault argued that some forms of knowledge prevail in a culture at one time, as mainstream common sense, excluding other alternative understandings, and is bound up with power (Burr, 2003). Based on this theory, our knowledge about the world, or what we believe as “truth”, is highly constructed by mainstream discourses. Foucault stated, “nothing has any meaning outside of discourse” (Foucault, 1972, cited in Hall, 1997, p.45). It means that everything exists without a fixed meaning but takes on a certain meaning and becomes knowledge through discursive practices at a certain historical time. Foucault believed that those discourses do

not exist authentically, but they are as a type of institutional apparatus that is always influenced by power:

I said that the apparatus is essentially of a strategic nature, which means assuming that it is a matter of a certain manipulation of relations of forces... The apparatus is thus always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it... This is what the apparatus consists in: strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, type of knowledge.

(Foucault, 1980, p.196)

It means that discourse-based knowledge is inevitably interconnected with power relations. This knowledge is used as the institutional apparatus to guide and regulate social practices, including what can be understood as absolute “truth”; what can be said and done as acceptable rationality. However, people usually take the effects of power subconsciously; that is, people may think what they say/do is according to their autonomous choices rather than a result regulated by power. It is because power is not simply a repressive force; it also produces pleasures. Foucault (1980) pointed out the reason that power is acceptable — “is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that say no, but it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse” (p.119). For example, women may spend a lot of time working on their bodies to meet the socially constructed ideal and take it as a means of pleasuring themselves. Hence, people can internalise certain knowledge/power and adopt the subject positions constructed by discourses, consequently becoming self-monitored subjectivity. Foucault (1982, p.781) indicated how power constructed subjects:

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects

Therefore, subjects are not the concept that is traditionally considered as individuals who are autonomous and conscious, whose actions fully follow their independent, authentic opinions as this they are separate from their discursive context. On the contrary, subjects, according to Foucault's theory, are produced within discourse. In other words, people can only make sense of themselves and others within discourse, which is presented in two ways: first, subjects subscribe to the knowledge produced by the discourse and adopt the attributes defined by the discourse; second, subjects are subjected to discourse, and then take the subject positions constructed by the discourse, from which the particular knowledge most makes sense (Hall, 1997). Davies and Harré's (1999) positioning theory further explained subject positions, and they stated, "a subject position incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire" (p. 35), an individual's subjectivity is positioned through understanding and using of the discursive practices.

In conclusion, this methodology section discusses social constructionism, as an epistemology, that determines how people understand knowledge and reality. From a social constructionist perspective, knowledge is socially produced through communication. Thus, language plays an important role in constructing knowledge. The meanings of language are relational and dynamic. Foucault's discourse, from a broader social perspective, emphasises power relations underlying language; people understand themselves and others through the subject positions constructed by the discourse. In this thesis, I subscribed to the epistemology of social

constructionism to understand the language used in *Sisters Who Make Waves*. I argue that the seemingly reasonable talks from the female celebrities in the show are socially constructed, and their language is structured by traditions of Chinese culture at this particularly socio-historical moment. This show is worth paying attention to as it deliberately attempts to shift the discourse, so we have this timely moment when attempts are being made to reframe how gender is constructed. In the next section, I outline the research method I adopted for the study.

Research Method

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis, as an analysing approach, “examines patterns of language across texts and consider the relationship between language and the social and cultural contexts in which it is used” (Paltridge, 2012, p.2); in doing so it seeks “to understand how talk and text constructs particular versions of reality and to identity the social consequences of these constructions” (Riley & Wiggins, 2019, p.426). This approach takes language as a trade-off of various social relations rather than a means of expressing opinions and feelings. Hence, this research method is consistent with social constructionist epistemology.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and Discursive Psychology (DP) are two different versions of discourse analysis. These two versions have different theories and methodological procedures that are useful for investigating different research questions. Borrowing Riley and Wiggins’s (2019) metaphor of camera lenses: DP allows us to zoom in on details of social interaction, while FDA provides a panoramic view of a broader context. In this thesis, I adopted FDA as my main research method to understand how the reality show constructed middle-aged women's subjectivity, but I also applied DP’s discursive devices/tools to examine how the

rhetorical strategies used in *Sisters Who Make Waves* affectively invite the female audience to take the subject positions constructed by the show.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

FDA, as an analytical approach, is heavily influenced by Michel Foucault. This qualitative approach is concerned with language and its role in constructing social and psychological life within a particular socio-historical moment (Willig, 2008; Riley & Wiggins, 2019). As discussed above, from Foucault's perspective, discourse facilitates knowledge, which then constitutes people's rationality, responsibility and power relations. For discourse analysis, this translates into a focus on people's talk. So, FDA highlights the influence of power relations in discourses, especially the dominant discourse. "Dominant discourse privileges those versions of social reality that legitimate existing power relations and social structures" (Willig, 2008, p.113). Also, dominant discourses are often entrenched as common sense or truth, people often take them for granted. As a result, dominant discourses, inevitably, exert influence on producing people's talk. Hence, discourse is not simply the language used by people but a means of representing institutional practices — regulating people's social lives (Willig, 2008). FDA analyses discourses by putting them in a broader context, it is used to understand the functions of talk. For example, people's talk often presents or constructs social/power relations to achieve a certain purpose. Among these functions, offering subject positions is an important one.

Discourses offer subject positions. While FDA foregrounds this function of discourses. When people take up the positions constructed by discourses, they automatically adopt the attributes of the positions. Based on Foucault's theory of knowledge/power (discussed above), every subject position set limits and certain forms of agency on individuals simultaneously, which determines their social practices, that is, what subjects can/cannot speak and do. Moreover,

Foucault (1980) argued that “if power takes hold of the body, this isn't through it having first to be interiorised in people’s consciousness” (p.186). It means that when people are subjected to certain discourse, they may take the subject positions produced by the discourse without necessarily realising it. For example, the “resurgence of sexual difference” discourse emphasises the biological difference between women and men, so women are naturally more suitable for the role of caregivers rather than going out for a career. After women take up the position, they will feel shamed if they fail to be good caregivers as it is the responsibility of women; more than that, women rarely challenge this discourse since they take it as a “fact” for granted. Thus, FDA is used to understand the relationship between discourses and people's subjectivity, consequently their social practices.

Comparing FDA with DP

Both FDA and DP are concerned with the role of language in constructing social reality. DP focuses on what people do with language and the performative qualities of discourse (Willig, 2008). In other words, DP studies how people use language in their social interactions, including how people apply linguistic skills (discursive devices) to build specific accounts of events for a certain purpose. As discussed in the section above, FDA is concerned with the discourse resources available to people and the subjectivity, selfhood and power relations constructed by discourse (Willig, 2008). Hence, FDA does not assume speakers' autonomous agency but focuses on the impact of power on what they say and how they say it. DP, conversely, assumes speakers’ active agency, that is, speakers actively apply discursive devices for constructing certain “reality” based on their purposes although they do this so quickly as not to necessarily be conscious of it. On the other hand, FDA takes speakers’ experience as the reflection of subjectivity, while DP takes this experience as the discursive construction. For example, in the discourse “I choose to challenge the

strongest team” (extract 19 of analysis), from the FDA perspective, the speaker can be understood as drawing on a discourse of personal agency; while from the DP perspective, the analytic focus is on how the first-person pronoun “I” was used in the interaction to position herself as agentic and validate what she said. Therefore, the core analytical tools of DP are discursive devices.

Although rhetoric must be studied in the context of when it is used, there are reoccurring patterns in talk that researchers have identified. These discursive devices can be categorized in terms of prevalence and also the particular purpose or actions they perform in social interaction. According to Wiggins' (2017) categories, discursive devices can be clustered into basic, intermediate and advanced. From basic to advanced clusters, the use frequency of the involved discursive devices in everyday life decreases progressively (Wiggins, 2017).

Table 1

Three categories of discursive devices

Basic	Intermediate	advanced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pronoun • Assessments • Silence pauses hesitations • Hedging • Extreme case formulations • Minimisation • Lists and contrasts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affect displays • Consensus corroboration • Detail versus vagueness • Disclaimers • Metaphor • Narrative • Reported speech • Script formulations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agent-subject • Distinction • Emotion categories • Category entitlements • Modal verbs • Stake inoculation

Note. This table is based on the source of Wiggins (2017)

Below, I describe several of these discourse devices based on how Wiggins (2017) explained them as rhetorical strategies. For each discourse device, I follow an example for better understanding.

Pronoun shifts. The discursive device involves identifying when/where a speaker shifts different pronouns for achieving a certain purpose. A common purpose can be to transfer responsibility from oneself to others. Pronoun shifts can also be used to manage the identities of the speaker and accountability for what is being said (Wiggins, 2017). For example, in the discourse “I still want to be cool even when I am old, you can still live a cool and easy life” (extract 9), the speaker began the talk with the first-person pronoun “I”, then shifted to “you”, during the process, the obligation was shifted from herself to the listeners.

Extreme case formulations. This discursive device is usually used to exaggerate or emphasise something. Although according to Wiggins’ (2017) description, extreme case formulation did more than just exaggeration. It can be “used to defend a claim or justify the reasons for a particular preference. Extreme case formulations are designed to manage the speaker's stake in what they are saying rather than producing a fact (Wiggins, 2017). For example, in the discourse “I think the most frightening thing about women is not the ageing appearance but the ageing mind” (extract 10), “most frightening” was an extreme case formulation, it was used to emphasise that the worst case is “ageing mind”.

Script formulations, such as “usually” and “always”. This discursive device presents the frequency of a behaviour or event. For example, “I don't usually hide my age” (extract 1), “usually”, as a script formulation, was used to imply that “hiding age” is unlikely to happen to her, it was used to maintain the speaker’s authenticity.

Agent-subject distinction. This discursive device constructs the speaker’s agency or the agency of those being spoken about. For example, in the discourse “I choose to challenge the strongest team “, the speaker tried to present herself as having the agency of challenging the strongest competitor because she had choices; while in the other discourse “When you face

setbacks you have to have an attitude you will always challenge the impossibilities” (extract 18), “have to” implied the behaviour of challenge was less a choice than an obligation.

Modal verbs, such as "must" and "should". This discursive device implies the speaker's obligation/responsibility. It also presents the speakers' ability to do something. For example, “I think women should be like this way, picking up the most fearful thing” (extract 19), “should be” here was used to tell the female listeners that picking up the most fearful thing was their obligation, so the speaker tried to rationalise the behaviour of picking up the most fearful thing for women.

In conclusion, FDA and DP are two different versions of discourse analysis; they have different theories and answer different research questions. According to Riley (2003), “a multi-level approach is particularly useful when focusing on gender as it avoids dichotomising macro and micro levels of analysis but takes these levels as an inherent part of the whole of the textuality of meaning making” (p.101). So, in my study, I adopted multi-level discourse analysis, incorporating FDA and DP’s discursive devices as the research method. As for the reasons, first, middle-aged women are both the subject and object of the research; meanwhile, both age and gender are socially constructed categories, FDA is used to discover the underlying power/social relations in the discourse practices of the reality show; second, the female celebrities of the show constructed the ideal subject positions for middle-aged women and applied several discursive devices to invite the female audience to take these positions, DP is useful to identify these discursive devices and learn how female audience might be invited; third, since the thesis also wants to understand what the implication of the reality show would be for the subjectivity of middle-aged Chinese women in modern China, FDA is suitable to investigate these potential implications.

Visual Analysis

In this thesis, analysing the talks used in the reality show is my focus as it allows me to answer the research questions. However, when analysing a TV programme involving female celebrities, such as *Sisters Who Make Waves*, talk occurs with images. Visual information can reinforce, or contradict, the discourses constructed by the reality show. Consequently, adding credibility to, or invalidating the claims of the discourse. For this reason, I employed a semiotic analysis of images, which is useful for developing discourse analysis of the talk.

In the language section above, I discussed Saussure's linguistic concepts "signifier" and "signified". However, language is not the only medium that conveys meanings. Visual images also represent cultural meanings. To understand the visual information conveyed through TV shows, the pictures on the screen can be seen as signifiers, and the images' representations can be signifiers (Hall, 1997). For example, as the stage performance scenes account for a big proportion of the reality show, the celebrities were not only the speakers of discourse but also represented the ideal of middle-aged women through their bodies and other external visible fashion factors. Thus, my visual analysis focused on these fashion factors presented by female celebrities. I argue that fashion choices reflect not personal preferences but, more importantly, social norms that are shaped by culture. As a result, women tend to adopt similar fashion styles during a socio-historical period. In response to this socially constructed fashion, Crane (2000, p.1) concluded:

Clothing, as one of the most visible forms of consumption, performs a major role in the social construction of identity. Clothing choices provide an excellent field for studying how people interpret a specific form of culture for their own purposes, one that includes strong norms about appropriate appearances at a particular point in time (otherwise known as fashion) as well as an extraordinarily rich variety of alternatives.

For the method of analysing visual information in this thesis, the concepts of “denotation” and “connotation” by Roland Barthes (1967) may indicate the direction of learning visual information. Denotation is the descriptive level of analysis. This level describes what the visual images present, the level of interpretation is about describing the direct information that most people would agree with when they see the images; connotation is the level that focuses on the social meanings of the signifiers, it is the process of interpretation that beyond the visual objects.

For example, Figure 1 below is from one of the stage performance scenes of the show. From a denotation level, this visual image presents five female celebrities, most of whom wear crop tops and miniskirts. From a connotation level, crop tops and miniskirts symbolise femininity and sexiness, and although there is no explicit age limit for clothing types, crop tops and miniskirts are not a common preference among middle-aged women. Normally, these types of clothes are used to show off a slender and toned physique associated with youth. So, crop tops and miniskirts often require specific body shapes.

Figure 1

Sisters Who Make Waves Season 2



Note. This figure is adopted from Sisters Who Make Wave S2EP12-2

Data Collection

The data of this study were the transcripts of *Sisters Who Make Waves* Season 2. In my thesis, I focused on Season 2 as it displayed the latest data. My data were collected from China Hunan TV's Official channel on YouTube (https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-), which is the producer of *Sisters Who Make Waves*. Season 2 contains thirteen episodes. There are twenty-six videos on the show playlist as every episode of the show is split into two parts on YouTube. Of the twenty-six videos, one video repeats the content of episode one, so the repeated episode was excluded from the data resource. Thus, there were twenty-five valid videos involving 40 hours, 53 minutes 27 seconds in total. Table 2 below demonstrates the duration and links of each episode.

Table 2

Duration and Link of each episode of Sisters Who Make Waves Season 2

Number	Episode	Duration	Link
1	Season 2 Episode 1-1	2:00:30	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VPDhQb22N4&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-
2	Season 2 Episode 1-2	2:10:35	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-a7rSqhZUzY&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=2
3	Season 2 Episode 2-1	2:25:14	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHgeePIpCU&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=4
4	Season 2 Episode 2-2	31:15	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bR-fLoLTmaY&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=5
5	Season 2 Episode 3-1	3:01:42	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TX98RHduJ_o&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=6
6	Season 2 Episode 3-2	35:22	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fTbaB_ZiSs&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=7
7	Season 2 Episode 4-1	2:20:37	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2WySbPPvd_o&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=8

8	Season 2 Episode 4-2	30:53	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3dBdDkhArE&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=9
9	Season 2 Episode 5-1	2:43:54	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9f_6bQkxwEY&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=10
10	Season 2 Episode 5-2	35:32	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0Q2q5d-iHM&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=11
11	Season 2 Episode 6-1	2:07:53	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKYXBbn4YIo&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=12
12	Season 2 Episode 6-2	35:49	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcie1CMpGzM&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=13
13	Season 2 Episode 7-1	2:30:02	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNZmK-5eh4Q&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=14
14	Season 2 Episode 7-2	44:20	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cxYV011OLu0&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=15
15	Season 2 Episode 8-1	1:56:40	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VNRK_uLYAo&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=16
16	Season 2 Episode 8-2	34:04	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70faPHw9caY&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=17
17	Season 2 Episode 9-1	1:56:05	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFqD2pX2Efc&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=18
18	Season 2 Episode 9-2	34:02	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaR2-nWafQc&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=19
19	Season 2 Episode 10-1	2:02:35	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIQNIvTjVCI&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=20
20	Season 2 Episode 10-2	35:49	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qr9PYrV3Kb0&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=21
21	Season 2 Episode 11-1	1:58:02	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4x2k8b5NQE&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=22
22	Season 2 Episode 11-2	35:33	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byEVpeuLmMo&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=23

23	Season 2 Episode 12-1	2:23:30	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMd03xBrHWk&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=24
24	Season 2 Episode 12-2	46:19	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdURD-Hwz3M&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=25
25	Season 2 Episode 13	4:37:10	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fB7keE0b3Jc&list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-&index=26

Data Preparation

Transcripts

The verbal data of the reality show were transcribed into textual form in word documents. The data were mainly spoken by the female celebrities in the show, the rest data were from the narrator of the show. The original data were in Mandarin. Most episodes on YouTube provided English subtitles, the initial transcripts could draw on the subtitles, but it required refining in later steps as the subtitles lacked accuracy. For the first three episodes, I transcribed the data into English. Since episode 4, I began to transcribe the data into both English and Mandarin, as I found it helpful to recall the scenes where the data occurred in the later steps. I also marked which episode and what time the texts occurred. Each episode took about eight hours to transcribe on average.

In the process of transcribing, the Mandarin transcripts reflected the original data verbatim, and the English transcripts were based on a direct translation while keeping the original meaning unchanged. According to Lotfipour-Saedi (1990), translation aims to establish an equivalence between the source language and the target language texts; translation should reflect the human verbal behaviour consistently with the true nature of this behaviour. My translation of this thesis followed the discorsal factors proposed by Lotfipour-Saedi (1990) for developing translation equivalences, including vocabulary, structure, texture, sentence meaning as opposed to utterance

meaning, language varieties, aesthetic effect, and cognitive effect. For example, Lotfipour-Saedi suggested that vocabulary translation should consider the vocabulary's meaning within the overall language system. In other words, an appropriate translation equivalence should consider the word's denotative meaning, connotative meanings, collocative meaning, contrastive meaning, stylistic meaning and the implicative meaning (Lotfipour-Saedi; 1990). Most discourses used in *Sisters Who Make Waves* were in colloquial Mandarin, so I also tried to use colloquial English when translating the original data into English. However, not all Mandarin has an English equivalence. For example, the Chinese idiom “不上不下” (from extract 4), its literal translation in English is “not up nor down”, however, the idiom, in the extract's context, refers to the speaker's career, which is neither good nor bad. So, I translated it as “career hits the bottleneck” by considering the English cultural context. The meaning conveyed by this translation is closer to the original meaning conveyed by the speaker in Mandarin.

After completing all the transcripts, I read the transcripts several times to get familiar with the content. During this process, if I found some transcripts were unclearly translated, I went to the videos again to watch the relevant parts based on the marked time and modify the translation. Since the English transcripts are the translated version of mandarin, re-examinations were required, especially for data related to the potential themes after coding.

I reviewed and refined the translation again for the final extracts by watching the relevant parts of the videos. These extracts were presented in both English and Mandarin in the analysis chapter of this thesis. The reason is that something might inevitably be lost in the translation process; displaying Mandarin extracts will be helpful for readers who are interested in comparing the original data. The source is provided at the end of each extract, including when and in which

episode the talk happened. For example, S2E1-1 20:30 means that the relevant talk took place at 20 minutes and 30 seconds of episode 1-1, season two.

Coding

I read through the transcripts again before coding; made sure I was familiar with the data well. The codes were done manually. Before coding, the transcripts were printed with wide margins. The keywords were made on the left-hand side of the margin whenever the texts were related to the research questions, keywords were often 1-3 words that described the key issues. At the same time, I noted on the right-hand briefly to explain “what”, “how”, and “why” those codes were related to the research questions (Riley & Wiggins, 2019). Some texts involved two keywords, and I kept both on this stage. For example, “I think I must work hard to get the chance as I am 38 years old” (from Extract 3) can be coded both as “work hard” and “age”. This sentence reveals the information that “getting older must work hard”, the modal verb “must” imply that “work hard” is the responsibility of middle-aged women. Thus, it reflects “how” the speaker constructs the obligation for middle-aged women.

Consolidate and Conceptualise

Guided by Riley and Wiggins (2019), I reviewed the keywords I made during coding at this stage. Some keywords repeatedly emerged, such as “age” and “work hard”. I then built new word documents to put the texts presented with the same keywords together. Some keywords that were not exactly the same, but presented similar meanings, could also be put together, such as “work hard”, “efforts”, and “fighting for”.

The next stage was to conceptualise the keywords based on the extracts that belong to them. For example, “age” is an important keyword for my dataset. There are many extracts related to “age” I found some psychological terms, such as “free soul” and “young spirit”, were often used

to describe “age”. Those texts attempted to define middle-aged women. For example, age does not matter if women have a young spirit. Hence, I identified the defining feature of the age talk. However, a keyword may have more than one defining feature. For example, the keyword “age” is also conceptualised as “with less opportunities”. Thus, it seems that “age” constructed by the reality show is paradoxical. On the one hand, age does not matter; on the other hand, age does matter as older women have fewer opportunities.

Identify Discourses

Guided by Riley and Wiggins (2019), at this stage, I identified the discourses and extracts that represented them, to answer the research questions. My thesis tried to answer questions: how the reality show constructed age for women, what ideal subject positions were provided by the show, and how the discourses attempted to influence the ordinary audience. I reviewed my dataset again and identified the most relative discourses that might answer the research questions. For example, as the main thread, age was constructed complexly by the show: on the one hand, a discourse reflected age as a problem because middle-aged women had fewer opportunities; on the other hand, another discourse reframed age as an advantage and a time for women to shine.

Procedures of Analysis

My analysis procedure was guided by the combination of Willig (2008), Riley and Wiggins (2019) and Wiggins (2017). Below I outline six stages that I did for analysing the thesis data and give some relevant examples.

Stage 1: Discourses

Identify the various ways of constructing the discursive object (Willig, 2008). According to my data, middle age was the object: from the psychological perspective, middle-aged women should maintain young mind (Extract 8); from the social perspective, middle-aged women had

“less opportunities” (Extract 3); from the physical perspective, middle-aged women could be young too (Extract 13).

Stage 2: Action Orientation

This stage requires researchers to examine the discursive contexts within which the various constructions of an object can be applied, meanwhile, identify the functions of the discourses (Willig, 2008). Going back to the three examples from stage 2: it was crucial for middle-aged women to maintain a young mentality; a young mind was a psychological state, it is unlike the uncontrollable ageing process, so this psychological discourse encouraged women to work on changing their mental state as it was doable; middle-aged women had less opportunity, this social discourse warned women who were in the age group to seize the limited chances now; middle-aged women could be young, this youthful discourse legitimised the possibility of middle-aged women maintaining a youthful appearance, so working on appearance to maintain young became an achievable task.

Stage 3: Positionings

Identify the subject positions constructed by the discourses. It was an important process that would potentially answer two of my research questions: what the subject positions were constructed by the discourses and how they strategically invited ordinary audiences to take the subject positions.

As noted above, the discourses used in *Sisters Who Make Waves* attempted to construct the subject positions for middle-aged women. It applied various discursive devices to invite the ordinary female audience to take up those subject positions.

Example

I choose to challenge the strongest team. I think women should be like this way, picking up the most fearful thing and being clear about their goals. It would be the truly brave status for women. (extract 19)

This extract constructed the ideal subject position of “truly brave” women and imposed the subject position on the female audience who identify themselves as women. Truly brave women were those who challenged the strongest competitor, picked up the most fearful thing and clearly knew their goals. In other words, truly brave women did not choose anything easy but pushed themselves in extremely difficult/hard situations.

Stage 4: Identify Discursive Devices

I developed this stage through a combination of Willig’s (2008) action orientation and Wiggins’ (2017) discursive devices. In the example (extract 19) above, the speaker of the discourse applied several discursive devices tactically to invite the ordinary female audience to take up the subject position she constructed. First, the speaker used the first-person pronoun “I” to express her identity. At the same time, “I choose to” also represents agent-subject distinction; it means that it was the speaker’s active choice, not by any external forces. Then, the speaker applied the extreme case formulation “strongest” to exert the emphasising and exaggerating effect, which made her choice even more “brave”. Also, the speaker shifted the subject from “I” to “women” to address the ordinary female audience in the gender category. This shift was used to provide accountability for what she said, as I can choose, and you (the female listeners) are supposed to choose the same. After that, the speaker used the modal verb “should” (Wiggins, 2017) to imply the responsibilities that women needed to adopt. Finally, the speaker applied the assessment tool “truly” brave, which legitimate women who challenge themselves.

Stage 5: Practice

Stage 5 and stage 6 may answer the research question about the implicit influence of the show's discourses on the ordinary audience. Stage 5, based on Willig's (2008) explanation, helps to understand the actions that the discursive constructions and the subject positions allowed and constrained. This stage analyses the possibilities for action contained within the discourses (Willig, 2008). Drawing on the example of stage 4, this talk may encourage women to be "brave"; that is, they will do it even if they fear; they will force themselves even if challenging the toughest competitor is not what they want.

Stage 6: Subjectivity

Based on Willig's guidance (2008), this stage is to recognise the subjectivity constructed by the discourses. Subjectivity is the internalised self through which people make sense of the world, themselves and others. According to Davies and Harré's (1999, p.35) explanation of "subjectivity":

Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned.

Hence, when people have taken up a certain position, they would apply the actions/practices required by the subject position, while subjectivity is concerned about what people can feel from doing so (Willig, 2008). The analysis at this stage may be speculative, but the speculation is based on the analysis of previous stages and the discourses in the broader contexts.

Still borrowing the example from Stage 4, women who took up the subject position constructed by the “truly brave” discourse may feel guilty or ashamed if they do not behave in the “brave” way as they failed to meet the ideal middle-aged women. Or put it another way, women who took up the “truly brave woman” position may initially be encouraged and have an agency to push themselves to challenge the toughest situations, such as picking up the most fearful thing, but the extreme situations are likely to cause them pain. As a result, they may feel sad or depressed when they compare themselves to the ideal women represented by these female celebrities on the show.

Ethical considerations

This thesis has been assessed as Low Risk by Massey University Human Ethics Committee. In the study, I analysed the discourse used in the reality show *Sisters Who Make Waves*. The show can be accessed by anyone via the YouTube link provided above. This link connects to the show’s YouTube channel—China Hunan TV Official Channel. China Hunan TV is the show’s producer. *Sisters Who Make Waves* is a mainstream TV show, and the show’s participants are Chinese celebrities, of adult age, who should be aware of the show’s public broadcast feature. Therefore, the thesis data can be categorized as public data, and the thesis is unlikely to violate any confidentiality or cause harm to the show’s participants.

The extracts of the thesis are presented in two languages, English and Mandarin. The original data are in Mandarin, and the English data are in the translated version. As the translator, I strived to present the closest English equivalences of the original talks (discussed in the data preparation section). The original extracts are provided for the purpose of allowing readers to compare the translation. All extracts provide their source on the show, through which the talk can be traced.

Reflexivity

As the researcher, I understand that my experiences, interests, and social identity, inevitably contribute to this thesis. So, in this section, I self-reflect on my position in this thesis. I am a Chinese woman who is also located in the middle-age bracket in Chinese culture. I often heard girls/women around me say: “I wish I was a man” when they felt they experienced more inequalities than their male counterparts. I did not intensively share these feelings until I was approaching thirty. In China, turning thirty is not a pleasant time for women. Even though this age itself may not essentially decline women’s abilities, the unpleasantness is attributed to how society interprets women in their thirties and above. In Chinese culture, thirty is usually associated with the beginning of a declining social value in the heterosexual marriage market. In a context where marriage can be considered more important than a women’s career or education, thirty can hardly be appreciated by many women. My personal experience, as a Chinese woman in her thirties, allows me to understand the cultural context behind the discourses about age in *Sisters Who Make Waves*.

During my study experience in New Zealand over the past two years, I have been exposed to critical thinking about post-feminism, neoliberalism, and individualism. I am interested in these ideologies as they often question things that most people take for granted. This education experience offered me a broader perspective on understanding discourse and the social relations constructed by discourse. It also shifted my view on age and gender. When I analysed the thesis data, I tried to maintain a socially constructive lens to understand them.

The reality show *Sisters Who Make Waves* largely used postfeminist and neoliberal discourses. In the context where individualist discourse is commonplace, it implies that many of the show’s audiences may take these discourses for granted. In this thesis, I do not want to provide

any right or wrong conclusions, or seek a specific “truth”. Instead, I present these discourses from a broader perspective and foreground the neglected social inequalities found within them.

CHAPTER 3: DATA ANALYSIS

In the analysis chapter, I examine the data collected from *Sisters Who Make Waves*. As the methodology chapter described, I applied a multi-level discourse analysis, incorporating Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Discursive devices, and semiotic analysis, to better understand the discourse and visual information presented in the reality show and answer the research questions: how the discourse constructed age and subject positions for middle-aged women in modern China, and identify the discursive devices and strategies used to invite the female audience to take these subject positions.

Below, I show how the discourses of the reality show reflect postfeminist sensibility in relation to individualism, empowerment, self-surveillance/discipline, makeover paradigm and femininity as a bodily property (discussed in Chapter 1). The celebrities in *Sisters Who Make Waves* strategically articulated these ideas through empowering and affective language during the show, which I argue rhetorically interpellated female audiences to adopt the “right” mentality (i.e., confidence and positive attitude); work hard to overcome life obstacles caused by ageing in a culture that devalues ageing women; and by extension, broader life difficulties associated with being a woman.

Throughout the show, the meaning of age for women is the main discourse repeatedly mentioned. It is also the key point threading other discourses together. The discourses of the show reflected the social fact that middle age could be a problem for women. However, the female celebrities of *Sisters Who Make Waves* attempted to construct new identities (subject positions) for middle-aged women, which aimed to “solve” their age problem. In the following analysis, four main discourses are described, these are, “age is a problem for women”, “age is only a problem if you let it”, “embrace knock-backs as they make you stronger”, and “you can only rely on you”.

Discourse I: Age Is a Problem for Women

The female celebrities are middle-aged in Chinese culture. Being older has an inverse effect on women in general, and specifically in the entertainment industry (Dolan, 2014; Jermyn, 2012). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the famous celebrities articulated a core discourse of the show that age is a problem for women. This discourse is reflected in two aspects: age is a sensitive topic that female celebrities try to avoid, and age reduces opportunities.

Age Is a Sensitive Topic

As female celebrities, their age may not be kept a secret. However, the female celebrities in the show were still reluctant to reveal their age directly, showing age as a sensitive topic since they could not talk about it easily or comfortably. The following conversation is between the director of the show and a female celebrity who was fifty when she participated in the show.

Extract 1

Yang Yuying: I am Yang Yuying I am a singer. Can I keep my age a secret or I must say it?

Director : Because we need to

Yang Yuying: But I saw that some sisters didn't say either on the first season. It was also quite comfortable. What about I just say I was born in 1971, is it okay? I don't like it that much, yeah, I don't usually hide my age but I debuted 30 years ago, my god. (S2E1-1 17:08)

杨钰莹：大家好我是杨钰莹我是歌手年龄不要讲了吧？一定要讲吗？

导演：因为是会有这个

杨钰莹：可是第一季我看有些姐姐也没有讲也蛮舒服的不如我就说我是 1971 年生人，好吗？我不大喜欢那样，对，我不大隐瞒自己的年龄，可是我出道也有三十年了，我的天啊。

The female celebrity requested to not reveal her age in front of the camera by asking, “I must say it?”. She then indirectly stated her age by giving her birth year instead of the exact age number. She explained that she did not like talking about age, although it was not because she wanted to hide it. She also tried to rationalise her request not to state her age, saying that some female celebrities in season one did not say their ages either. This statement acts to normalise not saying her age and justified saying that she felt more “comfortable” not revealing her age. The script formulation “usually” (Wiggins, 2017) was used in a negative sentence — “I don’t usually hide my age”, to maintain her authenticity, but it also implied that there was something inappropriate about hiding her age. She then mentioned she debuted 30 years ago, which, again, was an indirect reference to how old she was; she finished the talk with a sense of shock and horror “my god”. Therefore, extract 1 shows the ambivalent talk of a female celebrity about revealing her age, which involves her rationalising her avoidance while maintaining authenticity in that she did not hide her age.

Extract 1 implies that being older is understood as a problem. This is unsurprising, given that ageing has adversely impacted women, especially in the film and TV industry. Middle-aged female celebrities often have fewer job opportunities than in their 20s (Zhang, 2019). Under the influence of China’s deep-rooted patriarchal society, beauty and youth are considered the capital, or the main value, for women, bringing positive life outcomes (Teng et al., 2017), while ageing usually has negative effects on socially constructed beauty standards. These provide the conditions

for middle-aged women to understand age as a sensitive topic and thus reluctant to reveal their age directly.

Extract 1 shows how the celebrity avoided explicitly stating her age, and, perhaps through that, avoided being categorised as “old”, given that in other parts of the reality show, the celebrities explicitly described wanting to avoid this category. For example, the following extract 2 happened when the thirty female celebrities were together for Chinese New Year, and one of them suggested that relatively older sisters sit together, but these celebrities were reluctant to be categorised as “older”.

Extract 2

Na Ying: I'll arrange it, relatively older ones sit in the main table

Jin Qiaoqiao: I really don't want to go there [laughs]

Cheng Lisha: The older ones my god I am so...

Yang Yuying: I [laughs] am the youngest

Na Ying: Older people sit around the main table, YANG YUYING! HU JING!

Hu Jing: I am not the most... (S2E4-1 30:45)

那英: 好我安排一下啊岁数大的坐主桌

金巧巧: 好不想去啊(哈哈)

程莉莎: 岁数大的, 天啊, 我好...

杨钰莹: (笑) 我最小

那 英：岁数大的坐主桌，(喊) 杨钰莹！胡静！

胡 静：我不是最...我..

After Na suggested that relatively older celebrities sit around the main table, the other four somewhat older celebrities were reluctant to sit together, suggesting that no one wanted to be categorised as “older”. Jin then explicitly stated this, responding directly with “I really don't want to go there”, and her laughter showed trouble and perhaps embarrassment of “older”. Cheng and Hu also showed trouble in their talk, expressed in their unfinished sentences respectively — “The older ones, my god I am so...” and “I am not the most...”, these unfinished sentences implied that it might be uneasy for them to say “old” directly or to describe the feeling of being old. Yang, the second oldest celebrity in the show, joked that she was the youngest, a joke that deflects the embarrassment of being old. Therefore, extract 2 makes it clear that the middle-aged celebrities in the show consider “ageing” as an unpleasant embarrassment, so they attempted to avoid being categorised as the “older group”.

Age Reduces Opportunities

As mentioned above, age is a sensitive topic in the entertainment industry, specifically for women. Thus, those female celebrities in *Sisters Who Make Waves*, inevitably, face the disadvantages caused by ageing. For example, they indicated that working opportunities became fewer after they entered their 30s.

Extract 3

An Youqi: I think I must work hard to get the chance as I am 38 years old, so I am almost 40, the chance for me is getting less and less actually. You don't know what else you can do (S2E2-2 14:54)

安又琪： 我要很努力的争取这个机会,因为我三十八岁了,我马上四十岁了,其实在我面前的机会已经越来越少越来越少,你不知道还能干什么

An said she must work hard to get the chance, “must” is a modal verb (Wiggins, 2017), emphasising it was her obligation. She was 38, so her chance was getting less and less. “Actually” was used to justify what she said, making it a true claim. Extract 3 thus articulates the discourse of age as a problem, in this case, related to reduced work opportunities. In An’s case, she was approaching 40; her talk implies the scarcity of chances for women over 40 years old. Her last sentence, “you don’t know what else you can do”, reveals the sense of powerlessness due to lacking opportunities.

This talk reflects the “reality” of the television industry; female celebrities often have shorter careers in this industry than their male counterparts. They are likely to find their career “over the hill” after approaching their mid-30s due to prevailing ageism and gender discrimination in the field (Zhang, 2019). Middle-aged female celebrities are comparatively invisible in media due to fewer job opportunities in the highly competitive industry, and age is an important factor in this result (Xue & Liu, 2020). Similarly, Dolan (2014) also mentions that older female celebrities are far less likely to appear on screen in the entertainment industry as this male-dominated industry is obsessed with youthful aesthetics. The female celebrities in the show recognise this context in their talk, in which they connect/reiterate the importance of grasping “the chance” as “chance for me is getting less and less”.

As women’s opportunities get fewer while they age, many female celebrities in *Sisters Who Make Waves* encounter a career bottleneck. The following extract 4 was from a thirty-four-year-

old celebrity. Her talk represented her age-related anxiety; like most other female celebrities in the show, she took the reality show as their “last chance” to be successful.

Extract 4

Tang Jingmei: At our age, a state of severe anxiety, that is, the career hits the bottleneck while we have never got famous. In fact, there are many women in their 30s like me who are not noticed by people, it is maybe the best chance in my life, I just hope to make people see me and tell you who Tang Jingmei is (S2E1-2 38:15)

汤晶媚：在我们这个年龄非常焦虑的一个状态就是不上不下也并没有红过，其实像我这样不会被人看到的三十加的姐姐其实是挺多的，也许这是我人生最好的一次机会我就是希望大家看到我，然后告诉你汤晶媚是谁

The speaker used “our” as the pronoun to include more women in this age group rather than speaking for herself only. It made her talk of her experiences as representative of women more generally, rather than elite female celebrities. She described being over 30 as a state of severe anxiety, where they never made it to fame but hit the career bottleneck. Combined with the analysis of extract 3, the career bottleneck is likely a reference to insufficient opportunities due to ageing. She then added that there are many women in their 30s who have the same issue of not being noticed. This statement, again, included women, in general, making it normative. Then the speaker took it back to the specifics of her situation, *Sisters Who Make Waves* was probably the best of the few remaining chances that might make her succeed or, in her words, be recognised by people.

As the discourse displayed above, age is a problem that restrains female celebrities’ opportunities to develop careers. However, this age issue is not unique to female celebrities in

China. The entertainment industry's preference for women of a certain age group mirrors the audience's preference, and thus the attitude of the whole society towards women's values. An example that presents this attitude is that the derogatory term "leftover women" in Chinese 剩女 has been widely used to classify women unmarried in their late twenties and older in China (To, 2015; Fincher, 2016). It reflects the social phenomenon that women's social value declines with age, which leads them to be disadvantaged in the marriage market.

Discourse I reproduced the understanding of age as a problem for women, showing that it was a sensitive topic related to an embarrassing or undesirable identity, which was an uncomfortable psychological state, but it was also an external sociological and organisational issue related to age-reducing opportunities. However, the female celebrities of *Sisters Who Make* also employed other discourses, described below, which resisted gender inequality in Chinese culture and which attempted to redefine middle age for women.

Discourse II: Age Is Only a Problem If You Let It

Despite recognition of age-related inequalities, much of the female celebrities' talk downplayed or resisted the negative impact of age. Instead, they reframed age as a time of opportunity, echoing a central trope of *Sisters Who Make Wave*, as the show's stated aim is to encourage ordinary women to get rid of age constraints and break the stereotype of age (摆脱年龄束缚, 打破标签定义) (Mango TV, 2021). Below, three (sub)discourses/constructions of age with the relevant extracts are presented: first, age is a time to shine, age connects charm, sophistication, and middle age is a rebirth; second, age is psychology, age does not restrict women if they adopt a "young spirit/mind" and "a free soul", women also need the "right" mindsets, such as unconditional confidence; third, age is related to beauty, middle-aged women can still meet the aesthetic standards and keep youthful appearance if they give their bodies constant attention.

Age Is a Time to Shine

This discourse shows how *Sisters Who Make Waves* constructed age as a malleable factor that can be changed by middle-aged women. The celebrities drew on this to discourse in ways that called on the audience to be inspired to change themselves, and consequently the stereotypes of middle-aged women in the culture. The overall message in this talk was that women can still achieve any goals over thirty. The language used in the show tended to be inspiring and affective, speaking to female audiences, and interpellating them to identify with the female celebrities. Extract 5 is an example to display these discursive strategies.

Extract 5

Narration: Maybe we are stars alone, but we are members of the community of shared destiny. We sincerely long for a sailboat that can plough the waves work for one of ten thousand possibilities it can activate more lives and we have the courage to explore 100% from 10%. (S2E1-1 00:43)

旁 白： 我们是星辰更是命运共同体,我们真心渴望乘风破浪的帆船，这一万种可能性之一的努力能激活更多的人生勇于从十分去探索一百分

“Star” was a metaphor. In this sentence, it was referring to ordinary women. Here the narrator constructed women as individual stars in the sky when alone, but they could also be “members of the community” who shared the same “destiny”. This sentence aimed to invite all the female audiences together for a reason. Considering “age” is the most important object of the reality show, I argue that the “shared destiny” might refer to challenging the idea of ageing as a negative process. This discursive strategy tried to build a bond with the female audience. The pronoun “we” included these female celebrities of the show, which tried to resonate with the

audience. “We sincerely long for a sailboat that can plough the waves”, assumed that all the women had been desiring (sincerely long for) the “sailboat”. The metaphor “sailboat” implied an opportunity and echoed the show’s name, *Sisters Who Make Waves*. In other words, this reality show was the opportunity women had longed for. “One of ten thousand possibilities” was an extreme case formulation, emphasising the possibility was rare. However, women should still “work” for it, and this effort could “activate more lives”. Put in the other way, *Sisters Who Make Waves* is the show that can activate more women’s lives. The last sentence, “we have the courage to explore 100% from 10”, was used to inspire the audience, empowering them with the courage to pursue “100%”. 100% implied being perfect, even when they currently only had “10%”. Extract 5 used two extreme case formulations to encourage the ordinary female audience that even if the chance of success was rare for them or they were far away from their goals, they should still pay an effort to approach them.

This “activating life” discourse represents the mentality of meritocracy in the neoliberal culture; that is, no matter what social position you have right now, the “talent” combined with “effort” would rise you to the top (Littler, 2017). Under the influence of this mindset, people are encouraged to compete to succeed, and it also promotes entrepreneurial behaviours in daily life (Littler, 2017). However, the validity of meritocracy is to assume that society offers enough opportunity and mobility to everyone, which downplays the social inequalities in many aspects, such as class and gender.

As shown above, age reduces women’s opportunities (extracts 3 and 4), leading middle-aged women a vulnerable group. However, the discourses used in *Sisters Who Make Waves* tried to redefine middle age as an advantage. For example, extract 6 below compared how women understand problems in their 20s and 30s and above.

Extract 6

Li huizhen: 30s 40s and 20s we look at problems in different height, width, depth and dimension. This is the charm of age. If you are 40s and you still have the worries of 20s girls, then you just wasted time. what are you doing? right?
(S2E3-1 34:32)

李慧珍: 30+ 40+ 跟 20+ 我们看问题的高度广度和深度维度是不一样的这就是年龄的魅力如果说你已经 40+了你还是会有 20+那种小女生的担忧顾虑那你不是白活了吗 你干嘛呢? 是吗?

The speaker attempted to redefine age as “charm”; consequently, middle-aged women were charismatic. She compared the ability to interpret problems between middle-aged women and younger women in their 20s. She stressed that the difference was complete in terms of “height, width, depth and dimension”. It implied that middle-aged women had a level of sophistication that women in their 20s could not match. The speaker’s talk then portrayed a condition in which women in their 40s still worried about what women in their 20s worried about; she commented on the condition negatively by saying that they were just wasting time. When the speaker made the comparison, she used the pronoun “we” to include herself as the charismatic group, that is, the middle-aged women, whereas when she criticised women who worried like girls in their 20s, she shifted the pronoun to “you”, saying “you just wasted time”, she finished the talk by asking two rhetorical questions “what are you doing?”, “Right?”.

This talk constructed an agreement that women must grow as they age; therefore, middle-aged women should be much better than women in their 20s, and they should have better emotion regulation skills, such as not worrying in a way that women in their 20s might. This talk reflects

the postfeminist sensibility in relation to self-transformation, or Gill's (2007a) term, makeover paradigm, and self-surveillance. This ideology assumes that every woman's agency to become a "better" self. The information conveyed from extract 6 is quite clear: if women do not improve every year, they are failing to live a good life and "just waste time". The following extract 7 also constructs middle age as a desirable moment for women's transformation.

Extract 7

Jia Qing: For every woman, turning 30 is an opportunity for rebirth and transformation, I am 34 years old, I was once confused, scared, and lost. I believe everyone presents here had such time as well but today I am here on the stage of *Sisters Who Make Waves* I want to shine. (S2E5-1 2:17:23)

贾青: 30岁对每个女人来说都是一个重生蜕变的机会我今年34岁了我一度是出于非常迷茫恐惧和失落的状态我相信各位在座的浪花姐姐们也有过这样的时候但是我今天站在乘风破浪姐姐的舞台上我想发光发亮.

The speaker defined age as an opportunity, arguing that when women entered their 30s, they might be reborn as a better version of themselves. This claim was presented as an absolute truth for "every woman". Jia Qing then shifted the topic to herself, disclosing her own experiences of feeling psychologically vulnerable by describing herself as previously feeling "confused, scared and lost". She then constructed her personal experience into a generalized one by saying, "I believe everyone presents here had such time". "I believe" strategically implied her confidence to say so; meanwhile, it increased the credibility of the assumption. The extract finished with her making the claim that she wanted to shine, so that the whole extract described a trajectory from a

psychologically vulnerable youth into an older woman capable of shining, and one that implicitly speaks to the female audience through the shift from the personal narrative to a generalized one.

Both extract 6 and extract 7 strategically reconstructed middle age as a completely positive thing for women; as women step into this age group, they become better themselves, with an extreme case formulation description of this development as rebirth. Conversely, the 20s was constructed as a problem as women in their 20s tend to be “confused, scared, and lost”. Therefore, the discourse “age is a time to shine” reconstructs middle age as a desirable period for women, which brings more advantages than the 20s.

Age Is Psychology

The discourses used in the reality show attempted to reconstruct age, not as a chronological measurement, but as an internal mindset that could be controlled by women psychologically. The following discourse is also encouraging and affective, it uses the sense of contrast to emphasise the possibility of having a young spirit even when women are old. Extract 8 was from a fifty-three-year-old female celebrity, who was the oldest participant in this show.

Extract 8

Na ying: I am Na Ying, who is always curious and always enthusiastic. At the age of 53 I still challenge myself and make waves with the spirit of a teenager. The boat will stop the people will move forward. All sisters, as long as our spirits don't stop our dreams will never fall (S2E13 3:34:27)

那 英: 我是永远好奇,永远热爱,在五十三岁这一年里仍然怀着少年的心, 挑战自己乘风破浪的那英。船会停人将行,各位姐姐只要我们心不止梦永不落幕

Na used herself as an example to convince the ordinary female audience that even at the age of 53, it was still possible to “move forward”. Unlike the female celebrities who hesitated to state their age (see extracts 1, 2), Na highlighted her age so as to emphasise how age normally contrasts with the traits of “curious” and “enthusiastic”. Thus, she used herself as an example to show that it is possible to have the “spirit of a teenager” even at her age. “Always” is a script formulation that presents the high frequency; her curiosity and enthusiasm towards life never changed with age. She still actively challenged herself at the age of 53, “still” implied that it was uncommon among middle-aged women because “curious” and “enthusiastic” were often associated with the “spirit of a teenager”. She then moved onto a “boat”, which is referenced as a metaphor for the reality show *Sisters Who Make Waves*. “The boat will stop the people will move forward” meant that the show would certainly end, but women who participated in the show would continue moving forward. She then addressed all women, saying “all sisters”, which interpellated the female audience to also not stop chasing dreams but challenge themselves and “make waves”. Hence, extract 8 used many discursive strategies to invite middle-aged women to take the ideal subject position of young minds women, who understand themselves as empowered subjects through adopting a teenage spirit, such as curiosity and enthusiasm.

Extract 8 echoed postfeminist sensibility in relation to empowerment and individualism. Middle-aged women are supposed to help themselves with desirable personalities, so they do not stop due to ageing. The discourse seems inspiring and affective, especially from a female celebrity over 50.

Extract 8 highlights the importance of the “spirit of a teenager”. Similarly, the following talk emphasises the desirable mindset “free soul”, which is the “most important” thing for middle-aged women to maintain.

Extract 9

Zhou Bichang: I still want to be cool even when I am old. You can still live a cool and easy life I believe it is the most important to remain a free soul (S2E1-1 2:30)

周 笔畅：我到老我都想做一个很酷的人，你仍然可以活得很洒脱。我觉得最主要是有一颗自由的灵魂。

The speaker initially used the first-person pronoun “I” to express her wish, that is, “want to be cool” when she was old. It was an active sentence, implying the speaker’s agency, and then she switched to the pronoun “you” to refer to all the listeners, that is, all the listeners “can live a cool and easy life”. This pronoun shift tried to invite more people to take the subject position of being cool. It also transferred the obligation of living a cool life from herself to the audience. In her first sentence, “I still want to be cool even when I am old”, the words “still” and “even” implied the sense of incompatibility between “cool” and “old”, or put it another way, it was uncommon to see old people live a “cool” life. In the last sentence, “I believe it is the most important to remain a free soul”, the extreme case formulation “most important” was used to emphasise the importance of a free soul.

The speaker assumed every female audience’s agency as “you can still live a cool and easy life”. It resonates with postfeminist sensibility in relation to individualism. Extract 9 constructs “being cool” as a personal choice, and every woman has the autonomy and agency to choose to “live a cool and easy life”. Consequently, it is women’s responsibility to be cool. This talk also assesses the “free soul” as the “most important” thing when people age. However, “free soul” is a subtle concept that lacks a clear explanation and is difficult to measure. From the perspective of the literal meaning, I argue that a “free soul” can mean an uninhibited mindset that is not bound

by any social rules. Therefore, it is likely an unrealistic goal. Put it together, extract 9 attempts to encourage ordinary middle-aged women to “live a cool and easy life”; meanwhile, it assumes everyone’s agency. It also proposes that “free soul” is the “most important” means of living “a cool and easy life”, although “free soul” is a state of mind that is unlikely to be achieved.

As the previous discourse constructed that age is a problem for women, it reduces opportunities. Undoubtedly, for most people, ageing is a natural and irreversible process. However, a psychological mindset is fluid that can be worked on. The following extract 10 came from a forty-three-year-old celebrity who argued that an ageing mind was more frightening than an ageing appearance.

Extract 10

Hu jing: No matter what age you are, everyone has a sun in their hearts, and that sun will never set. I think the most frightening thing about women is not the ageing appearance but the ageing mind. Although I am in my 40s, my life shouldn't stop here (S2E12-1 16:48)

胡 静： 不管你到了什么年龄每个人心里面都有一个自己的太阳那个太阳是永远不会落下来的我觉得女性最可怕的不是外表的衰老而是你内心的衰老虽然我是四十加了但是人生不应该止步于此

Extract 10 emphasises that age does not matter from three aspects. First, the speaker used the word “everyone” to cover all the ordinary female audiences; she assumed that all the women had an unset sun in their hearts. An unset sun, as a metaphor, implied dreams, hopes, and enthusiasm that had never gone away. Thus, the first sentence was used to inspire ordinary audiences to achieve their dreams/goals no matter what age. Then she said, “I think the most

frightening thing about women is not the ageing appearance but the ageing mind”. This sentence attempted to downplay the importance of a young appearance to women because an ageing mind was more frightening than an ageing appearance, making an ageing mind a problem. So, it is significantly crucial for women to keep their minds young. To understand it in the context, the ageing mind alludes to a state where women stop pursuing dreams/goals due to ageing. In the last sentence, she gave herself an example, “although I am in my 40s, my life shouldn’t stop here”. “Shouldn’t” is a modal verb, implying that her behaviour results from responsibility. In other words, she is responsible for nonstop chasing. However, the word “although” reveals the sense that it is more common to see people in their 40s stop chasing.

The female celebrities in *Sisters Who Make Waves* tried to downplay age as an insignificant factor for women, whereas a young mind is the crucial element that women should adopt. Since a young mind, as a mentality, is changeable, it is women’s responsibility to change their minds so they can keep on working and achieving endless goals, while age is not the reason to stop them. This individualistic psychological discourse neglects the social fact of gender inequality in China’s patriarchal society. The adverse effects caused by ageing, including aged appearance, impact women more than men. In her book *Buying beauty*, Wen Hua discusses the reasons for the popularity of cosmetic surgery among Chinese women. She explains that beautiful appearance, as a form of sexual capital, is a key factor in improving women’s social and economic status (Hua, 2013). A woman’s appearance and age are important not only in the marriage market but also in the job market, and middle-aged women opt for cosmetic surgery to make themselves look younger to stay competitive in job-hunting (Hua, 2013; Hanser, 2005). Therefore, women are more likely to experience ageing anxiety due to their appearance declining. It is, obviously, opposite to what is constructed in extract 10.

Extract 10 highlights the importance of young minds for women so they never stop chasing their dreams regardless of age. However, as discussed above, women's path forward may be hindered by the difficulties caused by the social stigma of age. Consequently, confidence becomes a desirable mindset that women need to move on. The following talk took place when a female celebrity was questioned by some netizens, who criticised her for overconfidence.

Extract 11

Jia Qing: Some netizens say I am too confident, but I want to say people are supposed to be confident on this stage. I kept denying myself on this stage and constantly re-establish confidence. I want to say people who flew kites may know that kites only fly higher and further against the wind. (S2E7-1 1:31:57)

贾 青：有网友说我谜之自信，但是我想说人本该就该有自信，我在这个舞台上我不断的否定自己不断的重新建立信心，我想说放过风筝的人知道风筝只有在逆风中才能飞的更高更远

Extract 11 conveys the idea that there is no “too confident” because “people are supposed to be confident”. She rationalised her possible overconfidence, which was criticised by some netizens. “Constantly re-establish confidence” implied that she had lost her confidence many times, but she finally managed to rebuild it. Thus, she was resilient in the face of self-doubt. Furthermore, she reframed the stage of self-doubt as a positive barrier, as each regained confidence makes her a stronger and better version of herself. She used the metaphor of “flying kites”, which made kites fly “higher and further” only when they flew against the wind. Wind implies barriers here. In this talk, the speaker ostensibly narrated her personal experiences of regaining self-confidence after

numerous self-denials, extract 11, however, was also an affective discourse designed to resonate with the audience. Women, especially middle-aged women, are likely to have a similar experience of self-doubt in a culture that devalues ageing women.

Orgad and Gill (2022), in their new book *Confidence Culture* stated, “As gender, racial and class inequalities deepen, women are increasingly called on to believe in themselves” (p. 9). As the exhortation of self-confidence has permeated a wide range of domains of life, it has become unquestioned common sense in contemporary culture (Orgad & Gill, 2022). Confidence-related discourse often addresses individualism; women’s problems should be solved from their psychological level rather than socio-structural level; confidence is also a desirable element of postfeminist sensibility. It acts as a disciplinary technology of the self, exerting self-motivation and self-regulation effects for women while attenuating social problems such as gender inequality (Gill & Orgad, 2017). However, being confident does not equal consistently strong; women can still show their vulnerability. Orgad and Gill (2022) argue that exposing vulnerability, a seemingly contradictory move, is also a mandatory part of the individualistic psychologised confidence imperative. Most importantly, self-confidence may also be a tool to regulate women’s complaints and emotions, making them believe that their inferior status is not a result of patriarchal capitalism or institutionalised sexism but represents an individual’s insufficiency, such as confidence deficit (Gill & Orgad, 2017).

Similar to extract 11, extract 12 below highlighted the speaker’s unconditional confidence, but unlike extract 11, which justified confidence through being resilient, the speaker of extract 12 emphasises pleasing herself.

Extract 12

Wang Ou: I do everything with confidence. I am already 38 years old, you have to tell yourself that (do) anything should be firstly based on my will then whether you like it or not. It is a very good state to please yourself, first of all everyone must love themselves or say self-approval. (S2E1-2 1:46:32)

王 鸥：我做什么事情都会有自信，都活到 38 岁了你要告诉自己，任何事情首先得是我愿意然后才是你喜不喜欢，悦己是一个非常好的状态，首先每一个人就是要爱自己嘛，要认可自己应该说是

Above, Wang Ou applied two modal verbs in extract 12, “should” and “must”, emphasising it was women’s obligation to love themselves and do everything based on their will. The first-person pronoun “I” was used to express the speaker’s agency; she does “everything with confidence”. “Everything”, as an extreme case formulation, emphasised her utterly confidence. Meanwhile, it was also an exaggeration to verify her statement. Then, the pronoun shifts to “you” to invite all the listeners to do her suggested action, that is, “you have to tell yourself that (do) anything should be firstly based on my will”, and “have to” implies the passive obligation. The talk, “(do) anything should be firstly based on my will then whether you like it”, constructed individual preference over other’s perspectives as the most important. It is because “please oneself” is a very good state. This “I come first” discourse challenges the traditional gender norm, in which women often put their family members first.

Extract 12 suggested that middle-aged women should adapt to the subjectivity of seeking happiness internally rather than externally. Self-compassion language, such as “self-pleased”, “love themselves”, and “self-approval”, reflected the individualist ideology; that is, women should

keep attention to themselves and take responsibility for their own happiness, success, and achievement. Extract 12 also presented the self-help discourse. This kind of discourse has been unprecedentedly spread in various literature, providing women with the hope of “being better” because they are often positioned in need of becoming the ideal individualist selves (Riley et al., 2019). Self-help is usually associated with self-centred transformation and resilience, and in so doing, it diminishes attention to social inequalities.

As displayed above, the discourses of the reality show reconstructed age as psychology that can be worked on. This psychological discourse also created the subject positions of young mindset and confident women for middle-aged women. Based on the discourse, ageing appearance does not matter if women manage to have a young mindset (e.g., extract 10). I argued in the previous that appearance is important to women as aged appearance brings disadvantages in various aspects. However, below I show how the celebrities argued that middle-aged women can also be conventional beautiful if they give their appearance constant attention.

Age Is Related to Beauty

Female celebrities on the show avoided direct reference to the impact of physical appearance on their success, but the importance of appearance could hardly be neglected. It indirectly reflected their frequent appearance-related comments on each other. For example, in the show, episode one, comments, such as “beauty” (美女), “beautiful” (漂亮/美), and “good-looking” (好看) are said 55 times. The extracts displayed in this (sub)discourse link middle-aged women to conventional beauty, age is not a beauty restriction for middle-aged women. With constant efforts to maintain women’s youth, middle-aged women can be even more beautiful than they were in their 20s. These middle-aged female celebrities in *Sisters Who Make Waves* make this information even more conceiving by presenting their ideal appearance as evidence.

Extract 13 below, the speaker tried to legitimise the possibility that middle-aged women could have a youthful appearance, so it linked middle-aged women to beauty.

Extract 13

Yang Yuying: Women can be young at any age (S2E3-1 2:05)

杨钰莹：女性无论在任何年纪都可以青春

Women are a gender category, including anyone identifying as female. All “women can be young” regardless of their age. Extract 13 legitimised middle-aged women or even older can also be young. On the surface, this discourse seems inspiring, but increased age often comes with physical ageing, making it an impractical task. Extract 13 might be intended to alleviate women’s fear of getting older, but paradoxically, it could increase women’s anxiety because once youth becomes a state that women of any age can achieve, youth is an external result of self-choice. In other words, it is women’s obligation to choose to stay young.

Even though extract 13 legitimised that women of any age can be young, it did not mention in which way women can possibly achieve it. Below, extract 14 revealed that constant efforts might be the method. This conversation was mainly from a thirty-eight-year-old celebrity when online netizens asked her what she thought of the attention audience had paid to her appearance since the reality show began. This question indirectly suggested that appearance was one of the focal points of the audience watching the show.

Extract 14

Chen yanxi: As the matter of fact, all the sisters know that it is not easy to maintain the appearance

Jiang luxia: Yes, it is very difficult

Chen yanxi: It takes a lot of efforts I hardly eat seasoned foods for so many years. It has been persisted for many years it also reflects my respect for the career more or less. (S2E6-1 34:50)

陈 妍希: 其实姐姐们都了解要维持外貌也是很不容易的一件事情

蒋 璐霞: 非常难

陈 妍希: 也是要为此付出很多努力,就是我这么多年几乎都不吃有调味料的食物,坚持了这么多年也是多多少少对这个职业的一份敬意吧

Chen was the main speaker of this conversation. The expression “as the matter of fact” was used to justify what she said. In other words, her talk was based on the truth. “It is not easy to maintain appearance”, and “all the sisters know it” as a fact. “All the sisters know” was used to normalise the phenomenon of maintaining appearance among women. After her talk, another celebrity agreed, saying, “it is very difficult”. Chen then gave her own experience of working on the appearance: “it takes a lot of effort”. For example, she “hardly eat seasoned foods for so many years”. She also added that a strict diet represented a female celebrity’s respect for her care, which implied that a female celebrity’s appearance is crucial in the entertainment industry. Her talk positively constructed women who persevered in maintaining their youth to show their professionalism.

Extract 14 reflects the elements of postfeminist sensibility—bodily property, self-surveillance and transformation. Women constantly work on their bodies to meet aesthetic ideals because an attractive appearance is important to female celebrities and ordinary audiences. It is

why online netizens asked appearance-related questions in the first place. However, it raises the question of why women must work hard to look attractive. The answer may have to do with China's narrow beauty standards. Beauty and young are undoubtedly ideal for women in Chinese culture, including middle-aged women. China's aesthetic standards for women are strict. The recently widely circulated beauty ideal "white, young and thin (白幼瘦)" is a typical example of China's overly narrow aesthetic under the influence of the patriarchal society (Liu, 2021), which restricts the value of women to certain appearances. In addition, women's beautiful appearance may affect their career success.

On the other hand, beauty standards work as discipline and regulation for women, although beauty practices usually are seen as self-choice and produced through self-surveillance (Elias et al., 2017). Women actively work on their bodies to meet the social norm and feel anxious if they fail to approach the ideal. Feminists argue that "beauty" is an effective tool of patriarchal domination, which restricts norms of femininity, resulting in women's depression and anorexia (Elias et al., 2017).

In the "age is psychology" discourse, the female celebrities constructed confidence as a desirable mindset for middle-aged women; once women manage to have this mindset, they will continue to chase their dreams, and age is no longer a problem for them. Self-confidence is a state in which people positively trust their beliefs, judgements, abilities, etc. Often confidence comes from past successes and familiarity with certain things. In *Sister Who Make Waves*, however, beauty and self-confidence are interconnected; that is, confidence can lead to a high evaluation of one's own beauty; meanwhile, beauty is the reason for confidence. The following conversation demonstrates this relationship.

Extract 15

Jike Junyi: I certainly don't care about where you set me, because no matter where I am, I will be the most special one. I come here to present my beauty and my talent

Director: umm, so is age a trouble to you?

Jike Junyi: it is certainly a big trouble that I am much more beautiful than I was in my 20s. (S2E1-2 1:10:03)

吉克隽逸: 当然了我不怕你们把我放在哪 放在哪我都是最特别的那个我就是来展示我的美丽和我的才华

导演: 这个年龄对你是个困扰吗

吉克隽逸: 当然了这个困扰非常大我比二十多岁的时候更美了

The female celebrity Jike explained that she did not care where she was positioned on the show because she would be the most special of all the celebrities, emphasising that it was “certainly” an indisputable fact. She continued that she joined the show to present her beauty and talent. When the director asked if her age was trouble, she joked that the age was big trouble, but the trouble was desirable as she was even more beautiful than she was in her 20s. This seemingly narcissistic discourse sounds abrupt in Chinese culture, where modesty is a virtue. The premise that the narcissistic discourse can be accepted, or even appreciated, by the audience is that it is rationalised through an expression defined as self-confidence. While her confidence comes from her current beauty, which is even more attractive than in her 20s. Her talk further corroborates another celebrity's previous claim that women can be young at any age (extract 13).

The speaker of extract 13 linked youth to women of any age. Below, she revealed the reason why youth was vital for Chinese women. She also legitimised the meaning of *Sisters Who Make Waves* for all women.

Extract 16

Yang yuying: In fact, in terms of Eastern aesthetics it seems that no matter how old you are, it is always the compliment that wow you are in your 40s or you are in your 50s, but you look like a girl. That is, in the Eastern aesthetics young girls are always the mainstream. This reality show is to let everyone put the mature beauty sisters who are above 30 into the Eastern aesthetics again. I think this is the best part of the show (S2E12-1 1:07:08)

杨钰莹：其实在东方的审美里来讲，好像你多大都是怎们你哇你四十多了快五十多了你长得跟少女一样，就是在东方的审美里面永远都是少女是主流。这个节目就是让大家重新再把三十加的姐姐这种成熟的美放到东方的审美里面。我觉得这点是姐姐这个节目最牛的一个地方

Extract 16 revealed the fact that no matter how old a Chinese woman is, it is always pleasing to complement her youthful appearance because the appearance of a young girl is the eternal mainstream aesthetic in the eastern culture. She gave the example of how it is delightful that people compliment women in their 40s and 50s for looking like young girls. The speaker then gave *Sisters Who Make Waves* a positive meaning; that is, this show included the “mature beauty” of women over 30 in eastern aesthetics.

Extract 16 attempted to make the reality show more than just a TV show for entertainment because it approved the “mature beauty” as a part of eastern aesthetics. This talk implies that these

middle-aged celebrities presented a “mature beauty” on the show, which is different from young women’s beauty. However, it is worth noticing that almost all the thirty female celebrities in a reality show can be considered conventionally beautiful. In other words, they meet a youthful-looking Eastern aesthetics well, which reflects the visual information they presented in the show.

The female celebrities in the show tend to wear tight-fitting clothes to accentuate their figures, and some fashion elements often require certain body shapes. Figure 1 is an example; it was from one of the stage performance scenes of the show.

Figure 2

Sisters Who Make Waves Season 2



Note. This figure is adopted from Sisters Who Make Wave S2EP12-2

The visual image presents five female celebrities; their clothes are in the colour black and gold. Four of them wear crop tops (1st to 4th on the right), revealing their flat stomachs; three wear miniskirts (1st, 2nd and 4th from the left), showing their slim, toned thighs. None of them smile, but

their facial expressions are relaxed. Three of them adopt the chin up and shoulder back posture. The five celebrities are in the pose of stretching their bodies to some extent.

Figure 1 conveys that the five female celebrities are confident, independent, and assertive. Even though there is no explicit age limit on the types of clothing, crop tops and miniskirts are not common preferences for middle-aged women. According to Haslanger (2007), crop tops, as the fashion trend among teenage girls, sexualise those girls who wear them while marginalising larger girls. Crop tops and miniskirts are often considered “sexy” and “hyper-feminine”, but they are not considered flattering on plus-size bodies. The five celebrities have bodies that are recognizably slim. They represent the ideals that meet Chinese aesthetics. Overall, these five celebrities represent sexy, confident, and attractive women who meet the aesthetic standards in Chinese culture. Moreover, given their “middle age”, the visual information presented through their bodies provides evidence for what they say, that is, women can be young at any age (extract 13). Thus, in their visual representations, the “mature beauty” (extract 16) they described on the show does not differ from the appearance standards of young women.

Similar to figure 1, these middle-aged celebrities in figure 2 below also display some clothing that may be considered revealing, such as crop tops and miniskirts. Meanwhile, they add other fashion elements to make themselves look younger.

Figure 2

Sisters Who Make Waves Season 2



Note. This figure is adopted from Sisters Who Make Wave S2E3-1

The five female celebrities all wear white colour tops, miniskirts, and shorts. Four (1st to 4th from the left) wear crop tops under their white coats. All of them present one hand on the hip pose. Four (1st to 4th from the left) use the gesture that seems alapadma hand gesture derived from Indian dance. The left three celebrities have the hairstyle of double ponytails, while the right two have a single ponytail.

The five celebrities' outfits combined sexy and elegant aesthetics. The crop tops inside may be revealing, but the white colour keeps it from being too sexy. Their body positions reflect a feeling of self-confidence. The hand gesture seems alapadma, originally from the Indian dance, which means blooming lotus. This gesture can be used to present beauty. The high ponytail hairstyle is often associated with young girls in Chinese culture, while teenage girls and even younger girls often use two ponytails.

This teenage girl aesthetic was a recurring trope in the outfits worn by other celebrities in the show because Eastern aesthetics appreciate “young girl” looks (extract 16). These female celebrities follow this standard during the show. Figure 3 is an example.

Figure 3

Sisters Who Make Waves Season 2



Note. This figure is adopted from Sisters Who Make Wave S2E3-1

The five middle-aged female celebrities in figure 3 wear garments with polka dot patterns. Three are in dresses (1st, 2nd and 5th from the right). Their clothes are not revealing, but the noticeable belts accentuate their slim waists. The celebrity in the middle has a double ponytail hairstyle, and the first celebrity from the left has a double bun hairstyle. Three celebrities wear bow hair accessories (2nd, 3rd and 5th from the left). They all have a red lip print on their palm.

The polka dot pattern represents a classic retro style from the 1980s and 1990s. The five female celebrities did not deliberately want to expose their body parts, but it is not difficult to

notice slim waists under the contrast of the wide belts. They use many fashion elements to make themselves look cute and youthful, such as double ponytails, double buns, and bow hair accessories. And the red lip print on the palm gives them a sweet and feminine feeling.

As the figures above show, these middle-aged female celebrities present throughout the show clearly convey the visual information that they meet the desirable ideals in China's culture. Even though they tried to legitimise *Sisters Who Make Waves* as a meaningful show, which includes "mature beauty" to the mainstream aesthetics (extract 16), what they represented in the show through their bodies and fashion selections strengthens the narrow aesthetic standards in China. Furthermore, these beauty standards are even more eye-catching when displayed by middle-aged women as it is different from the traditional impression of those women. According to the result from past experimental studies, the standard beauty norm presented in the media predicts women's self-objectification and increases women's appearance anxiety when they fail to meet the media ideals (Calogero, et al., 2005). This may imply the potential anxiety of the female audience of the show if they fail to look as young as these celebrities.

In summary, this section has reviewed patterns of talk in which age is constructed as a potential problem for women but only a problem if women let it. Discourse II reconstructs age as a desirable thing for women: middle age is a time to shine, so women can be their better selves and get rid of all the miserable moments as they step into 30; age, at the same time, is psychology, the ideal subject positions created by this psychological discourse are confident and young mind women; on the other hand, age is related to beauty, women can be young at any age (extract 13), as a fact was proved by the visual information presented by these female celebrities. Thus, this beauty discourse constructed the ideal subject position of forever young women for middle-aged women. Women who adopt a young mind and unconditional confidence can alleviate the "side-

effects” caused by ageing; age can also be related to conventional beauty if women constantly work on their appearance.

Discourse III: Embrace Knock-backs as They Make You Stronger

Discourse II instructed middle-aged women to adopt “right” psychology and work on their bodies to counteract the adverse consequences of ageing, so age is no longer a problem for women. The lessons women learn from dealing with mindsets and ageing appearance can also apply to other aspects of life. For example, hard work contributes to women's youth but also helps women overcome obstacles in life. Discourse III specifically focused on the issue of obstacles and constructed these life obstacles as necessary for women. Women not only have to fight for themselves in the face of obstacles/difficulties but also proactively challenge themselves with extreme situations because these situations shape better women. In this process, women need to be relentlessly positive toward the discomfort and even pain of failure, become resilient and fight again like a “shero”.

Fighting Shero

In this discourse, middle-aged women are extolled to work hard, especially in unfavourable conditions. *Sisters Who Make Waves* set up competitions where female celebrities dance and sing to compete. The celebrities in the lower ranks are ruled out based on the audience's votes after each competition. Extract 17 happened when the host asked a celebrity why she worked so hard.

Extract 17

An Youqi: Because our fifteen sisters are ranked from the bottom, we feel that we have nothing to lose on this stage. Why did we choose the song "*Mulan*"? Because we also hope to have the spirit of Mulan and fight like a soldier

and also fight for the little flame in the heart. I hope everyone can see our efforts. In fact, our fifteen sisters have failed in the first two sets of challenges. So I hope we can at least fight for our fifteen girls and get three places because all fifteen of us worked very very very hard. (S2E3 1:48:34)

安又琪： 因为我们其实都是十五个姐姐排名都是倒数的因为我们觉得我们已经没有什么可以再失去的了在这个舞台上为什么选木兰这首歌呢因为我们也希望可以有木兰的精神像个战士一样像个将军一样为了自己的心中的那个小火苗去拼搏然后也希望大家可以看见我们的努力然后其实我们十五个姐姐前面两组挑战都失败了我希望我们最少能为我们十五个人争取到三个名额因为我们十五个人都非常非常非常的努力

In this extract, “effort” deserves to be appreciated and respected, so the speaker expected that audience “can see our efforts”. When women are in a disadvantaged position— “ranked at the bottom”, they should “work very very hard” to change the situation, even reverse the situation, by carrying “the spirit of Mulan” and fighting like “a soldier”. Mulan is a fictional female character in ancient China. She is widely seen as a female warrior who concealed her gender and replaced her sick father in the army. Mulan represents a strong female image, which challenges the traditional fragile image of Chinese women. Extract 17 encourages women to carry “the spirit of Mulan” and “fight” as “soldiers”. In other words, women should borrow from men's traits of masculinity in the ability to fight like men. Extract 17, therefore, constructs the ideal “fighting soldier” as a subject position for women.

For the most female audience, this discourse may indicate that they should work as hard as men in contemporary workplaces. Ideal workers in the workplace are often constructed as gender-

neutral or masculine tendencies, including man-like behaviours and characteristics (Kelan, 2009). This phenomenon, ironically, is taken as evidence of gender equality in the workplace, weakening the impact of gender discrimination. Post-feminism assumes that gender equality has been achieved; women can pursue whatever they desire through hard work. This ideology empowers women to approach independence and personal value in the neoliberal market, although it neglects the existence of gender inequalities in the workplace. Individualist discourses are often the assuming solutions to overcome gender discrimination; that is, women have the agency and responsibility to work very hard and achieve what they want in the workplace (Kelan, 2009).

Extract 17 interpellates middle-aged women as “fighting soldiers”. Hence, women understand that they should work hard and fight for themselves in the face of obstacles, but what if these obstacles are too tough to overcome or beyond women's ability? Extract 18 below provides the answer: women should always challenge the impossibilities.

Extract 18

Dong jie: When you face setbacks you have to have an attitude you will always challenge the impossibilities. (S2E5-1 1:49:11)

董洁：就是当你面对挫折的时候你永远要有一个态度就是你永远要向那些不可能发出挑战

Extract 18 proposed a situation when women faced setbacks. They should challenge the difficulty that most people consider "impossible". The pronoun “you” was used three times in the sentence to emphasise that it was the listeners' responsibility to challenge, and the script formulation “always” implied that the behaviour of challenging the impossibilities was consistent.

This discourse sent clear information to the audience that the ideal woman would never withdraw in the face of difficulties; women were supposed to dream big and win the seeming impossibility.

Gill (2014b) argued that under the intersection of contemporary neoliberal and postfeminist sensibility, women are supposed to win “all the battles”. Women influenced by those ideologies often adopt autonomous, agentic, and empowered subjectivity (Gill & Scharff, 2011). From a broader perspective, Lewis et al. (2017) pointed out that post-feminism is a form of governmentality, a means to govern women’s daily lives through internalising discourses about who is a good person or what is a good life, which shapes women’s subjectivity. Consequently, women adopt the identities of self-managing, self-transformation and self-responsibility, diverting their attention from the negative impact of social factors, such as gender inequity, on their lives.

As it showed above, extract 17 and extract 18 invite women to take the subject position of fighting soldiers, dealing with difficulties, even when these seem impossible to overcome. In this talk, women were constructed in *Sisters Who Make Waves* as not just passively confronting life difficulties but actively putting themselves in the toughest situation. Extract 19 below reveals this subjectivity, the speaker proactively chose to challenge the strongest competitor, and she believes that it presents her “truly brave”.

Extract 19

Zhang Baizhi: I choose to challenge the strongest team. I think women should be like this way, picking up the most fearful thing and being clear about their goals. It would be the truly brave status for women. (S2E3 1:01:20)

张 柏芝： 我自己选择了挑战最强的那组，我就觉得女人就是这样子，拿起自己最害怕的东西，然后清楚自己的目标，那我觉得那个是真正勇敢的一个女性的状态。

The pronoun “I” implied the speaker’s sense of agency to challenge the strongest team, and then the speaker changed the subject from herself to women in general and said, “women should be like this way”. As a modal verb, “should” implies a sense of obligation and responsibility. So, it became women’s obligation to challenge “the most fearful thing” and be “clear about their goals”. Her last sentence approved women who managed to do these tough tasks as “truly brave”.

Extract 19 reflects postfeminist sensibility in relation to individualism and empowerment. At the same time, global neoliberalism also influences the discourse, inspiring women’s entrepreneurial mentality and describing risk-taking behaviour as cool and equal work (Gill, 2002). However, the speaker’s “picking up the most fearful” discourse seems to take the risk-taking ideology to a new level because it requires women to actively participate in extreme situations and even embrace these extreme difficulties. Extract 19 defined “truly brave” women as those who “challenge the strongest team” and “pick up the most fearful thing”. Therefore, extract 19 creates a subject position of “truly brave” women for the female audience.

The female celebrities in *Sisters Who Make Waves* promoted extreme situations because extreme hard situations create better women. The following extract 20 rationalised the need for a desperate situation and guaranteed it as a means for women to grow up, thus, women should embrace it.

Extract 20

Na ying: When you are pushed to a desperate situation, there is no way back, you will definitely grow up and make progress (S2E6-1 1:37:13)

那 英: 人把你逼向绝境的时候你就一定会成长会进步

In this discourse, the speaker began by describing an extreme situation where women were pushed into a desperate condition, and there was no way out. She said, “when you are pushed”, which implied a sense of passivity, it meant that this extreme situation might not be your own choice or might be even against your will, but this situation, she guaranteed, would “definitely” lead “you” to “grow up” and “make progress”. “You”, as the second person pronoun, targeted the audience. In summary, extract 20 conveys clear information that extreme situations are necessary for women because those situations lead to success. Thus, women are exhorted to brace for the toughest situation instead of avoiding them.

This seemingly inspiring discourse reflects the neoliberalist ideology that everyone should be entrepreneurially adventurous. It assumes that all women have the agency to solve the toughest situations and make progress. As a result, women should self-blame if they fail to win in those situations; meanwhile, since the toughest situations are desirable, women should respond with the “right” emotion when they are having a hard time, such as feeling happy.

Extract 21 below sends a similar message; women should embrace cruel situations because the crueller the situation, the more likely it is for a woman to become a shero.

Extract 21

Jia Qing: That is the more you are in such a cruel situation the more you constantly deny yourself the stronger you should become the more likely that you will turn into a shero (S2E7-1 1:27:58)

贾 青： 就是你越是在这样的残酷的情况下，越是在不断的否定自己的情况下，你越要坚强，越要变成女英雄

Extract 21 proposed a way of becoming a “shero”, who is considered a strong woman with a lot of respect. This talk suggested women be stronger/tougher, especially when they constantly questioned themselves in a cruel situation. The hardest situation is what women desire because the more brutal the situation, or the more women doubt themselves, the more likely women become stronger. That is to say, escalating difficulties continue to strengthen women’s ability and eventually make them the much-anticipated heroine. Therefore, those “cruel” situations can be chances for women’s transformation.

This talk echoes postfeminist sensibility in relation to self-surveillance, empowerment, and makeover paradigm. Under its influence, women working hard to improve themselves is no longer an option but a necessity. Extract 21 created an ideal subject position of shero, representing an image of powerful women with extraordinary perseverance and courage who generally have recognised achievements in a certain field. “Shero” can also refer to the influential “female superhero” in American comic books; those well-known fictional characters have the same power as men, meanwhile, have hyper-feminine appearances. Thus, the subject position of shero invites women to strive for extraordinary excellence and man-like power and bravery, and the tougher the circumstances for women, the more conducive it is to achieve this goal.

Relentless Positivity

The discourses used in *Sisters Who Make Waves* advocated extreme hard situations and even encouraged women to embrace these situations. However, extremely hard situations are likely to be uncomfortable, even painful. The discourses, therefore, encourage women to persevere through pain, and prescribe relentless positivity for women, so that women can rise again if they fall and, most importantly, dispel their complaints during the process. For example, extract 22 below suggests what women are expected to react to when facing pain.

Extract 22

Chen Xiaoyun: Now that you have taken this step, you just step on it steadily, it doesn't matter even if there are needles under your feet. (S2E1-1 2:44)

陈 小云： 你既然迈下了这一步你就踏踏实实的踩上去就算脚底下都是针头又怎样

“Needles under your feet” implies an extreme painful scenario. However, women should still “step on it steadily”. Like most other female celebrities in this show, the speaker of extract 22 used the second-person pronoun “you” to address the ordinary audience. Since “you” have already taken your step, “you” should not give it up in the middle. The painful feeling “doesn’t matter”. This discourse inspires women to stick to their goals and never give up, even when feeling extremely uncomfortable. Meanwhile, the speaker applied the discursive strategy “even if” to try to minimise the adverse effect caused by hard situations.

The following extract 23 teaches women to face failure with optimism. It was from a celebrity when she was ruled out of the reality show in episode three due to fewer votes from the

audience. It is worth mentioning that she is one of those celebrities in the reality show, who briefly rose to fame after a previous talent show, but rarely had a chance to show to the public afterwards; she took *Sisters Who Make Waves* as her last chance (see extract 3).

Extract 23

An Youqi: I didn't disappoint myself, I feel quite happy on the stage that there are people who still remembering me and calling out my name. I am really happy ((crying)), and I will go on fighting and be more optimistic (S2E3-1 2:43:58)

安又琪: 我没有让自己失望还挺开心的在舞台上还能有人记得我然后叫我的名字就是挺开心的（哭）继续加油吧就是更乐观一点

Extract 23 applied many positive emotional expressions. For example, “I didn’t disappoint myself”, “I feel quite happy”, “I am really happy”, and “I will go on fighting and be more optimistic”. However, when expressing “I am really happy”, she could not help crying. This seemingly contradictory reaction might reflect the speaker’s complicated emotions; it also demonstrates a cultural prescription for positivity even in the face of a situation that is recognizably not wanted.

As argued earlier, a positive framing is part of contemporary postfeminist sensibility related to example to confidence culture, but positivity is also an important ideology in contemporary China (Chen & Wang, 2019; Peidong & Lijun, 2018). *Positive Energy* (正能量), as a term, refers to uplifting discourses, especially on media and the internet. Those discourses often have empowered and inspiring effects on their information receivers. Meanwhile, *Positive Energy* can also be a means of opposing critical and negative opinions. Since those positive discourses can

guide public opinions and “solve” many social problems caused by inequality, the Chinese government often approves media that propagate *Positive Energy*. *Sisters Who Make Waves*, one of China’s most famous reality shows, certainly met this political regulation. Extract 23 promotes a positive/optimistic attitude for middle-aged women as once they adopt the attitude, they would cope with their problems/difficulties internally rather than question gender inequality. Put another way, women should regulate their “negative” thoughts and adjust their feelings. Therefore, these positive discourses produce self-disciplined docile subjects.

In the face of failures, women need to regulate their emotions with relentless positivity to justify their responses and proactively self-explain the meanings of possible unfair encounters. The following talk was from a forty-five-year-old celebrity, and she gave a very affective talk after losing the competition in the show.

Extract 24

Li huizhen: The experience that life has given me is much crueller than this. I told myself when I was very young, I hope I live like water and I can become different shapes in different containers. So I still say that life is for feeling, hard work can always leave a mark of pride there will be no regrets on the road that you try your best to walk. There will be scenery after crossing the rough and the wonderful future is waiting for you to come (S2E3-1 2:45:15)

李 慧珍：生活给我的历练比这个残酷多了，我很小就跟我自己讲说，我希望自己活得像水一样，放在不同的容器里面我就可以变成不同的样子，所以还是那句话，生活时用来感受的，努力总能

留下值得骄傲的印记尽力走过的路就不会有任何遗憾，越过崎岖终有风景，未来的精彩正等你们披光而来

“The experience that life has given me is much crueller than this” means that it is an acceptable level of failure for her as she was used to experiencing something “crueller”. She had wanted to be “water” since a very young age because water shapes differently according to the containers. The metaphor constructed her as a person who wanted to adjust herself to the environment rather than change it. “I still say that” indicated it was her long-term belief that “life is for feeling”, which implied that life was a journey of experiences to her; therefore, winning or losing did not matter. This discourse legitimised her positive attitude towards failure. “Hard work can always leave a mark of pride” implies that she was still proud of herself as she worked hard. Even though she failed the competition, there were “no regrets” as she did her best. In the end, she told the audience that the “wonderful future” would eventually come after a hard time trying. In this discourse, the speaker revealed to the audience that she had many cruel experiences, but the adverse consequences are negated by having a positive attitude.

Gill (2017) argued that postfeminist ideology promotes happiness and a positive attitude while outlawing other “negative” emotions, such as anger and insecurity. Under the influence of positive psychology, women are the positive subjectivity, always choosing happiness over unhappiness, success over failure. Orgad and Gill (2022) point out that the “discourse of resilience call people to be adaptable and positive, bounce back from adversity and embrace a mindset in which negative experiences must be reframed upbeat terms” (p.19). Similarly, Calder-Dawe et al. (2021) also discussed positivity, as the attractive relationality and agentic cognitive style for women in neoliberal culture, is promoted through affective discourse.

Drawing together the above analysis, Discourse III creates a subject position of “fighting soldiers” for middle-aged women, encouraging them to work hard and challenge the impossibility. It also creates a subject position of “truly brave” women, that is, women who actively choose extreme situations, such as challenging the strongest competitor and picking up the most fearful thing. Women should embrace these situations as they lead them to the ideal “shero”. However, under such extreme challenges, women are likely to feel pain or even fail; Discourse III constructed the subject positions of “relentlessly positive” women, suggesting that women must persevere in pain and maintain a positive attitude towards failure.

Discourse IV: You Can Only Rely on You

This discourse constructed middle-aged Chinese women complexly. On the one hand, modern Chinese women were independent subjects who prioritized themselves and did not rely on marriage. On the other hand, traditional roles of women, such as caregiver and family-oriented housewife, are the social norm and therefore desirable.

Unlike traditionally family-oriented women, modern women with postfeminist subjectivity do not take their partners as the priority but put themselves first. The conversation below happened when the female celebrities in the show were asked to rank themselves, partners, parents, and children.

Extract 25

Zhang baizhi: I think myself is the most important, then children, parents, and partner

Jia qing: So, partner is the last

Zhang baizhi: Yes, because if I don't know myself well, I can't protect my loved children and parents but partner who cares

Dong Xuan: I am similar to Zhang Baizhi, it is most important to protect myself so that
I can protect my family members

Jia Qing: So it is yourself, children and parents, the partner is the last one

Dong Xuan: Yes the partner is... ((rejective gesture))

Yang Yuying: That is something beyond your control. (S2E2-2 16:45)

张 柏芝: 我觉得自我第一个, 孩子, 父母

贾 青: 所以伴侣最后

张 柏芝: 因为如果我自己都不清楚自己我就不可以保护我最爱的小孩跟家人伴
侣就谁管他

董 璇: 我跟张柏芝很像, 最重要还是先保护好自己才能保护好自己
的家人

贾 青: 所以先是自我孩子父母伴侣

董 璇: 伴侣就 (拒绝手势)

杨 钰莹: 那个也是一个很玄的事情不由你来控制的事情

Four female celebrities were involved in extract 25. This conversation focused on the most important person in middle-aged women's lives. Both Zhang and Dong considered themselves the most important person because women could not take care of others until they took good care of themselves. "Protect my family members", however, revealed the social norm that women often played the role of taking care of their family members. On the other hand, both Zhang and Dong

put partners as the least important people. Zhang gave a rhetorical question, “Who cares” to minimise the importance of partners. It implied that nobody cared about partners. On the other hand, Dong gave a subtle answer with an uncompleted sentence, followed by a rejective gesture, revealing that she was reluctant to talk more about partners. Yang agreed with them as she thought partners, or, say, romantic relationships were beyond women's control.

Extract 25 presents the individualist ideology. Unlike traditional women, middle-aged women in contemporary China take themselves as the priority to their family members, although they still consider protecting family members as their obligation. However, partners seem not as important as other family members in their lives. The possible reason may be that partners are beyond women's control; marriages/relationships are unpredictable. The following extract 26 provides a further explanation. Extract 26 is from one of the speakers of extract 25; she was divorced during her performance in the show.

Extract 26

Dong Xuan: First of all, marriage has potential risks. If you give up everything to stay at home and your marriage faces difficulties, it will be very hard for you to restart your career. I didn't have a job for 3 years. There is no suitable role for you to film. There are not many scripts as before. (S2E2-2 17:29)

董璇: 首先就是婚姻就是有风险的, 然后你再什么都不干了回归家庭, 然后当你的婚姻出现问题的时候, 你再重新再来, 我当时就三年没拍戏, 再重新再来的时候很难很难没有你合适的角色没有你合适的戏, 也不会像原来一样很多剧本给你选。

Extract 26 indicated that marriages/romantic relationships might be unstable, resulting in unpredictable results. The condition sentence “if you give up everything to stay at home” implied that it might be not uncommon to see women give up other things and choose to stay at home as housewives, but for those women, it would be “very hard” to restart their careers after their marriages were in trouble. She then gave her own experience that she once chose to give up her career and stay at home for three years. When she tried to restart her career after the divorce, she found no chance left for her; the working opportunities were much less than before.

This discourse reflects the fact that it is difficult for women to get a job after divorce in the TV industry. The speaker reveals the norm that female celebrities’ careers are likely to meet the bottleneck after getting married and having children. Since China’s divorce rate has increased noticeably in the past decades (Mo, 2017; Wan, 2019), women are more likely to feel insecure in a marriage/relationship. Divorce leads women to a more vulnerable position than their male partners, especially women who have sacrificed their careers to become housewives. Recognising this vulnerability, the speaker put herself in the most important position and her partner in the least important position (see extract 25) because “marriage has potential risks”. On the other hand, the discourse also presents gender discrimination in the television industry. Based on Dong’s talk, “if you give up everything to stay at home and your marriage faces difficulties, it will be very hard for you to restart your career.” Women face the complexity of intersectional inequality in contemporary society, that is, gender vulnerability is mediated by factors such as age and parental status (Gill, 2014b; Wing-fai et al., 2015). The situation is salient in the television industry. Compared with men in the industry, women are more likely to lose their jobs, especially when they age or start a family (Wing-fai et al., 2015).

Even though marriage and children may lead women to fewer job opportunities, the high divorce rate indicates potential risks of marriage, women are still expected to get married and have children because a family-oriented woman is traditionally the ideal. The following talk is from Dong, who is also the speaker of extract 26. However, compared with what she said in extract 26, her following talk seems controversial.

Extract 27

Dong Xuan: I think most girls want a stable romantic relationship and family, that is what I want too, to be a family-oriented woman. Maybe I will meet someone in the future who can let me give up my career and return to the family, I would choose the same as before. (S2E2-2 18:36)

董璇: 我觉得大部分女生都希望有一个稳定的感情,一个家,我也想那样很稳定做一个小女人,可能以后在遇到一个值得我去放弃事业回归家庭的人,可能没准还会像以前那样选择吧

Dong talked about romantic relationships and family. The dominant discourse, “most girls want a stable relationship and family”, showed that having a stable marriage was an ideal and norm for women. She also wanted a stable relationship and family to be a family-oriented woman. She then revealed her expectation that “maybe I will meet someone in the future who can let me give up my career and return to the family”. If “someone” emerged in her life, she would “choose the same as before”. Combined with the content of extract 26, she would, once again, choose to give up her career and stay at home even though “marriage has potential risks” (see extract 26), which was proved as truth by her last marriage.

In extract 27, the speaker argued that most women desired a stable marriage or romantic relationship, which was more important than a career, so she was willing to sacrifice “career” for “family” and become traditional “family-oriented women”. Extract 27 contradicts extract 26, in which the same person, Dong reveals her difficulties in getting a job after sacrificing her career for marriage, which ended up with a divorce. Extract 27 contradicts Extract 25, in which Dong ranked her partner as the least important person in her life. However, it does not necessarily mean that Dong tends to be inconsistent in general. In China’s patriarchal society, women are often associated with caregivers who prioritise family responsibilities, whereas men are regarded as the role of breadwinner for a family (Lazar & Ke, 2020). As a result, women’s value is assessed by how well they take care of and maintain their families. This traditional patriarchal ideology still significantly impacts family arrangements and female subjectivity in modern China. Women believe that “stable marriage” and “family-oriented” housewives are the path to happiness and success. Under the influence of this social norm, it is no surprise that Dong would still prioritise family beyond career. Meanwhile, the discourse also implies the dominant ideal of heterosexual romance. Romance is one of the key discourses by which women are interpellated as subjects (Gill, 2007c). Faced with an unprecedented high divorce rate, women’s passion for romantic love seems still resilient.

In summary, Discourse IV creates two seemingly contradictory subject positions of independent women and family-oriented women. Women with postfeminist subjectivity do not rely on their partners but prioritise themselves. However, women still see the traditional caregiver roles as their obligations and stable marriages as a goal for which they seek or even give up their careers. This maps onto the elements of postfeminist sensibility: a retraditionalsation of gender roles and the language of individualism and choice.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

This discussion chapter presents the summary of this thesis. It contains four sections. First, the result section aims to answer the three research questions of this study, these are, Q1 How did *Sisters Who Make Waves* construct middle age for women? Q2 What subject positions are provided by *Sisters Who Make Waves*? And Q3 What discursive strategies are used to invite the ordinary female audience to adopt the subject positions constructed by the reality show, and with what potential implications for subjectivity and practice? Second, the contribution section focuses on the potential contributions of this thesis. Third, the limitation section presents the study's limitations and suggestions for future research in this field. Fourth, the conclusion section summarizes the final implication of this thesis.

This thesis focused on the discourses used in China's famous reality show *Sisters Who Make Waves* and analyzed them in the context of Chinese Culture and broader global postfeminist sensibilities. During the process of analysis, I applied multi-level analysis to understand the language used in the show and the visual information presented, and I found four main discourses: discourse I age is a problem for women; discourse II age is only a problem if you let it; discourse III embrace knock-backs as they make you stronger; discourse IV you can only rely on you. The results also showed that the discourses of the show reproduced postfeminist sensibility and neoliberalism, which have been well-documented and studied in relation to the UK and North American cultures (Evans & Riley, 2013; Jeffreys, 2014; Gill, 2013; Lamb et al., 2013; Andsager & Roe, 2003; Holland & Attwood, 2009). My analysis has identified and examined these ideologies directed toward middle-aged women in modern China. Below, I present the thesis findings and answer three research questions raised in chapter one.

Q1 How *Sisters Who Make Waves* Constructed Middle Age for Women?

Even though exposing the adverse effects of ageing had never been the purpose of *Sisters Who Make Waves*, these middle-aged female celebrities still, inevitably, revealed that age may be a problem for women, which was reflected in the fact that age was a sensitive topic that needed to be talked indirectly (extract 1); being classified as “old” was unpleasant and embarrassing (extract 2); ageing reduced women’s opportunities while increased their anxiety (extracts 3 and 4). However, women should not worry too much as *Sisters Who Make Waves* would activate their lives and offer them the courage to overview this current thinking and chase their dreams no matter their situations (extract 5). Middle age constructed in *Sisters Who Make Waves* was a desirable period, which brought wisdom to women so that women saw things more insightful and sophisticated than they did in their 20s (extract 6); middle age was women’s rebirth, women would no longer be as confused, scared or lost as they were before (extract 7). Thus, middle age was constructed as an opportunity for women to transform and shine (extract 7).

Sisters Who Make Waves also provided solutions for the disadvantages caused by ageing, such as reduced opportunities and declined appearance. The reality show constructed age as a psychological state, where women could mitigate the adverse effects of age by adopting a young mindset and unconditional self-confidence. Middle-aged women who managed to adopt teenager-like curiosity and enthusiasm would no longer be restricted by age and continue to “make waves” (extract 8). They could still live a cool and easy life even when they were old (extract 9). Unconditional self-confidence would help middle-aged women face obstacles in life and empower them to seek self-pleasure and self-approval (extracts 11 and 12).

Ageing appearance, on the one hand, was not as frightening as an ageing mind (extract 10); and both could be avoided by the continuous efforts of women (extracts 8, 9, 10,16). *Sisters Who*

Make Waves approved the possibility of being young at any age (extract 13). Meanwhile, unconditional confidence, a desirable mindset, would also help them see their appearance positively (extract 15).

Therefore, to answer Q1. How *Sisters Who Make Waves* constructed middle age for women? In *Sisters Who Make Waves*, middle age is a contradiction. Discourse I revealed that age is a problem for women, consistent with the results of past studies discussed in chapter 1 (Dolan, 2014; Jermyn, 2012; Jerslev, 2017; Ma, 2022). However, it contrasted the discourse II, where age was constructed as a desirable new start that brought advantages to women. Discourse II also constructed age as psychology; middle-aged women could be whoever they wanted to be as long as they stayed young at heart and had unconditional self-confidence. Middle age did not restrict women's hope or beauty. Discourse II taught women that ageing appearance could be avoided if they paid constant effort to their bodies. These discourses reflected the postfeminist sensibility in relation to individualism, self-surveillance, and transformation (makeover paradigm). For example, the "age is psychology" discourse reflected individualism, it expected middle-aged women to work on their mindsets to mitigate the adverse effects of ageing; the "age is related to beauty" discourse told women that ageing appearance was avoidable through self-surveillance; the "age is a time to shine" discourse resonated self-transformation, it assumed that middle age naturally brought wisdom, so that middle-aged women would no longer be worried or confused. At the same time, these discourses place the responsibility/obligation on middle-aged women. Since middle age may no longer be a problem for women, it is women's responsibility to make themselves better and continue to strive to pursue their goals as younger women.

Q2. What Subject Positions Provided by Sisters Who Make Waves?

The discourses used in *Sisters Who Make Waves* created several ideal subject positions for middle-aged women. While discourse I revealed the problems of age, discourse II reconstructed age as a malleable factor that women can change. Thus, age can only be a problem if women let it, and women who do not let age become their problem are the ideal women constructed by *Sisters Who Make Waves*. The discourse “age is psychology” created the ideal subject positions of confident and young mindset women. Confident women were those who did everything with confidence and put themselves as the priority; they knew how to please themselves and love themselves (e.g., extract 12). Confident women might doubt themselves at some stage, but they eventually re-established their confidence, and these self-doubts only made them more confident (extract 11). Young mindset women, on the other hand, were those women who were always curious and enthusiastic; they had a free soul and never stopped pursuing their dreams (extracts 8 and 9).

The discourse “age is related to beauty” created the subject position of forever young women (extract 13). Age led to declined appearances that might be true to other women, but not those in *Sisters Who Make Waves*. These middle-aged women had proven that age was not necessarily related to old appearance to women who consistently worked on their appearance (extract 14). Middle-aged women could even be more beautiful than they were in their 20s (extract 15). *Sisters Who Make Waves* attempted to include the “mature beauty” into China’s main aesthetics (extract 16), although the visual information (figures 1, 2, and 3) showed that this “mature beauty” presented in the show was no different from the mainstream aesthetics.

In a culture that devalues ageing women, age is likely a problem for women. Discourse III created the ideal subject positions of fighting sheroes, truly brave and relentlessly positive women,

helping middle-aged women to overcome life obstacles. Fighting sheroes were women who worked hard in unfavourable conditions and pushed themselves to challenge the impossibilities (extracts 17 and 18). Truly brave women were those who proactively challenged the strongest competitor and picked up the most fearful thing (extract 19); they embraced extremely difficult situations as these situations led them to success and better selves (extracts 20 and 21). Relentlessly positive women were those who persevered through pain (extract 22); they adopted an optimistic attitude towards failures and rose again (extracts 23 and 24).

Discourse IV diverted the attention from “fighting shero” women to their traditional roles. As Gill (2006) argued, postfeminist discourses often entangled feminism and anti-feminism within them, making them contradictory. Discourse IV also reflected this contradictory nature. For example, the discourse “marriage has potential risks” showed that women might face difficulties in restarting their careers if they gave up everything and became housewives (extract 26). It sat in contrast to the “family-oriented women” discourse, where a stable relationship and family were still desirable to most women (extract 27). Thus, discourse IV created two seemingly contradictory subject positions of independent women and family-oriented women. Independent women adopted postfeminist subjectivity; they did not rely on their partners but put themselves in the most important position (extract 25). On the other hand, family-oriented women sought stable relationships/marriages and gave up their careers for families (extract 27).

Therefore, to answer the Q2. What subject positions are provided by *Sisters Who Make Waves*? The show constructed the ideal subject positions of confident women, young mindset women, (physically) forever young women, fighting sheroes, truly brave women, relentlessly positive women, and the contradictory independent and family-oriented women. These subject positions reflected the original elements of postfeminist sensibility, such as individualism, self-

surveillance, makeover paradigm, and femininity as body property, which were elaborated in chapter 1. For example, the subject position of truly brave women reflected individualist ideology as it assumed women's agency to challenge the strongest competitor; the subject position of forever young women reflected self-surveillance and femininity as body property as it required women to pay constant attention to their appearance; the subject position of relentlessly positive women invited middle-aged women to embrace extreme situations as these situations led to better women; thus, relentless positivity was reproduced postfeminist sensibility in relation to makeover paradigm and individualism.

In addition, the subject positions of confident and young mindset women emphasized women's psychology, or inner mindset, which reflected the confidence culture, a contemporary development of postfeminist sensibility (Orgad & Gill, 2022). Orgad and Gill's (2022) analysis of a range of western media from which they argued that women are constantly required to be more confident in the contemporary culture as it is an effective tool to reduce women's complaints about gender inequality. Women who are invited into a confident mentality tend to internalize the difficulties they are going through rather than ask questions from the external world.

Similarly, the subject positions of relentlessly positive women required women to have a positive attitude toward failure, gain resilience, and get back on their feet after failure. It resonated with contemporary China's positive ideology (Chen & Wang, 2019; Peidong & Lijun, 2018), which can be seen as a means of suppressing negative criticism caused by social inequalities. Hence, this ideology has been recognized and promoted by the Chinese government. It has also become one of the standards for measuring the media language in China.

The subject position of independent women reflected postfeminist sensibility in relation to individualism, choice and empowerment. In contrast, the subject position of family-oriented

women reverted women back to their traditional roles. This contradiction is consistent with the result of past studies (Liao, 2021; Guo, 2022; Ma, 2022) discussed in Chapter 1. Chinese women who adopt postfeminist subjectivity often highlight the importance of (financial) independence and self-help, but it does not prevent them from accepting their traditional social roles, such as caregivers.

Q3. What Discursive Strategies Are Used to Invite Ordinary Female Audience to Adopt the Subject Positions Constructed by the Reality Show and With What Potential Implications for Subjectivity and Practice?

The show constructed subjected positions of ideal middle-aged women through discourses spoken by the female celebrities, who applied various discursive devices in their postfeminist discourses, making the talk affective, inspiring, and inviting to the audience. Pronoun shifts were commonly used in the show to include/invite an ordinary female audience and transfer responsibilities from the speakers to the audience or arouse a resonance with them. Speakers started talking about their situations using the pronoun “I” and then shifted to the pronoun “you” to invite listeners. For example, the speaker in extract 3 started talking about her own situation. She said, “so I am almost 40, the chance for me is getting less and less” then she shifted the pronoun and said “you don’t know what else you can do” to resonant with the female audience of that age group; for the same reason, the speaker of extract 9, started with her own wish, “I still want to be cool even when I am old”, then shifted to “you” to include the female audience, “ you can still live a cool and easy life”. The pronoun shift device can also be used to separate the speaker from the listeners. For example, the speaker of extract 6 said, “30s 40s and 20s we look at problems in different height, width, depth and dimension”, so she used “we” when she highlighted the advantage of ageing, then she shifted the pronoun to “you” to criticize women who worried like

girls in 20s, she said, “you just wasted time” and ended with the rhetorical questions “what are you doing? Right?”.

Extreme case formulations were also used frequently in the discourses to exaggerate/emphasize the importance of certain situations. For example, a speaker emphasized the importance of participating in *Sisters Who Make Waves* for her, she said, “it is maybe the best chance in my life” (extract 4); women had the courage to explore 100% from 10% (extract 5), which exaggerated the situations from very bad to very good, meanwhile, it motivated the audience that no matter how bad their current situation was, they could still achieve the level of perfection. Similar examples, remaining a free soul was the most important (extract 9); the ageing mind was the most frightening thing (extract 10); doing everything with confidence (extract 12); picking up the most fearful thing (extract 19).

Modal verbs, such as “should” and “must”, were the discursive device often used in the reality show to emphasize the responsibility/obligation of the female audience. For example, women should do things based on their will, and they must love themselves (extract 12); women should challenge the strongest team and pick up the most fearful thing (extract 19); women should be stronger when the situation gets worse (extract 21).

The script formulations, such as “usually” and “always”, were used to present behaviour as if it regularly or frequently occurs (Wiggins, 2017). For example, a female celebrity said that she was always curious and always enthusiastic (extract 8), implying that her curiosity and enthusiasm never stopped; women will “always challenge the impossibilities” (extract 18), implying that the action of challenge would happen frequently; similarly, “hard work can always leave a mark of pride” (extract 24), implying the critical role of hard-working.

Agent-subject distinction, such as “have to” or “I do”, was used to present the agency of the speaker. For example, the speaker of extract 19 said, “I choose to challenge the strongest team”, implying that the choice was based on her autonomy or she had the agency to do so. It was to inspire the female audience to identify with her; on the other hand, the speaker of extract 18 said, “when you face setbacks, you have to have an attitude that you will always challenge the impossibilities”, “have to” implied that challenging the impossibilities might not be an active choice by women, but they needed to do it anyway.

In addition to the discursive devices commonly used in the discourses, the female celebrities also strategically applied affective talk to emotionally resonate with the audience. For example, a speaker said she was once confused, scared and lost, and she believed that every woman had such time (extract 7); another speaker revealed that her career hit the bottleneck and she believed that there were many women like her (extract 4); also, women were members of the same community shared a destiny (extract 5); there would be scenery after crossing the rough and the wonderful future was waiting for women to come (extract 24). The application of those affective discourses aimed to connect with the ordinary audience emotionally and then motivated them to follow the female celebrities’ steps in the show.

Moreover, the female celebrities in *Sisters Who Make Waves* shaped themselves as role models for the audiences. It was reflected in two aspects: on the one hand, the female celebrities told and showed the audiences how they managed to overcome the obstacles caused by ageing; on the other hand, based on the visual information represented on the show, all the middle-aged female celebrities met the aesthetic standards in Chinese culture, such as look young, thin and beautiful, which indirectly increased the credibility of what they claimed in the show. For example, women could be young at any age (extract 13).

As is shown above, throughout the show, the female celebrities strategically applied discursive devices, affective and inspiring talk, and at the same time, set themselves as the role models of the ideal middle-aged women constructed in the show. The audience, therefore, is likely to be hailed by those discourses because the apparent sense of empowerment brought by the discourses sounds exciting — they give a sense of opening possibilities, not to mention the ideals represented by these celebrities on the show. This thesis does not discuss whether the show's discourses were designed by the TV program or originally by the female celebrities that reflected their real feelings. However, I argue that these celebrities in the reality show, although they belong to middle-aged women in Chinese culture, are still a privileged group who probably have more resources and consequently more choices than most ordinary women; their lifestyle or mindsets may be hard to replicate by ordinary women. On the contrary, the ordinary audience invited may feel inadequate and disappointed by using these celebrities as their own comparisons/role models. At the same time, in a patriarchal context where women do have limitations based on their age, the social inequalities, either from genders or social structures, could impact women's aspirations. By locating the issue solely in women's mindset, it locates the blame on women if they fail to have their dreams realized as the show's discourses promoted.

Another implicated effect of the show is the way *Sisters Who Make Waves* constructs “ageing”, which makes age no longer a natural process shared by all, but a factor that negatively impacts women and can be controlled, so women need to exert efforts to reduce its adverse effects. Conversely, the discourses construct “youth” as a desirable, pleasant factor worth women trying whatever they can to maintain or even rejuvenate themselves with it. For example, a female celebrity who was at her 53 claimed that she still had the spirit of a teenager as she was always curious and enthusiastic (extract 8); another celebrity who was in her 40s said that the ageing mind

was the most frightening, women should adopt young mind and have an unset sun in their hearts (extract 10); a female celebrity revealed that she gave persistent attention and efforts on maintaining young and attractive appearance (extract 14). Moreover, the way all the female celebrities presented their bodies in the show by using fashion elements to look young and beautiful (Figures 1, 2 and 3). All of those send the audience clear information that youth is a good place to inhabit, where women certainly need to do some work to stay as long as possible. Thus, the reality show is nothing about how to age gracefully as middle-aged women but try your best to be like youth and inhabit youth even when you are not young.

Therefore to answer Q3. What discursive strategies are used to invite the ordinary female audience to adopt the subject positions constructed by the reality show and with what potential implications for subjectivity and practice? The female celebrities in the reality show commonly apply pronoun shifts, extreme case formations, modal verbs, script formulations and agent-subject distinction to strategically invite the ordinary female audience to take up the subject positions constructed by the show. Besides the discursive devices, these celebrities use affective and inspiring discourses, attempting to empower the audience to take the subject positions. They also set themselves as role models to provide persuasive evidence for the audience. Women who are invited may feel empowered for a short period, and they may also devote themselves to pursuing their dreams, challenging the extremely hard situations as the show promoted; they may also work on their appearance to meet the strict aesthetic standards in Chinese culture, such as a young and thin body. However, they are likely to realize that, due to limited resources and the inequalities of China's patriarchal society, it is difficult for them to achieve the ideal of middle-aged women constructed by the show. Since the ideal women are positive and optimistic subjects, women

cannot complain about more external factors but seek an answer from inside; consequently, self-blame is likely to be the result of this subjectivity.

Sisters Who Make Waves encouraged women to pursue their dreams/goals even in middle age, which might be a positive element of the show. However, the way the show constructed middle age made age no longer a natural process nor a graceful period in which women could appreciate and live peacefully. In *Sisters Who Make Waves*, age was a malleable factor that women needed constant efforts to combat the “side-effects” of ageing. Conversely, youth was framed as a desirable goal for women to adjust their mindset and maintain their appearance to approach. Moreover, the show largely applied postfeminist and neoliberal discourses, constructing unrealistic subject positions for middle-aged women and assuming every woman’s agency, which would lead to women’s frustration and incompetence when compared to these ideal subject positions shaped by the show. For example, the reality show constructed the ideal subject position of truly brave women and advocated that women proactively put themselves in extreme situations, which is likely to cause discomfort to ordinary women. Likewise, the ideal subject position of forever young women inspires women to be young at any age, which is unlikely to be achieved as ageing is a natural process for most women. Therefore, *Sisters Who Make Waves* might attempt to empower ordinary middle-aged women to pursue higher goals and present their “mature beauty”. Paradoxically, it is likely to trigger women’s anxiety about ageing.

Contribution to the literature

In Chapter 1, I discussed that postfeminist sensibility, as an ideology, profoundly influenced a significant part of contemporary culture, especially the discourses of the media, which have been well studied in the context of western cultures. However, postfeminist sensibility not only impacts western cultures but also interacts with other cultures through globalization and

consumerism. Although China has been one of the fastest-growing consumer markets in the world over the past few decades, it is also one of the quintessentially entrenched societies of patriarchy, and research in this field with Chinese women as subjects is rare. Another gap in postfeminist scholarship is produced from a focus on young women, while middle-aged and older women are relatively absent in this field. This thesis focuses on the discourses used in a Chinese reality show, and the discourse speakers are middle-aged female celebrities. Thus, the thesis results may fill these two gaps in this field and contribute to understanding how postfeminist sensibility is circulating in modern China.

Additionally, the thesis also developed postfeminist scholarship methodologically, by adopting multi-level analysis as the research method, not only considering the social meanings of the talk in the context of Chinese culture but also understanding the impact of discursive devices used frequently in the talks on the audience. In addition, the analysis includes visual information as a part of its data as visuals often convey a more impressive message for viewers than words do in reality TV shows involving female celebrities, such as *Sisters Who Make Waves*. Visual information simultaneously supplements or reinforces what the talks express. Besides these potential contributions, this thesis has some limitations. In the next section, I will discuss the limitations and their implications, meanwhile, the possible suggestions for future research in this area.

Limitations

The limitations of the study can be divided into four parts: the study assumes the impact of the reality show on their audience based on the methodological theories but does not include feedback from the actual audiences; the study analyzes the discourses that are the translations from another language, inevitably losing some of the subtleties of talk in so doing; the analysis of the

discourses aims to answer the three research questions, so some discourses that are irrelevant to these research questions but may be useful for investigating Chinese media language are missed; the method used to understand the visual information in this study was used to support the discourse analysis and could be further developed in subsequent research.

First, this thesis applied the methodology and theories of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to understand the data and then provided possible impacts of postfeminist sensibility on the ordinary audience. As it is showed above, the results showed subject positions constructed by the discourses in the show, meanwhile, the speakers used several strategies to invite the audience to take up these subject positions. For example, the speakers used discursive strategies, affective expressions, and set themselves as role models. Combined with the visually conveyed information, I argued that the audience is likely to be invited and take up the new identity constructed by the show. However, this thesis does not include data beyond the reality show to further study the audience's feedback after watching the show. It makes thesis results stay at the theoretical hypothesis level but lack evidence to conclude the effects of the show on their audiences. Thus, further studies in this field may want to include the audience's feedback by interviewing them and collecting related comments from online platforms.

Second, the thesis data were originally in Mandarin, while the study analysis was based on the data's English translation. Although I used several translation strategies (discussed in the methodology chapter) to balance the original meaning in Mandarin and the equivalences in English, some English translation elements might inevitably be lost as I was the only translator. This thesis considers the impacts of discursive devices on inviting the show's audiences; therefore, a more accurate translation may help to better understand them. For those future studies that apply

discourse analysis but involve more than one language, it may be important to include a more professional translator to enhance the translation accuracy.

Third, the analysis of this thesis was based on answering the three research questions. As a result, it missed some potential discourses that were less related to the research questions, or the related discourses were relatively less dominant throughout the show. The thesis results showed that the discourses used in *Sisters Who Make Waves* were highly influenced by postfeminist sensibility and neoliberalism in the context of China's market economy. However, some other discourses reflected the ideologies specifically in China not related to age and gender. For example, a female celebrity said, "I feel that the society has given me a lot, I hope I can also pay back" (S2E1-1 1:13); another female celebrity prioritized team value beyond individuals', she said, "you are one of the team, it is not your solo, I'm worried since I'm afraid of holding them back" (S2E2-1 26:17); and a Chinese policewoman was invited to the show as a special guest in episode 12, she said "... if people and my country need me I can stand out in the frontline to protect people" (S2E12-1 40:00). These discourses are indoctrinated by China's distinctive political correctness that may be important to further understand media language in contemporary China.

Fourth, the study applied semiotic analysis to understand the visual information presented in the show. The method was used to study the "denotation" and "connotation" of the visuals. Since there are relatively few studies on postfeminist media cultures specifically involved in understanding visual information of reality shows, there is a limited experience to draw from. However, according to the results of this thesis, there is no doubt that visual information is an overlooked part of TV shows that deserves in-depth study. Future research of this interest may develop more systematic research methods to study it more effectively.

Conclusion

Just one month before the completion of this thesis, *Sisters Who Make Waves* season 3 has already started broadcasting on its official video platforms, including the YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/hunantv/search?query=Sisters%20Who%20Make%20Waves%20S3>). Given the fierce competition in Chinese entertainment reality shows, *Sisters Who Make Waves* has been produced for three seasons. It may, from a different perspective, reflect the show's popularity among its audience, while the show's novel focus, a long-neglected group — middle-aged women, contributes to the result. Judging by the content of *Sisters Who Make Waves* season 2 studied in this thesis, the show's claimed goal of encouraging more ordinary women to pursue dreams and getting rid of the age constraints does not seem to have been achieved. On the contrary, the unrealistic ideal of middle-aged women constructed through the discourses and visual information of the show is likely to trigger ordinary women's anxiety about ageing.

On the other hand, considering the Chinese government's exclusive power over China's media, *Sisters Who Make Waves* obviously conforms to the current political trend. It not only survives under strict control but also broadcasts for three consecutive seasons. It is worth thinking about the ideal woman advocated by the reality show again — they are self-monitoring and self-reliant; they work hard, endure pain, actively adjust their mindset, and positively interpret social inequalities; they internalize injustice rather than challenge the system. These characteristics are exactly what the government needs for the ideal neoliberal citizens.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Approval



19/10/2021

Dear: Xiao Zhang

Re: Low Risk Notification - 4000025084 - The influence of the reality show Sisters Who Make Waves on gender, age and body image of Chinese Women: A Discourse Analysis Study

Thank you for your notification which you have assessed as Low Risk.

Your project has been recorded in our database for inclusion in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

If situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your ethical analysis, please contact a Research Ethics Administrator.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research."

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director - Ethics, telephone 06 3569099 ext 85271, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz."

Please note, if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish requires evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to complete the application form again, answering "yes" to the publication question to provide more information for one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

Yours sincerely

Professor Craig Johnson
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)