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# Empowering middle-aged women? A discourse analysis of gendered ageing in the Chinese television reality show *sisters who make waves*

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## ABSTRACT

*Sisters Who Make Waves* is a popular Chinese reality show that affirmatively centres “middle-aged” women. Given its popularity and positive framing, the show has significant potential to shape Chinese discourses of gendered aging. To examine this potential, we performed a discourse analysis on Season 2 of *Sisters Who Make Waves*, identifying its discursive constructions of gendered aging; the subject positions within these discourses; and the rhetorical strategies interpellating the viewer to identify with these subject positions. Three discourses were evident: (1) “age is a problem for women” (an account articulated only to be refuted), (2) “age is a problem only if you let it;” and (3) “hyper resilience” (an expectation of psychological resilience in the face of severe challenges). Reading this analysis through the lens of a postfeminist sensibility, we show how the affirmative potential of *Sisters Who Make Waves* is undercut with the show’s entanglement of empowerment with regulation and synergies between postfeminist feeling rules and Chinese state ideology of Positive Energy 正能量.

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## Introduction

In 2020, a Chinese reality TV show produced by China Hunan TV called *Sisters Who Make Waves* (乘风破浪的姐妹) aired for the first time on Mango TV. It had 370 million views within three days. Subsequently, the show released more seasons, its success a significant achievement amongst competitive Chinese entertainment reality shows. Its secret? *Sisters Who Make Waves* focused on middle-aged women, a devalued group within contemporary Chinese culture, notable for their absence in Chinese media. Instead, *Sisters Who Make Waves* invited 30 female celebrities over 30 years old (an age group considered middle-aged in China), to compete in a talent contest; affirmatively positioning these women as beautiful and able to “bravely pursue their dreams” (勇敢追梦) because “life begins at thirty” (三十而骊).

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Given its popularity and refiguring of “older” women, *Sisters Who Make Waves* could shape contemporary articulations of femininity in China. To examine this potential, we offer a discourse analysis of its representations of women’s aging, showing how *Sisters Who Make Waves* offered constructs of ideal femininity entangled within complex flows of transnational postfeminism, neoliberalism and Chinese culture, economics, and politics.

### ***A postfeminist sensibility***

Rosalind Gill (2007) developed the concept of a postfeminist sensibility to connect multiple and potentially contradictory elements producing a new form of ideal femininity in British media. These elements included discourses of female empowerment and individual choice; practices of self-surveillance, self-discipline, and beauty work; self-sexualization and celebrations of female sexual agency; and the “retraditionalisation” of gender roles. Gill connected these elements with neoliberalism and consumption; and with others, including Angela McRobbie (2004), also described how postfeminism drew on feminist language while rejecting feminist politics or identification.

The work of Gill, McRobbie and other scholars of postfeminism showed how post-feminist media addressed women as a particular kind of sexually agentic, entrepreneurial, empowered, “can-do” woman, interested in feminine pursuits and able to transform herself through hard work. A central theme was that appearance work was empowering. For example, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer’s (2006) showed how US reality television represented cosmetic surgery through a narrative of self-choice, transformation, and the opportunity to become “better.” Other studies showed how female celebrities represented successful figures of postfeminism through their capacity to produce themselves as beautiful (Giuliana Monteverde 2016; Dayna Chatman 2015), evoking in others the need to participate in “aesthetic labour” (Sophia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff 2017), despite celebrities creating unattainable levels of beautification that left other women “only ever able to position themselves as somehow failing” (Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley 2013, 278). Thus, in circulating ideas about ideal femininity, postfeminist media shaped many women’s understandings of themselves, creating affective flows of shame and anxiety when women failed to meet these ideals.

Postfeminism remains an ongoing, if shifting, media address. A new visibility of feminism often aligns with postfeminism (Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg 2020), while other elements of postfeminist sensibility have intensified including an “expectation for women to work on their bodies, transforming them to meet cultural beauty ideals, and to understand this work as empowering and undertaken by their own volition” (Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans and Martine Robson 2023, 50). Despite concerns about body image distress (Riley, Evans, and Robson 2023), levels of self-criticism and self-loathing (Brenda R Weber 2007) and expectations of perfection (Angela McRobbie 2015), this transformation imperative has strengthened through associations with empowerment, and the proliferation of beauty products and services framed as pampering, pleasurable and even feminist. For example, Michelle Lazar showed Singaporean magazine advertisements with straplines such as “fight for your right to own the perfect body” (2011, 41).

The transformation imperative now includes older women, where a new, positive media visibility of older women is predicated on having a youthful appearance, offering viewers the promise “ageless aging” (Josephine Dolan 2014; Deborah Jermyn 2012; Anne Jerslev 2017; Barbara L.; Barbara L Marshall and Momin Rahman 2015; Iolanda Tortajada, Frederik Dhaenens and Cilia Willem 2018; Imelda Whelehan 2013). For example, Korean advertising campaigns represent valued older women as sexy and youthful (Jong Mi Jong Mi Kim 2011; Fedorenko Olga 2015); and older Korean women articulate media discourses of freedom, autonomy, and a social expectation to “age beautifully” (Joanna Elfving-Hwang 2021).

The transformation imperative also extended to include work on the mind, not just the body. This psychological turn created new “feeling rules,” requiring women to demonstrate a confident and positive approach to life’s challenges (Sarah Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018; Octavia Calder-Dawe, Margaret Wetherell, Maree Martinussen and Alex Tant 2021; Arlie Russell Hochschild 1979; Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill 2022). Within these feeling rules, women may express pain and vulnerability, but only as part of a progressive narrative of success through resilience, self-regulation, self-belief, and confidence. This “confidence culture” (Orgad and Gill 2022) encourages women to cultivate resilience in the face of challenges, creating a psychological transformation imperative that directs women’s attention to working on their positivity. Confidence culture occurs against a backdrop of governmental economic policies that increase women’s vulnerability, including post-Mao marketisation in China (Jie Yang 2017); and works to quell complaint by focusing attention onto fixing individual psychologies not structural inequities (Angela McRobbie 2020; Orgad and Gill 2022; Riley, Evans, and Robson 2023).

### ***Transnational postfeminism***

Scholars have found postfeminist sensibility useful for making sense of media representations of women in many countries, including Australia, China, Columbia, India, Italy, New Zealand, Nigeria, Portugal, Russia, Spain, South Africa, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the USA (e.g., Julie Andsager and Kimberly Roe 2003; Priscila Álvarez-Cueva and Paula Guerra 2021; Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020; Priscilla Boshoff 2021; Eva Chen 2013; Del Río Carral, María and Antonia Lyons 2020; Amy Shields Dobson 2016; Simidele Dosekun 2015; Isis Giraldo 2015; Margaret Henderson and Anthea Taylor 2019; Sue Jackson, Tiina Vares and Rosalind Gill 2013; Britt-Inger Keisu and Helene Brodin 2022; Sagar Murdeshwar, Sarah Riley and Alison Mackiewicz 2019; Geraldina Roberti 2022; Sivi Salmenniemi and Maria Adamson 2015; Estella Tincknell 2011; Sofie Van Bauwel 2018). These countries have market-led economies underpinned by neoliberal deregulation, which require their citizens to develop identities in relation to individualism, consumption and becoming flexible workers for fluctuating market-driven economies. This psychosocial shift is more palatable when neoliberalism is entangled with local values (Aihwa Ong 2006), and given the entanglement of postfeminism with neoliberalism, this argument holds for a postfeminist sensibility (Jingyi Guo, Ziwei Zhang, Jinhong Song, Lu Jin, Yu Duan and Sara Liao 2022; Michelle M Lazar 2011; Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans, Sinikka Elliott, Carla Rice and Jeanne Marecek 2017; Riley, Evans, and Robson 2023).

Postfeminism is a neoliberal discursive formation that can adapt to different forms of culture, economy, and politics while still maintaining its key characteristics (Jess Butler

2013). For example, Salmenniemi and Adamson (2015) described how Russian self-help literature combined postfeminist themes with Russian cultural values, so that postfeminist tropes of self-surveillance, work on the body as empowering and linked to women's successes, feminist language without identification as feminist, and a re-traditionalisation of gender roles, were tied to Russian values of self-improvement, hard work, and a historical communist rejection of feminism as a bourgeois ideology.

The meshing of postfeminism with local values often creates problems for women. For example, postfeminist drinking cultures conflict with local constructs of British working-class respectability (Lin Bailey, Christine Griffin and Avi Shankar 2015) and Indian nationalist discourses (Murdeswar, Riley, and Mackiewicz 2019). Relatedly, Sue Thornham and Feng Pengpeng (2010) discuss the complexities of transnational postfeminism in the symbolism of women's white skin in China, which was linked to aristocratic beauty in classical 17<sup>th</sup> century Chinese literature, devalued during Mao's time as decadent, and now—intersecting with western beauty constructs—revitalized as ideal Chinese.

With the global reach of neoliberal economic systems—even into once communist countries like China—and the dynamic flows of people in these systems, scholars call for nuanced analyses “of the complex interconnections, power asymmetries, and global flows of postfeminist sensibility” (Riley et al. 2017, 8). Such work includes a careful consideration of how elements of postfeminism intersect with a country's values, politics, histories and gender relations, and the recognition of the multiple flows of meaning making (Nandita Dutta 2021; Thornham and Pengpeng 2010; Fan Yang 2020).

### ***Postfeminism in China***

Market-orientated economic reforms were led by Deng Xiaoping in China in the 1970s, ending Mao Zedong's centralized economy. Subsequently, three decades of economic reforms linked to neoliberalism, and associated consumerism and individualism, have shaped Chinese citizens, influencing gender in Chinese society (Wu Xiaoying 2010). Although multiple discourses of gender circulate (Thornham and Pengpeng 2010; Yang 2020), it is useful to note a broad historical shift from Mao era framings of gender as sameness, to a contemporary focus on gender difference and women's heterosexually attractiveness. These contemporary understandings circulate within Chinese media which, produced against a complex backdrop of “global systems of communication, finance, leisure, entertainment, scholarship and much more” (Kevin Latham 2006, 233), are aligned with government policies because radio, film, television, print, and social media are governed by state-initiated regulations (Sara Liao 2021; Wenna Zeng and Colin Sparks 2019).

Analysis of contemporary Chinese media aimed at women evidences postfeminist tropes, including using feminist language while refuting feminism; centring the body as the site of women's value/identity; desires for unattainable appearance and postfeminist perfection; an emphasis on autonomy, self-determination, and personal choice; and re-traditionalisation (Guo et al. 2022; Thornham and Pengpeng 2010; Shengwei Sun and Feinian Chen 2015; Xiaoying 2010; Yang 2020). Consumption and feminist discourses are also woven together, for example, in notions of “power femininity” in Chinese editions of global fashion magazines (Eva Eva Chen 2016). In this consumption-oriented feminism, scholars identify a postfeminist sensibility, with Yang (2020, 2) calling it “consumerist

pseudo-feminism” and Guo et al. (2022, 387) “choice feminism.” Relatedly, Thornham and Pengpeng (2010, 207) describe how feminism (in terms of a political movement) becomes an unspoken loss for young women who might identify as feminist and/or recognize the discrimination Chinese women face, but who are given individualizing strategies in the magazines they read that “offer neither an explanation nor a solution.”

Appearance work is also linked to feminism and/or empowerment in Chinese media (Meng Zhang 2012; Jaehee Jung 2018). This occurs in the context of privatization of state-owned enterprises, requiring women to find new forms of employment, for example in the beauty industry and/or to consider youthful beauty as important economic capital for employment or marriage (Jie Yang 2011; Wen Hua 2009; Ma Hua 2022; Du Yiwei 2021). In this “face-judging” (看脸时代) context of narrow “white, young and thin (白幼瘦)” beauty ideals, Chinese media often highlight women’s beauty over their professional skills (Yiwei 2021; Anett Dippner 2018).

Older women are devalued within this visual economy. Middle-aged female celebrities are comparatively absent in media,<sup>1</sup> and media representations stigmatize older single women (Hannah Feldshuh 2018; Shiyu Zheng and Xu Min 2022). For example, in the popular dating show *If You Are the One* (非诚勿扰), young participants are most welcomed by male participants and placed centre stage, while older participants fear being “leftover women” (剩女) (Li Luzhou 2015; Wei Luo and Zhen Sun 2015). Another contemporary derogative term is “big mother” (大妈), which is used to disparage older women as unattractive and unfashionable (Li Sheng 2022; Claudia Huang 2021).

On Chinese social media, female internet influencers (“Wang Hong” 网红) coach beauty practices, promote beauty-related products, and discuss the importance of appearance in maintaining a successful marriage (Liao 2021; Mingyi Hou 2022; Jia Guo 2022; Dippner 2018). Wang Hong are also trained in, and are encouraged by the state, to articulate “positive energy” (正能量), a political discourse from the Xi Jinping office, designed “to encourage people to be optimistic, love the country, society, and life, and do good things” (Xu Jian, Qu Lina and Ge Zhang 2022, 537; also see; Zifeng Chen and Clyde Yicheng Wang 2019; Peidong Yang and Lijun Tang 2018). Thus, despite different contexts, there are resonances between the Chinese “positive energy” discourse and postfeminist positive feeling rules identified in western media.

Despite important entanglements between Chinese media representations of women and a postfeminist sensibility there are few studies considering postfeminism in the context of China, and none we can find focusing on older women (Wei Shi and Liu Sshih-Diing (2023)). Addressing this research lacunae, we examined *Sisters Who Make Waves* because with its viewing figures, and its departure from dominant negative framings of middle-aged women, the show has potential to radically shape discourses of gendered aging for millions of Chinese women. Our aim was therefore to understand how *Sisters Who Make Waves*, in showcasing the talents of singers, dancers and actors aged between 30–50 years, constructed middle-aged, ideal femininity for Chinese women.

## Method

Closed captions of *Sisters Who Make Waves* Season 2, were retrieved from the Official YouTube channel of China Hunan TV,<sup>2</sup> which gave us access to the most recent full season available at the time, thus, providing the most contemporary discourses articulated by the

show. We viewed both the original Mandarin and YouTube's English translation together, adding descriptions of key actions happening on the screen. Mandarin transcripts were unchanged to reflect the original data verbatim, while the English transcripts were further reviewed by the first author (fluent in Mandarin and English). Season 2 contained thirteen episodes, totalling almost 41 hours. Extracts that represented exemplars of the discourses identified in the analysis are presented below in English and Mandarin, with the source provided, e.g., "S2E1-1 20:30" represents season 2, episode 1 part 1, 20 minutes and 30 seconds in.

We applied a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis in line with Sarah Riley, Robson Martine and Evans Adrienne (2021), where transcripts were coded for direct and indirect references to age and gender, and through an iterative process, we conceptually themed these extracts to create a typology of patterns of talk that represented the micro discourses (or interpretative repertoires) that construct the object of study (in this case gendered aging). We then considered the subject positions produced in these discourses, which offer vantage points from which a person can view themselves and the world (Bronwyn Davies and Harré Rom 1999); and the performative qualities of talk in interaction such as rhetoric strategies to interpellate the audience. Combined, this systematic process enabled a theoretically informed, multi-layered discourse analysis that identified robust patterns across the data set. With this method of analysis, we addressed the following research questions: What discourses of gendered aging are evident in *Sisters Who Make Waves*? What subject positions are offered? And what discursive strategies are used to interpellate the viewer?

## Analysis

*Sisters Who Make Waves* centres on what it means to grow older. The show recognises discourses that problematize aging for women, but only to reject them. Instead, the show constructs affirmative subject positions for older women, but ones that also orient to hard work and struggle. Below, we examine this complexity with three discourses produced in our analysis: "age is a problem for women," "age is only a problem if you let it," and "hyper resilience."

### *Age is a problem for women*

Explicitly and implicitly, age was constructed as a problem for women. For example, when a contestant described age as a problem in relation to reduced work opportunities:

Extract 1 (S2E2-2 14:54)

An Youqi: I think I must work hard to get the chance as I am 38 years old, so I am almost 40. Chances for me are getting less and less actually. You don't know what else you can do.

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 underpinning narrative of *Sisters Who Make Waves* was of the show giving these celebrities another—and perhaps last—chance at success, in the context of women

having shorter media careers than their male counterparts, within a wider cultural devaluating of older women. Above, An Youqi articulates this narrative, with “must” framing this as a prescription, which she connects to reduced chances, supported by a reality claim “actually”. Her last sentence connects these reduced opportunities to a sense of powerlessness and absence of possibilities: “you don’t know what else you can do”; creating a subject position of “women without prospects” that aligns with the wider media construct of “leftover woman” (剩女). In this context, where age represented a loss of opportunities for women, it was unsurprising when contestants showed age to be a sensitive topic that they could not talk about easily:

Extract 2 (S2E1–1 17:08)

- Yang Yuying: I am Yang Yuying, I am a singer. Can I keep my age a secret or must I say it?
- Director: Because we need to
- Yang Yuying: But I saw that in the first season some of the sisters didn’t say it either. That felt easy. What about I just say I was born in 1971? Is that okay? I don’t like it that much, yeah, I don’t usually hide my age, but I debuted 30 years ago, my god.
- 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。

Above, when Yang Yuying is invited to describe herself, she asks if she can keep her age a secret. She explains this avoidance as a personal preference “I don’t like it that much,” before shifting to position herself differently, as someone who does not usually hide her age. This shifting suggests a need to account for not saying her age, implying that hiding one’s age is problematic—which may be linked to the age-affirmative stance of the show. But she returns to a problematic framing of age, acquiescing to the request by only indirectly giving her age and exclaiming in horror or shock “my god” when she considers how long she has been working. Thus, even in a show that celebrates older women’s accomplishments, age was constructed as a problem orienting to the economic and social capital that younger women have in China.

### ***Age is only a problem if you let it***

Although the show acknowledged that aging reduced women’s opportunities, it did so only to refute the “age is a problem” discourse. This was shown in the multiple ways where the contestants downplayed or resisted negative accounts of age, constructing age as a problem only if you let it by (1) framing middle age as a time to shine; (2) reframing age as psychology not biology; or (3) positioning ageless beauty as attainable. In line with our discussion of postfeminism above, these understandings functioned to situate responsibility for managing the “problem” of age with women.

### *Age is a time to shine*

Here participants articulated a developmental narrative where age offered a psychological advantage:

Extract 3 (S2E3–1 34:32)

Li huizhen: 30s, 40s and 20s, we look at problems in different heights, widths, depths and dimensions. This is the charm of age. If you are in your 40s and you still have the worries of 20s girls, then you just wasted time. What are you doing? Right?

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?

Above, Li Huizhen describes a richness of thinking as “the charm of age,” positioning middle-aged women as superior to younger women. Her talk also reflects the psychological transformative imperative described above: if women do not improve, they “just wasted time.”

Extract 4 (S2E5–1 2:17:23)

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 here had such time as well, but today I am here on the stage of *Sisters Who Make Waves* I want to shine.

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

Jia Qing’s talk also described desirable, aged-related transformation. Starting with a call to “every woman” to see turning 30 as an “opportunity for rebirth and transformation,” she shifts to herself, disclosing her own experiences of feeling psychologically vulnerable (“confused, scared, and lost”) before generalizing again, “I believe everyone here had such time.” Turning again to herself, she claims “I want to shine.” Her talk thus recognises and refutes fear of aging, not just for herself but for “every woman,” interpellating all older women that they too can shine. This talk also articulates the positive feeling rules of contemporary postfeminism, that women may express pain or vulnerability, but only as part of a progressive narrative towards developing confidence.

### *Age is a mindset*

Extract 5 (S2E13 3:34:27)

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 wane, our dreams will never fail

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

Above, Na Ying, the oldest contestant on the show, states her age but discounts its importance by focusing on her unchanging youthful mindset (“the spirit of a teenager”).

Her ability to stay psychologically youthful is framed as unusual (“I *still* challenge myself”), but possible. Referencing the metaphor of *Sisters Who Make Waves*, she suggests that even though the show will end, its momentum will continue for “all sisters,” interpellating the female audience to believe that they too can fulfil their aspirations if they work on their psychology (“as long as our spirits don’t wane”). Her talk articulates psychological transformation imperative and confidence culture and reproduces the understanding of youthfulness as valued, while decoupling this valued youthfulness (“the spirit of a teenager”) from age. Thus, with the right amount of work, an older woman can achieve this form of youth.

### *Ageless beauty is attainable*

The importance of appearance was a central motif in the show, for example, in episode one “beauty” (美女), “beautiful” (漂亮/美), “good-looking” (好看), and “face value” (颜值) were said 55 times. Within this, a discourse of attainable ageless beauty (Dolan 2014) was articulated, for example, when Yang Yuying said that “women can be young at any age” (S2E3–1 2:05 钰莹:女性无论在任何年纪都可以青春). Such talk evoked possibility and obligation, entangling optimism, empowerment, and regulation. Relatedly, their talk described ageless beauty as possible, but challenging:

Extract 6 (S2E6–1 34:50)

- Chen Yanxi: As a matter of fact, all the sisters know that it is not easy to maintain one’s appearance
- Jiang Luxia: Yes, it is very difficult
- Chen Yanxi: It takes a lot of effort, I have hardly eaten seasoned foods for years. That I have persisted for so many years reflects my respect for my career
- 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

This extract brings the audience into the celebrities’ secret confidences (“all the sisters know”). The secret shared, and corroborated by another celebrity, is that “it is very difficult”. This is followed by an example of the effort Chen Yanxi puts into her appearance, which is described as ongoing for many years and related to her commitment to her career, implying that a beautiful appearance requires sacrifice and effort. This talk produces the subject position of an unceasing aesthetic labourer, participating in choiceful aesthetic entrepreneurship as emblematic of commitment to her career.

The possibility of ageless aging was also repeatedly signified in the celebrities’ clothing and appearance, which included tight-fitting clothes, crop tops revealing flat stomachs, and miniskirts showing slim, toned thighs. Thus, both the celebrities’ talk and appearance oriented to the postfeminist promise that—with the right choices and an orientation to self-improvement for both mind and body—women can transform themselves.

In the context of age being a problem for women in China, in terms of career and relationship prospects (Hua 2009, 2022; Yiwei 2021; Yang 2017), the discourse of “age is only a problem if you let it” offered the hope that women can maintain their economic and social capital. But this logic located the solution to the social and structural problems of gender inequity in women working on their appearance, with the implication that if women do not overcome age, it is because they did not try hard enough. The outcome is a “cruel optimism” that directs women’s desires towards toxic or unattainable objects (Lauren Lauren Berlant 2011), in this case, of inhabiting the subject position of a “forever young woman.” Further, the valuing of psychological maturity in “middle age as a time to shine” contradicted the prescription to have a teenage spirit, again, creating unattainable expectations.

### Hyper resilience

The understanding that hard work can overcome structural inequity was also evident in the third discourse of hyper resilience. Repeatedly, the show articulated a “can-do woman” subject position, of being able to face great challenges, while staying relentlessly confident and positive.

Extract 7 (S2E1–2 1:46:32)

Wang Ou: I do everything with confidence. I am 38 years old already; you must know that my will comes first, whether you like it or not. It’s a very good state when you can please yourself; first of all, everyone must love themselves

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

Above, Wang Ou uses extreme case formulations, describing “everything” she does as an act of confidence and demanding that “everyone” love themselves. She also uses modal verbs (“must”) making confidence and self-love both a prescription and a pleasurable outcome (“a very good state”). This talk evoked confidence culture (Orgad and Gill 2022) and produced the subject position of a woman who can bend the world to her will. The celebrities also talked about resilience in the face of adversity:

Extract 8 (S2E5–1 1:49:11)

Dong Jie: When you face setbacks, you must have an attitude that will always challenge the impossible.

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

The rhetorical strategies of Dong Jie’s talk, including extreme case formulations (“always challenge the *impossible*”), a modal verb (“must”) and repetition of the second person (when *you* face setbacks, *you* must), produced a powerful exhortation for women to meet setbacks head on. This prescription held, even when challenges were imagined as impossible or extreme, for example, when Chen Xiaoyun said “It doesn’t matter even if there are needles under your feet” (就算脚底下都是针头又怎样, S2E1–1 2:44).

Such talk created a discourse of “hyper resilience,” that prescribed confidence and psychological resilience in the face of extreme adversity. Second-person pronouns (“you” “your”) were often used, interpellating the audience to face their challenges, however painful or impossible they might be. The expectation to be relentlessly positive in the face of recognizably unwanted situations was also embodied. For example, when An Youqi was ruled out of the show, she said, whilst crying and thus appearing unhappy, “I am really happy” (就是挺开心的S2E3–1 2:43:58).

The discourse of hyper resilience created subject positions of the relentlessly confident and positive woman, through which the audience was invited to respond positively to challenges, however hard they might be. Individualism and risk-management were connected to hyper resilience when the contestants described needing to prioritize themselves so they could look after their families in the context of marriage being too risky to be relied on, even though marriage was held as a normative ideal in line with a retraditionalisation of gender roles (e.g., “I think most girls want a stable romantic relationship and family that is what I want too, to be a family-oriented woman” (我觉得大部分女生都希望有一个稳定的感情,一个家, Dong Xuan, S2E2–2 18:36). This talk created the subject position of “family-oriented woman” that contrasted with other accounts of needing to be financially self-sufficient and individualistic.

## Discussion

With its affirmative centring of older women, *Sisters Who Make Waves* has significant potential to shift negative discourses of gendered aging for women in China. Accordingly, we engaged in a nuanced analysis that identified three discourses of gendered aging: (1) “age as a problem for women,” to which the show positioned itself in opposition; (2) “age is only a problem if you let it,” which was produced through presenting physical ageless-aging as a possibility and conflicting accounts that celebrated both the psychological development that age brought and an unchanged youthful psychology; and (3) “hyper resilience,” which exhorted women to have relentless positivity in the face of significant challenges. Combined, we see an overarching narrative of women being exhorted to be aspirational in a context where their aspirations are likely to be impossible—and to ignore this impossibility.

Within these discourses we identified multiple subject positions, including the “young mindset woman,” “forever young woman,” “relentlessly confident and positive woman,” “hyper resilient woman,” “can-do woman,” and “aesthetic labourer.” A range of discursive strategies were employed that interpellated the viewer to identify with these subject positions, including the generalized “you;” explicit reference to “ordinary women;” extreme case formulations such as “usually” and “always” that normalized these ideas; and modal verbs, such as “must” that constructed an obligation or prescription. The talk also had an affective tone of hope, optimism, and intimacy as the celebrities shared their thoughts and experiences of overcoming cultural stigma against older women.

In these accounts, we identify various transnational postfeminist tropes, including ideal femininity constructed through multiple, contradictory discourses; empowerment through beauty work that requires self-surveillance and discipline; femininity as a bodily property; a physical and psychological transformation imperative; positive feeling rules; individualism and re-traditionalisation.

Gill (2007) developed the concept of a postfeminist sensibility to draw together what might otherwise have been considered disparate elements circulating in British media (itself part of a global media complex). Since then, scholars across the globe have found it a useful concept for examining their own mediated context produced within global flows of people, neoliberalism and commerce that intersect with local values and practices. In such work, including ours, postfeminist sensibility is useful, not for imposing onto another culture, but for providing a vantage point to make connections—in the same way that Gill used it for her context. The vantage point for us is in considering the disciplinary power of the discourses circulating in *Sisters Who Make Waves*, and their potential psychological harm.

We see harm in how *Sisters Who Make Waves* is positioned as an intervention creating new, affirmative subject positions for middle-aged women in China, while simultaneously undermining its affirmative possibilities. These affirmative possibilities are undermined when (1) women are positioned as responsible for creating themselves as having value by meeting contradictory or otherwise unattainable prescriptions (e.g., to both change and not change psychologically; to be in/dependent; to agelessly age), and (2) through exhortations to believe one can win against impossible challenges, and say one feels happy, even when crying in despair.

We also highlight the synergies between postfeminist positive feeling rules and Chinese Positive Energy (正能量) state ideology (Chen and Yicheng Wang 2019; Jian, Lina, and Zhang 2022; Yang and Tang 2018), which create prescriptions of hyper resilience. Hyper resilience represents an intensification of confidence culture, critiqued for quelling complaint and locating the solution for gendered inequity in individual women. Our analysis therefore adds new and further evidence to the argument that women are being asked to bear the burden of economic inequalities that come at the intersections of market-led economies, patriarchy, and sexism. Further, the disciplinary power of postfeminism, working as it does through women's desires to be good citizens or live their dreams, functions to maintain these inequities. The implication is that research on neoliberal rationality must consider gender.

Although there is now a (small) body of literature evidencing postfeminist sensibility in women's media in China (Chen 2013, 2016; Guo 2022; Guo et al. 2022; Hou 2022; Liao 2021; Yang 2020), to date there has been no substantial analysis of Chinese television shows. We therefore offer an original contribution to understanding how postfeminist sensibility circulates in Chinese television, as well as addressing the limited research globally, and specifically in China, on representations of middle-aged women. We also offer innovations in multi-level discourse analysis that considered discourses, subject positions, and discursive devices used to interpellate an audience. Future research might further develop analysis of the interaction between visual and audio content as well as examine audience responses.

By placing older women centre stage and celebrating what they can do, *Sisters Who Make Waves* has radical potential to challenge the stigmatisation of older women in China. But this potential is undercut by the show's engagement with a postfeminist sensibility that entangles empowerment with regulation and offers a cruel optimism that directs desires towards toxic or unattainable objects.

## Notes

1. Xue, Yujie, and Liu Chang. 2020. "The invisible women: China's middle-aged actresses." Sixth Tone. Last modified Feb 26, 2020. [https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005237/the-invisible-women-chinas-middle-aged-actresses-](https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005237/the-invisible-women-chinas-middle-aged-actresses)
2. [https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLUM8x224JrX80m\\_X7Vo\\_iu8ic7XqFXLY-](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLUM8x224JrX80m_X7Vo_iu8ic7XqFXLY-)

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