

# A Girlfriend Gaze on Romantic Feelings

## Coconstructing Postfeminist Selfhood on Douban

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### Abstract

This article discusses how postfeminism plays into the exchange of romantic relationship advice between young women on the Chinese social media platform Douban. Employing Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis, we elucidate how the process of giving and receiving romantic relationship advice facilitates the construction of a normative, postfeminist selfhood specific to China's post-socialist transition. Under postfeminist aspirations for independence, self-empowerment, and personal success, this selfhood is constructed in social-mediated communication to offer an instrumentalist assessment of romantic relationships. In doing so, young Chinese women repudiate each other's lovesickness, pathologizing romantic desires to achieve a false sense of emotional stability and mental strength. This gives rise to a girlfriend gaze on women's emotional changes, establishing a self-/peer surveillance mechanism that regulates how members of the Douban community engage each other on the platform. While masked with a veneer of female empowerment and sisterly help, this mode of self-/peer surveillance not only perpetuates the stereotypical association of women with emotionality and irrationality but also marginalizes public discussions on structural gender inequalities, undermining collective efforts to challenge the patriarchal status quo. The research findings shed light on the functioning

of neoliberal governance in contemporary China in the context of social-mediated communication.

**Keywords:** China; critical discourse analysis (CDA); peer surveillance; postfeminism; romantic relationship; social media

## Introduction

With approximately three hundred million monthly active users, Douban is one of China's most popular social networking sites.<sup>1</sup> Originally launched for sharing reviews of books, films, music, and other cultural products, the platform is now widely used by well-educated, middle-class Chinese urbanites to organize interest-based or topic-oriented “groups” or “communities.”<sup>2</sup> According to a 2022 report from the “Qianfan” query platform, the majority of Douban users are women under thirty years old.<sup>3</sup> Groups such as “Today I Had a Crush but Received No Response” and “Douban Group for Encouraging Breakup,” formed by young women keen to seek and offer each other advice on issues concerning (predominantly heterosexual) romantic relationships, are especially popular and have accumulated hundreds of thousands of followers within two years.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Douban has turned itself into a social networking site that claims to offer young Chinese women community-based support.

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1. Neal Schaffer, “The Top 5 Chinese Social Media Networks,” Neal Schaffer, updated January 1, 21, 2024, <https://nealschaffer.com/top-5-chinese-social-media/>.

2. Brian Yecies et al., “The Douban Online Social Media Barometer and the Chinese Reception of Korean Popular Culture Flows,” *Participations* 13, no.1 (2016): 302.

3. Ting Yang et al., “Chinese Women's Concept of Childbirth Based on the Social Media Topic ‘What Does Childbirth Mean to a Woman’: Content and Thematic Analysis,” *JMIR Pediatrics and Parenting* 7 (January 5, 2024).

4. Youyou Wang, “Crush as the Substitution—Young People Have Indeed become More Conservative,” [in Chinese] Sanlian Lifeweek Magazine, October 28, 2022, <https://www.lifeweek.com.cn/article/179885>.

In this article, we examine the seeking and giving of romantic advice that takes place on Douban based on a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of seventy social media postings retrieved from five popular romance-centered subgroups. The results of our analysis suggest that advice on romantic relationships burgeoning on Douban typically resembles postfeminist media culture in the West, which sanctions intensified surveillance of women through responsabilizing them for their personal well-being and self-care. The discourse on Douban epitomizes a postfeminist call in the Chinese context, revolving around crafting a self-made woman who refutes her longing for intimacy and can get by with minimal support from men. It turns female Douban users' community-based advice-giving into a form of emotional peer surveillance, rendering the intensified patrolling and policing of women's femininities. Packaged with the veneer of solidarity, such peer surveillance paradoxically absolves persistent patriarchy and misogyny, marginalizing critical scrutiny of structural issues underpinning gender inequalities in Chinese society today.

## The Rise of Postfeminist “Feeling Rules”

Since the 1990s, an active process of “undoing” feminism, described as *postfeminism* by feminist media and cultural scholars,<sup>5</sup> has been on the rise across Euro-American societies. This societal process is contextualized against the accomplishments of the second-wave feminist movement, which has removed many structural barriers to women's social inclusion.<sup>6</sup> With successive generations achieving financial self-sufficiency through participation in social production, middle-class women are now rewarded

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5. Ángela McRobbie, “Post-feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (November 1, 2004): 255–64; Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 1, 2007): 147–66.

6. Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

with the purchasing power to renegotiate their positions in the consumer market. In this process, postfeminism emerges as a specific variant of rhetoric, which acknowledges the feminist gains of the 1970s and '80s only to suggest that collective emancipation mobilizations are no longer needed. Rather than orchestrating an outright backlash against feminism, postfeminist rhetoric revolves around glorifying consumer agency as the means to pursue personal lifestyle choices, which are considered ultimate goals for women's well-being and self-care.<sup>7</sup> This sanctions a form of neoliberal governance, where emancipation agendas are traded off for a pseudo sense of empowerment and autonomy through consumption-based self-optimization.

Postfeminism promotes an ideal postfeminist subject who seemingly enjoys self-autonomy yet is incapable of forming the public to collectively challenge entrenched gender asymmetry.<sup>8</sup> Against this backdrop, young women in contemporary Anglo-American societies are interpellated as the "top girl" who embodies the exemplar of female success in the new qualification-based system seemingly characterized by opportunities and openness.<sup>9</sup> Gill describes postfeminism as a "sensibility."<sup>10</sup> Central to this sensibility is the call for autonomous, independent, and resilient selfhood,<sup>11</sup> which inculcates a self-governing spirit, requiring the operationalization of psychoanalysis to diagnose the symptoms of and prescribe solutions to women's

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7. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

8. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 7.

9. McRobbie, "Post-feminism."

10. Rosalind Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (November 20, 2017): 618.

11. Akane Kanai, "The Best Friend, the Boyfriend, Other Girls, Hot Guys, and Creeps: The Relational Production of Self on Tumblr," *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 6 (March 14, 2017): 911–25.

problems.<sup>12</sup> Self-transformation under neoliberalism is thus crucially about “mobilising, acting on, and being sensitised to the right feelings.”<sup>13</sup> This perfectly aligns with a postfeminist form of discipline over women, which relies on regulating and producing women’s desires and attachments insofar as to pathologize and delegitimize an array of emotional needs traditionally labeled as “feminine.”<sup>14</sup>

Specifically, postfeminism cultivates its desired femininity by inciting women, particularly young women, to self-monitor and self-modify their spontaneous feelings and emotions according to a set of “feeling rules.”<sup>15</sup> As defined by Hochschild,<sup>16</sup> feeling rules govern women by creating a sense of obligation, which requires them to experience and express emotions in a particular manner in interpersonal interactions. The rules encompass the intensity, timing, duration, and placement of a feeling. Following such rules, the female subject is invited to track how she feels, acutely detect any emotional deviance, and reflexively adapt herself to the feeling rules while suppressing abject feelings and emotional states.<sup>17</sup>

Postfeminist feeling rules often exert influence through women’s media consumption. Self-help media, an arena where experts, coaches, and other cultural intermediaries guide individuals to overcome obstacles in life by making the right choice,<sup>18</sup> has created a discursive imperative urging women to be confident, upbeat, calculating, and rational.<sup>19</sup>

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12. Gill, “The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism,” 618.

13. Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai, “Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism: Affect, Subjectivity and Inequality,” *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 321.

14. Gill, “The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism,” 615.

15. Gill and Kanai, “Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism,” 319.

16. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 57.

17. Kanai, “The Best Friend, the Boyfriend, Other Girls, Hot Guys, and Creeps,” 913.

18. Meg-John Barker, Rosalind Gill, and Laura Harvey, *Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture* (New York: Polity, 2018).

19. Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill, *Confidence Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

However, driven by relentless neoliberal competition, the ongoing pressure to make optimal choices has been accompanied by growing feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, stress, and depression.<sup>20</sup> The desire to purge these abject feelings demands the subject to cling to aspirations toward a sense of security, both spiritual and material.<sup>21</sup> In the realm of intimate relationships, the injunction to confidence impels women to repudiate vulnerability, low self-esteem, self-doubt, and neediness, all of which are labeled as “toxic.” By locating both the cause and the solution of gender inequalities in individual women, specifically their psychological dispositions, the call for emotional positivity turns away from critiques of structural male hegemony and toward intensified practices of self-discipline and self-transformation.<sup>22</sup>

Under postfeminist feeling rules, women’s capacity for emotional detachment is deemed particularly necessary,<sup>23</sup> especially for those who want to engage in casual sex, since they should vacuum their feelings to prevent themselves from being trapped in a relationship.<sup>24</sup> Forensic vigilance is summoned, urging women to read the signs of male disinterest to avoid investing in a relationship that is unlikely to progress.<sup>25</sup> While claiming to help women maximize interests and minimize risks in heterosexual relationships, these postfeminist feeling rules effectively impose extensive emotional, psychic, and practical labor on women.<sup>26</sup>

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20. Stuart Hall and Alan O’Shea, “Common-Sense Neoliberalism,” *Soundings*, no. 55 (December 13, 2013): 9–25.

21. Engin F. Isin, “The Neurotic Citizen,” *Citizenship Studies* 8, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 217–35.

22. Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*.

23. Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 138.

24. Panteá Farvid and Virginia Braun, “Casual Sex as ‘Not a Natural Act’ and Other Regimes of Truth about Heterosexuality,” *Feminism & Psychology* 23, no. 3 (April 8, 2013): 365.

25. Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 137.

26. Barker, Gill, and Harvey, *Mediated Intimacy*, 108.

## Girlfriend Surveillance as a Form of Postfeminist Control

Understanding how postfeminist feeling rules shape femininity requires revisiting the surveillance mechanism of social media. Claiming to facilitate interconnectedness, social media platforms are effectively built for surveillance. Participating in social-mediated communication involves Internet users creating a profile and populating it with personal data. Alongside the constant monitoring of user behavioral paradigms through algorithms, this participation requires Internet users to trade off control over privacy to obtain an optimized user experience. In this process, social media surveillance not only operates as a top-down mode of control but also entails bottom-up dynamics in the form of inviting peer surveillance between individual users.<sup>27</sup> In the context of postfeminist feeling rules, such peer surveillance enables a new paradigm of the regulatory regime—namely, “gynaeopticon,” which facilitates “the many women watch the many women” on social media platforms.<sup>28</sup>

The disciplinary regime of the gynaeopticon operates through a “girlfriend gaze,”<sup>29</sup> which describes a modality of surveillance in which women discipline each other’s bodies and behavior.<sup>30</sup> The girlfriend gaze consists of both affection and “normative cruelties.”<sup>31</sup> Normative cruelties encompass meanness, bullying, and abuse, inciting undesired feelings such as worthlessness, inferiority, and jealousy to construct normative femininities.<sup>32</sup>

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27. Daniel Trottier, *Social Media as Surveillance: Rethinking Visibility in a Converging World* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

28. Allison Winch, “Brand Intimacy, Female Friendship and Digital Surveillance Networks,” *New Formations* 84, no. 84 (October 20, 2015): 228.

29. A. Winch, *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood* (New York: Springer, 2013).

30. Gill, “The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism.”

31. Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold, “Normative Cruelties and Gender Deviants: The Performative Effects of Bully Discourses for Girls and Boys in School,” *British Educational Research Journal* 36, no. 4 (August 1, 2010): 573–96.

32. Jessica Ringrose, *Postfeminist Education? Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

For example, schoolgirls regulate each other's appearance and sexuality by slut-shaming and mocking others' weight.<sup>33</sup> The desire for intimacy, belonging, and recognition tempts girls to subject themselves to the regime of the girlfriend gaze despite its cruelty. Glorified as sisterhood and sentimentalized by love, care, and solidarity toward a common project of self-reinvention, the regime enables and perpetuates an ever more intimate and obfuscated form of disciplinary power that regulates women in their everyday lives.<sup>34</sup>

A girlfriend gaze is made compulsory and perpetual by the constantly shifting position between the gazer and the gazed.<sup>35</sup> Materialized upon the numbers of followers, likes, reflagging, and comments, this girlfriend gaze is operationalized on social media by means of creating a "feedback loop" to increase the visibility and popularity of more palatable expressions.<sup>36</sup> For instance, Dobson observes that young women's social media profiles are frequently updated, edited, and rewritten with the mindfulness of an imagined audience, whose presence requires them to performatively and preemptively display confidence and shamelessness to shield themselves from the judgmental gaze of peers.<sup>37</sup> In the same vein, Kanai's analysis of Tumblr blog posts reveals how imagined girlfriend readers impel young women to exhibit certain emotions/attitudes toward significant others in social-mediated self-representation, where "the boyfriend" can be mentioned affectionately but substantial emotional dependence on him is taboo.<sup>38</sup>

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33. Terri Apter and Ruthellen Josselson, *Best Friends: The Pleasures and Perils of Girls' and Women's Friendships* (New York: Harmony/Rodale, 1999).

34. Winch, *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood*.

35. Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans, and Alison Mackiewicz, "It's Just between Girls: Negotiating the Postfeminist Gaze in Women's 'Looking Talk,'" *Feminism & Psychology* 26, no. 1 (February 1, 2016): 94–113.

36. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg, "Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation," *Feminist Theory* 21, no. 1 (April 23, 2019): 12.

37. Amy Shields Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation* (New York: Springer, 2015): 104.

38. Kanai, "The Best Friend, the Boyfriend, Other Girls, Hot Guys, and Creeps."



Through the girlfriend gaze mechanism, homosocial spaces on social media can function as a peer-to-peer monitoring system, branded as a “collaborative enterprise” that supervises the mutual development of competitive femininities. Winch’s research on wedding forums and Mumsnet demonstrates that women form digital communities to help each other combat what they perceive to be excessive weight, crucially, by offering their bodies up for analysis, calculation, and comparison.<sup>39</sup> Posts and comments mobilize the ingredients of friendship, including empathy, encouragement, and attentiveness, as well as disappointment, rivalry, and envy.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, gynaeoptical surveillance necessitates digital self-tracking (e.g., weekly weigh-ins on discussion boards).<sup>41</sup> Individuals are interpellated as a “quantified self” who utilizes digital affordances to voluntarily collect, record, monitor, and share a variety of quantified and nonquantifiable information about the self,<sup>42</sup> where the quantification of feelings and emotions precedes introspection.<sup>43</sup> For example, Illouz observes a growing interest in plotting intimacy levels on a scale to maintain balanced emotional investments from both parties in a relationship by identifying and problematizing “excessive” coldness or enthusiasm.<sup>44</sup> The convergence between social media and girlfriend gaze intensifies self-governance and peer surveillance.<sup>45</sup>

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39. Winch, “Brand Intimacy, Female Friendship and Digital Surveillance Networks.”

40. Winch, *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood*.

41. Winch.

42. Ana Sofia Elias and Rosalind Gill, “Beauty Surveillance: The Digital Self-Monitoring Cultures of Neoliberalism,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 1 (June 24, 2017): 60.

43. Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 138.

44. Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*.

45. Winch, *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood*.

## The Formation of Postfeminist Womanhood in Post-Socialist China

Existing scholarship on postfeminism is primarily based on observations of Euro-American societies.<sup>46</sup> Yet, capturing the commodification of women's empowerment rhetoric, the theorization of postfeminism has the potential for cross-border application. As evident in East Asian contexts,<sup>47</sup> an emerging body of literature has employed it to inform an analysis of gender politics in China in the wake of its post-socialist transformation.

The post-1970s economic reforms have offered the contextual ground for postfeminist ideologies to incubate in China. As David Harvey notes, the government has incorporated certain neoliberal strategies in its social governance since the late 1970s.<sup>48</sup> Without compromising on political fronts such as the party-state polity, China's practice of neoliberal governmentality is different from its Western counterparts, considering the authoritarian essence of the regime.<sup>49</sup> Yet, with a primary focus on the marketization of industries,<sup>50</sup> neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics is crafted within the restructured economy, which attempts to unleash individual creativity and self-entrepreneurship to boost economic growth. Yet, amid the imbalanced investments across regions, the privatization of housing, and the withdrawal from welfare state-building, the economic reforms have led to increased

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46. Simidele Dosekun, "For Western Girls Only?," *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 6 (August 24, 2015): 960–75; Jiang Chang and Hao Tian, "Girl Power in Boy Love: Yaoi, Online Female Counterculture, and Digital Feminism in China," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 4 (August 11, 2020): 604–20.

47. Jiang Chang and Hailong Ren, "Empowerment through Crazy: The German TV Series *Knallerfrauen* and Its Female Viewers in China," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 6 (July 24, 2016): 565–82; Sara Liao, "Wang Hong Fashion Culture and the Postfeminist Time in China," *Fashion Theory* 25, no. 5 (July 15, 2019): 663–85.

48. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (OUP Oxford, 2007).

49. Altman Yuzhu Peng, *A Feminist Reading of China's Digital Public Sphere* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2020).

50. Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

social stratification and rural/urban divisions despite their simultaneous creation of a sizable group of affluent middle-class urbanites. To legitimize structural inequalities emerging from the post-socialist transition that violate its past communist manifestos, official propaganda has sought recourse to neoliberal discourse, binding moral probity to self-reliance and promoting a set of ethics that urges individuals to act as self-sufficient entrepreneurial beings in all aspects of their everyday lives.<sup>51</sup>

Contextualized against its neoliberal transition, the incarnation of post-feminist sensibility in China is conditioned upon the state's resumed call for traditional femininity. In Mao's era, participation in socialist production was deemed an indispensable part of women's emancipation and national development. The strong, skillful, and desexualized "iron girls" were promoted as role models, often visually represented as female peasants from rural communes and labor workers dressed in uniforms and blue trousers.<sup>52</sup> This marked a key feature of China's gender politics during the socialist construction era, playing out as the neutralization of the citizenry's gender traits. A paradigm shift was, however, observed throughout the 1980s and 1990s, during which "restoring authentic femininity" was pervasively called for by male political elites. The resumed quest for "feminine virtues" was registered upon women's return to the domestic sphere to perform their "divine" gender roles as "dutiful wives and good mothers."<sup>53</sup> This came against the backdrop of the mass layoffs of labor workers at state-owned enterprises and the erosion of socialized childcare services, which created a twofold necessity for women's retreat from the public sphere to reassume their familial responsibilities within the restructured market economy.<sup>54</sup>

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51. Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 42.

52. Fengshu Liu, "From Degendering to (Re)gendering the Self: Chinese Youth Negotiating Modern Womanhood," *Gender and Education* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 18–34.

53. Liu, "From Degendering to (Re)gendering the Self."

54. Harriet Evans, "'Patchy Patriarchy' and the Shifting Fortunes of the CCP's Promise of Gender Equality Since 1921," *China Quarterly* 248, no. S1 (August 11, 2021): 95–115.

Yet, instead of presenting itself as a coercive form of political control, the call for traditional femininity is disguised with an empowerment veneer. Alongside the repudiation of the country's socialist past, the figure of iron girls was simplistically denounced as alienating women from their nature.<sup>55</sup> Essentialization of gender differences assumes the significance of liberating women from the "gender sameness" of the socialist past and enabling them to reassert their individuality and "female essence." Femininity is reconstructed, crucially, through indulging in the "possibilities and pleasures of feminine expression" offered by the ever-expanding market.<sup>56</sup> Women's autonomy and emancipation, once inseparable from the struggle against feudal and capitalist patriarchy, are now redefined by their consumer agency. The commodification of female empowerment facilitates the undoing of socialist feminism and depoliticizes the feminist struggles for egalitarianism and gender equality.

Well-received among urban, middle-class women growing up in the context of China's rapid economic growth, postfeminist self-making is intimately linked to notions of female independence.<sup>57</sup> Urban women are expected to undertake domestic duties, but they find it "too risky" to rely on their male partners completely.<sup>58</sup> Mediated by consumption, wage-earning power not only secures a material base but also signifies exemplary, modern middle-class womanhood. Affluent, sophisticated, and cultured women are discursively constructed as the norm of modernized female subjectivity, in distinction with the uneducated, "low-quality" (*suzhi di*) rural migrant workers. Beyond economic and cultural superiority, financial autonomy is also associated with aesthetic and sex capital, with career progress being

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55. Siyuan Yin, "Re-articulating Feminisms: A Theoretical Critique of Feminist Struggles and Discourse in Historical and Contemporary China," *Cultural Studies* 36, no. 6 (June 29, 2021): 981–1004.

56. Liu, "From Degendering to (Re)gendering the Self," 20.

57. C. J. Wallis and Yongrong Shen, "The SK-II #changedestiny Campaign and the Limits of Commodity Activism for Women's Equality in Neo/Non-Liberal China," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, no. 4 (June 6, 2018): 376–89.

58. Liu, "From Degendering to (Re)gendering the Self."

regarded as a channel to display the imagery of “white-collar beauty” with feminine charm<sup>59</sup> and to enhance women’s desirability in the marriage market.<sup>60</sup> Driven by the normative middle-class aspiration for success (*cheng-gong*)<sup>61</sup> and constant insecurity about one’s future well-being amid the erosion of a state-provided safety net, Chinese female urban youths keenly embrace the neoliberal and meritocratic vision of educational and professional excellence. Their pressure to succeed is further amplified by the filial obligation as the “only child” or “substitute son” for their parents.<sup>62</sup>

Women’s urgent agenda of personal success leads them to identify with achievement-oriented traits and dispositions, traditionally recognized as masculine for their association with the gendered expectation of men as breadwinners, including strong determination, toughness, courage, and competitiveness. Identification with masculine qualities indicates a departure from conventional notions of femininity characterized by gentleness, emotionality, obedience, and domesticity. Characteristics labeled “girly,” such as softness, weakness, and coyness, are devalued and even despised.<sup>63</sup> On this note, Liu’s findings resonate with Dobson’s observation on Anglo-American contexts that young women attempt to represent themselves on mediated peer networks as girl-powered individuals by performing psychological and social traits of masculinity, such as high self-esteem, fierce self-reliance, and ambition in career advancement.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, female urbanites tend to engage in constant self-reflection and extend economic rationality and

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59. Fengshu Liu, “The Rise of the ‘Priceless’ Child in China,” *Comparative Education Review* 60, no. 1 (February 1, 2016): 105–30.

60. Kailing Xie, *Embodying Middle Class Gender Aspirations: Perspectives from China’s Privileged Young Women* (New York: Springer Nature, 2021).

61. Yunxiang Yan, “The Chinese Path to Individualization,” *British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 3 (September 1, 2010): 489–512.

62. Liu, “From Degendering to (Re)gendering the Self.”

63. Liu.

64. Amy Shields Dobson, “Performative Shamelessness on Young Women’s Social Network Sites: Shielding the Self and Resisting Gender Melancholia,” *Feminism & Psychology* 24, no. 1 (December 1, 2013): 97–114.

self-centered utilitarianism to their positioning of intimate relationships.<sup>65</sup> Liu notes that high school girls contain their romantic desires to avoid distraction from schoolwork and caution against the tendency to indulge in feelings because it is perceived to affect their academic performance.<sup>66</sup> In this sense, the idealized postfeminist femininity in China bears distinctiveness from the womanhood typically described in Western-based accounts, which is characterized by a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, spontaneity, and sexual freedom.<sup>67</sup> In light of such differences and complexities, it is worth investigating how postfeminist feeling rules for young women play out in the Chinese context.

Primarily targeting urban middle-class women, relationship advice media is gaining increasing traction in China's digital economy, shaping women's selfhood formation and positioning of intimate relationships. For example, Mimeng, a digital influencer who self-branded as a feminist and was once one of China's most successful women-focused influencers, asserted that women should live for themselves and prioritize their own happiness. Highlighting the importance of self-care, she advocated women's financial independence to the extent that they can please themselves with unconstrained consumption.<sup>68</sup> Another prominent digital influencer, Ayawawa, a self-proclaimed "love guru," cautions women to stay calculating for the sake of their economic security. Women are encouraged to strategically capitalize on their sexual attraction, including traditional femininity, to maximize their material returns in romantic relationships and marriages.<sup>69</sup> To avoid falling for

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65. Fengshu Liu, "An Expressive Turn with a Chinese Twist: Young Women's Other-Sex Relations in Three Generations," *Sociology* 52, no. 5 (May 12, 2017): 950–65.

66. Liu, "From Degendering to (Re)gendering the Self."

67. Liu; Rebecca Brown and Melissa Gregg, "The Pedagogy of Regret: Facebook, Binge Drinking and Young Women," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 26, no. 3 (May 18, 2012): 357–69.

68. Altman Yuzhu Peng, "Neoliberal Feminism, Gender Relations, and a Feminized Male Ideal in China: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Mimeng's WeChat Posts," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 1 (August 13, 2019): 115–31.

69. Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong, "What Is Made-in-China Feminism(S)? Gender Discontent and Class Friction in Post-Socialist China," *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 4

“pure love,” women gather under influencers’ social media accounts, forming digital communities of relationship self-help. Underlying such self-help culture is an essentialist understanding of the differences between men and women in intimate relationships. Women are stereotypically portrayed as passive, indecisive, dependent, emotional, confused about their real needs, and incompetent in relationship management.<sup>70</sup> The gender stereotypes are further naturalized and rationalized by popular psychology, such as the highly rated *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, which ranked third in “Douban’s Top 10 Popular Books on Gender Relations.” Such sex essentialism attributes women’s vulnerabilities and risks in heterosexual relationships to their psychological deficits, which can be avoided by transforming their mindset and psychological states. The emphasis on individual changes renders the institutionalized and structuralized power asymmetry within heterosexual relationships into women’s responsibility for their well-being. Despite drawing from feminist language, such discourse conforms to the Chinese Communist Party’s regime of neoliberal governance, thus surviving the government’s strict censorship of feminist content on social media.<sup>71</sup>

As digital space becomes increasingly participatory, Internet users assume the role of content producers and actively engage in peer advice-giving.<sup>72</sup> Douban’s unique “Groups” function facilitates people with similar interests to gather and exchange views on particular forums, forming various online communities. In the forums’ commentary section, the most-liked comments are listed at the top, enjoying the greatest visibility, thereby sustaining the feedback loop mechanism. The commentary section also supports a “floor-building” function, where group members can reply to each other’s comments by referencing them, forming an ever-expanding “block”

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(September 9, 2019): 471–492.

70. Mary Crawford, “Mars and Venus Collide: A Discursive Analysis of Marital Self-Help Psychology,” *Feminism & Psychology* 14, no. 1 (February 1, 2004): 63–79.

71. Peng, “Neoliberal Feminism, Gender Relations, and a Feminist Male Ideal in China.”

72. Barker, Gill, and Harvey, *Mediated Intimacy*.

of dialogue as more users contribute to the thread.<sup>73</sup> The platform's interactive mechanism constructs the technological architecture of a gynaeopticon where peer surveillance can take place.

Existing literature on Chinese postfeminism tends to foreground how surveillance over the feminized body regulates Chinese women's daily labor on beauty and appearance.<sup>74</sup> Building on such analyses, this study attempts to explore how mediated postfeminism informs and facilitates self- and peer surveillance over Chinese women's emotions, psyche, and subjectivity. Through a case study of Douban, the study also contributes a timely intellectual intervention and a situated critique of the intimacy advice flourishing in the Chinese media landscape.

## Research Questions and Methods

As discussed, this study examines how romantic relationships are discursively constructed on Douban, focusing on its entanglement with localized postfeminist culture in the Chinese context. The underlying research questions are:

- RQ1. How do members of the romantic relationship advice-giving groups call for postfeminist selfhood on Douban?
- RQ2. How does postfeminist selfhood construction contribute to the establishment of self-/peer surveillance between women on Douban?
- RQ3. How does self-/peer surveillance constitute a neoliberal form of control over women's emotions?

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73. Altman Yuzhu Peng, "Amplification of Regional Discrimination on Chinese News Portals: An Affective Critical Discourse Analysis," *Convergence* 27, no. 5 (December 9, 2020): 1343–59.

74. Yin, "Re-Articulating Feminisms"; Wallis and Shen, "The SK-II #changedestiny Campaign and the Limits of Commodity Activism for Women's Equality in Neo/Non-Liberal China."



Table 1. Dataset summary

Group names	In Chinese	Number of group members (by August 2022)
<b>Today I Had a Crush but Received No Response</b>	我今天 crush了没有回应小组	61,284
<b>Help Group for the Forever Single</b>	母单互助组	36,890
<b>What does (S)he Mean</b>	ta说这话什么意思?	118,561
<b>Atlas of Human Couples</b>	人间情侣观察	185,954
<b>Douban Group for Encouraging Breakup</b>	豆瓣劝分小组	361,641

The research design was informed by Yang's theorization of "guerrilla ethnography."<sup>75</sup> Specifically, the first author closely monitored five discussion groups on Douban over a three-month period between May 2022 and August 2022. The five groups were selected for (1) their relevance to the topic of romantic relationships, and (2) their popularity as indicated by the number of forum members (see table 1 for details). Posts were collected by taking screenshots using mobile phones' default functions. Acting as a guerrilla ethnographer allows the researcher to capture the openness, fluidity, and connectivity of Douban as a digital space and the migration of images and narratives across the platform.<sup>76</sup> In addition to posts and comments, Douban forums contain rich textual and visual data, with links to maxims and memes circulating throughout the site.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was applied to analyze the postings sampled from Douban. CDA describes a theoretical position in discourse studies focusing on how language use facilitates the exercise and maintenance of power in communicative processes.<sup>77</sup> Yet, it is also widely used by media

75. Guobin Yang, "The Internet and the Rise of a Transnational Chinese Cultural Sphere," *Media, Culture & Society* 25, no. 4 (July 1, 2003): 469–90.

76. Lutgard Lams and Wendy Weile Zhou, "Pseudo-Participation, Authentic Nationalism: Understanding Chinese Fanqian Girls' Personifications of the Nation-State," *Asian Journal of Communication* 33, no. 1 (November 15, 2022): 38–59.

77. Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (New York: Pearson Education, 2001); Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis* (New York: Sage,

scholars as an operational methodological approach, which prescribes specific analytical steps to examine the shaping of media texts in broader sociopolitical contexts.<sup>78</sup> According to Fairclough's framework,<sup>79</sup> CDA conducts a threefold analysis: (1) textual, (2) discursive, and (3) sociocultural. At a textual level, CDA describes a wide range of linguistic features, such as lexical choices, speech acts, and rhetorical devices (e.g., metaphor, irony, and implicature).<sup>80</sup> At a discursive level, CDA explores the processes through which texts are produced, interpreted, and distributed, often focusing on such discursive strategies as (a) interdiscursivity, attending to what "genres, discourses, and styles [the text under examination] draws upon, and how it works them into particular articulations";<sup>81</sup> (b) nomination (establishing ideological meanings by naming people, objects, or events); (c) perspectivization/framing (specific ways of representation or narration of events and utterances).<sup>82</sup> At a sociocultural level, CDA examines the interplay between texts and broader social, political, and cultural contexts to inform critiques of wider social processes/practices.<sup>83</sup> In this study, we adopted Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, analyzing how female Douban users frame emotional states and romantic relationships to facilitate self-/peer surveillance on Douban and how

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2009); Teun A. Van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Studies: A Sociocognitive Approach," in *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: Sage, 2009), 62–86, esp. 62–67, 75–80, <https://doi.org/10.1075/z.184.79dij>.

78. Altman Yuzhu Peng and Yu Sun, "A Dialectical-relational Approach to Anti-trans Sentiments on Hupu," *Discourse Context & Media* 50 (December 1, 2022): 100654; Majid KhosraviNik and Johann W. Unger, "Critical Discourse Studies and Social Media: Power, Resistance and Critique in Changing Media Ecologies," in *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, 3rd ed. (New York: Sage, 2015), 206–33.

79. Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 59.

80. Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*.

81. Norman Fairclough, "A Dialectical-Relational Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis in Social Research," in *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 230–54.

82. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis* (New York: Sage, 2009).

83. Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (New York: Psychology Press, 2003).

their practices inform the construction of a postfeminist idealized selfhood to rationalize the neoliberal control over women in China.

On Douban, a user must become a group member to publish and comment on topical threads. While posters' identities are concealed by a pseudonymous name of their choosing, the threads within the ground remain publicly visible to all Douban users.<sup>84</sup> For ethical considerations, we removed posters' usernames when quoting them in the data analysis to avoid compromising their privacy. The sampled postings were written in Chinese and translated into English.

## Analytical Discussion

Our CDA accounts identified three interlocking aspects of the romance-focused discourse circulating within these Douban groups: (1) the discursive construction of emotional deviance, (2) the call for peer surveillance, and (3) the exhibition of emotional management.

### *Deviance from Postfeminist Feeling Rules*

On Douban, different emotions and feelings are discursively constructed to establish the feeling rules for women in romantic relationships. In such discourse, lovesickness is repeatedly pathologized as young women open up their private feelings for peer scrutiny and judgment.

Excerpt 1: Recently, I feel the frequency of chatting with my crush has indeed been too high. I kind of enjoy that feeling, but I know that it's

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84. Shiguang Shan, Jie Ren, and Cangyan Li, "The Dynamic Evolution of Social Ties and User-Generated Content: A Case Study on a Douban Group," *Enterprise Information Systems* 11, no. 10 (April 28, 2016): 1462–80.

really terrible to let one's emotions depend on others. Worse, the state of waiting for the other's reply, frankly speaking, does affect my work and my studies to some extent. How to control my impulse to contact him? [How] to calm myself down and cool down the intensity of interaction?

Excerpt 2: During the day I have a part-time job . . . [and] will not think of him too much. Every night at about ten o'clock, as soon as my boyfriend goes to bed, I miss him terribly to the point that I feel it has already impacted my own life. I cannot concentrate on . . . my study.

Excerpt 3 "LOVE BRAIN" IS REALLY ANNOYING

After having a crush (*shangtou* 上头), I feel that I have become trapped in a passive state, waiting for his messages, waiting for his reply. . . . I really hate my "love brain" (*lian'ai nao* 恋爱脑) . . . but I just cannot help. Ruin yourself haha!

The term *shangtou*, enlisted among the "2019 Ten Most Popular Buzzwords,"<sup>85</sup> is used extensively in advice-seeking groups. *Shangtou* literally means "straight to one's head," which in the Chinese language is often associated with the state of being intoxicated. In Douban users' postings, *shangtou* is used as either a verb or an adjective to denote the psychological state of developing strong feelings for another person. Here, intoxication is used as a metaphor, pathologizing the affection as a surge that overwhelms rationality, akin to "love fever." As a lexical choice, *shangtou* usually collocates "love brain" to substantiate a nomination of women in this emotional state.

A pseudoscientific analysis of the psychological state surfaces from the aforementioned discursive practice, which reduces one's attachment, excitement, longing, and devotion to the chemical mechanism of the brain. This pseudoscientific analysis is highly gendered, reiterating a thesis of sex essentialism that attributes women's emotionality to a biological trait essentialized in their bodies. As previously discussed, sex essentialism refers to reducing

85. "What Do *Shangtou* and *Panta* Mean—Here Emerges Another Buzzword List," [in Chinese] Paper, December 3, 2019, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_5127080](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5127080).

the notion of sex to one's biological traits.<sup>86</sup> Taking the form of popular readings, such as *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, it is perpetuated in public debates, offering pseudoscientific grounds to rationalize public observations of socially constructed gender differences. In the Chinese context, such sex essentialism is well-suited in the restructured market economy, where a pseudoscientific rationalization of entrenched gender asymmetry is not only needed but also celebrated, as the nation departs from the legacy of state feminism in its post-socialist transition.<sup>87</sup>

Such sex essentialism is even more blatantly pronounced in the nomination of passion as "ovary brain," suggesting that a cisgender woman with an ovary can be infected with love fever more easily. The state of waiting for replies is, explicitly or implicitly, stigmatized as a symptom of love brain, which triggers considerable anxieties. The anxieties reflect a tension between women's sex-essentialist understanding of their bodies and their neoliberal aspiration for independence and self-autonomy. The state of waiting is considered toxic and fearful due to its dependency on the intimate other and the accompanying passiveness, uncertainty, and vulnerability, contradicting the self-fulfilled and composed postfeminist ideal. The above excerpts thus demonstrate how young women practice emotional self-monitoring and management to avoid deviating from the feeling rules. In particular, women's anxieties are specifically linked to concerns over lovesickness's impediment to study, as explicitly voiced, which constitute a common theme of these advice-seeking postings.

Linked with broader sociocultural contexts, the pathologization of the love brain echoes Liu's<sup>88</sup> observation about Chinese urban young women's preoccupation with educational and career achievement. Central to postfeminist selfhood formation, the yearning for financial autonomy is specifically

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86. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

87. Jie Yang, "Nenu and Shunu: Gender, Body Politics, and the Beauty Economy in China," *Signs* 36, no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 333–57.

88. Liu, "From Degendering to (Re)gendering the Self."

a middle-class aspiration. In China, the decades-long strict implementation of the one-child policy has created generations of young women who are the focal point of investment within urban nuclear families. With sufficient financial support from parents, they are cultivated self-reflexive beings who value and appreciate personal success as a defining aspect of their social existence. The diagnosis of love brain has very much reiterated Liu's observation of ideal womanhood construction, which is interdiscursively linked to a middle-class vision of individual well-being crafted in post-reform China.

Following the diagnosis of love brain, the discourse on Douban cautions members against its consequences. At a textual level, this is often associated with a specific lexical choice, *neihao* (内耗). Literally meaning "internal friction,"<sup>89</sup> the term offers an interdiscursive reference from physics. Originally denoting the force-resisting motion between the particle elements within a material,<sup>90</sup> it now metaphorically captures a counterproductive mental state that involves anxiously ruminating about the crush's responses or struggling to move on after being rejected, resulting in the attrition of emotion and energy. Again, the physical terminology substantiates a pseudoscientific account of women's psychological state. It is employed in female Douban users' postings to rationalize their usage of various motivational phrases, orchestrating a collective effort to eliminate women's mental internal friction. The posting below quotes one of the most popular maxims in the advice-giving community:

Excerpt 4: Stop internal friction, stop losses in time.

Adopting an imperative mood, the maxim is upheld as one of the golden feeling rules for young women eager to regain clearheadedness and serenity. The

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89. Zixuan Zhang and Ke Li, "So You Choose to 'Lie Flat?' 'Sang-Ness,' Affective Economies, and the 'Lying Flat' Movement," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 109, no. 1 (December 11, 2022): 48–69.

90. J. M. Hyde and C. A. English, "Microstructural Characterization Techniques for the Study of Reactor Pressure Vessel (RPV) Embrittlement," in *Irradiation Embrittlement of Reactor Pressure Vessels (RPVs) in Nuclear Power Plants*, ed. Naoki Soneda (Cambridge: Woodhead Publishing, 2015, 211–94, <https://doi.org/10.1533/9780857096470.3.211>).

repudiation of internal friction disavows the complexity, subtlety, and ambivalence of feelings. The latter clause implies that internal friction incurs “losses” because it is perceived to be a factor that drains emotional energy and hampers one’s productivity in work. On this note, a financial metaphor is implicitly devised, reinterpreting internal friction as part of one’s failed investment in a relationship, which returns little to no “emotional value” (*qingxu jiazhi*). The framing of “loss” and “emotional value” is emblematic of how economic jargon has infiltrated into discourses of intimate relationships. Relationships are increasingly framed as “transactions,” “commodities,” or “contracts,” premised upon “equal” exchanges that aim at fulfilling both parties’ needs and interests.<sup>91</sup> Such discursive changes demonstrate how neoliberal ethics, intersected with a postfeminist ethos, normatively construct women as “intimate entrepreneurs” who are urged to reconfigure intimate relations through a market rationale of profit-maximization.<sup>92</sup> They tellingly reflect how the marketization-led economic reforms simultaneously provide the fertile grounds for neoliberal tenets to infiltrate people’s everyday lives. Playing out in the context of gender struggles, this manifests as the responsabilization of individual women for their well-being and self-care, rendering critical scrutiny of structural power asymmetry and systematic gender violence marginalized in public debates.<sup>93</sup>

### *Appeal for Peer Policing*

The alertness to lovesickness and its attendant mental internal friction triggers a heightened sense of anxiety, helplessness, guilt, and self-doubt since young women are constantly caught in the dissonance between their spontaneous feelings and the postfeminist feeling rules that condemn emotional

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91. Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 194.

92. Barker, Gill, and Harvey, *Mediated Intimacy*.

93. Wallis and Shen, “The SK-II #Changeditiny Campaign and the Limits of Commodity Activism for Women’s Equality in Neo/Non-Liberal China.”

dependence. The inability to resolve the dissonance gives rise to a specific discursive practice on Douban featuring female users inviting the policing of their daily conduct from their imagined girlfriend readers, as evident in excerpts 5 and 6 below:

Excerpt 5: Jiemei (Sisters) Please Please Tell Me Off

Excerpt 6: Please Scold Me Back To Sanity

Excerpt 7: [It is] separation anxiety, jiemei (sister). [I] suggest you cut him off for two or three days. Last week, I was just as extremely anxious, [so I] cooled myself off for a few days. Much better now.

The buzzword *jiemei* (sister[s]) is widely used across the forums. In the Chinese language, *jiemei* can serve as a second-person singular pronoun *you* or as a generic plural pronoun addressing other women. In both cases, it constitutes a nomination strategy, which brings imagined girlfriend readers to the forefront of the discourse insofar as it establishes a sense of affinity, solidarity, and sisterhood. The proliferation of *jiemei* constructs an intimate homosocial space within the Douban community, reproducing the social pleasure of identification and belonging. By contrast, the pronoun collocates the adverbial “please” and verbs that connote a power relation, such as “tell off” and “scold.” Placing the intended addressee in the position of strength, the poster speaks in a begging tone, as if she is almost desiring harsh peer policing. The paradoxical coexistence between intimate sisterhood and the maintained hierarchy captures the entanglement of affection and “normative cruelties” constitutive of the “girlfriend gaze.”<sup>94</sup> As Winch argues, the desire for belonging easily hooks women into the regime of the girlfriend gaze.<sup>95</sup> Pronouns like *jiemei* underplay the harsh nature of surveillance and mask the disciplinary power with a friendly face, yielding a form of peer policing that is paradoxically welcomed by women subject to it.

94. Ringrose and Renold, “Normative Cruelties and Gender Deviants.”

95. Winch, “Brand Intimacy, Female Friendship and Digital Surveillance Networks.”



Exercising a girlfriend gaze into the poster's emotional world, the commenter of excerpt 7<sup>96</sup> takes on the double personas of a close friend and a didactic coach. On the one hand, she draws on her personal experience to empathize with the poster; on the other hand, she assumes authority by drawing on psychological terminology to diagnose the poster's unsettlement as a consequence of her love brain. In postings of this kind, interdiscursive references to popular psychological terms, such as *dependent personality disorder* and *anxious attachment style*, are commonly used. Such lexical choices offer the foundation for scientific rationalization—an argumentation strategy employing “systematic bodies of knowledge” (i.e., psychology) to legitimize institutional practices<sup>97</sup>—to be invoked here to legitimize the pathologization of lovesickness and neediness.

When policing becomes the consensus between the poster and the commenter, the “normative cruelties” of the girlfriend gaze can be easily amplified, imbued with judgmental and deprecating criticisms. Such comments typically gather beneath the posts that invite the imagined girlfriend readers to evaluate the crush/boyfriend, as exemplified below.

Excerpt 8: So, break up or not? It is you who paid the bill so that he could be a freeloader. Is his tone apologetic at all? Any sign of apology? Isn't this PUA in disguise?

Excerpt 9: [He is] stingy, lazy, and macho, yet you are here wondering if you have overreacted and hoping for his understanding. What a good woman you are.

Amid a considerably unbalanced sex ratio and anxieties around idealized masculinity, many young Chinese men started embracing pickup artist (PUA) training as a shortcut to finding and securing a girlfriend.<sup>98</sup> However,

96. Selected from the comment section below excerpt 2.

97. Theo Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 116.

98. Haiping Liu, “Aspirational Taste Regime: Masculinities and Consumption in Pick-up Artist Training in China,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 23, no. 1 (December 30, 2021): 85–103.

beyond a narrow definition of pickup artists who deliver sexist and misogynist seduction skills, the concept of PUA has evolved into a synonym for gaslighting on Chinese social media, often used as a verb to encompass various practices of mental and emotional manipulation. Gaslighting tactics rely on gendered stereotypes and structural inequalities against victims.<sup>99</sup> Based on the chat record provided by the poster, the commenter of excerpt 8 determines that the poster's boyfriend was gaslighting her, as he was mobilizing a gender-based stereotype that associates women with irrationality and irritation to delegitimize her anger. However, the series of rhetorical questions aims to correct the poster's mentality by inducing her embarrassment and self-doubt. Assuming the role of a "feminist" savior attempting to drag the poster out of her unequal relationship, the commenter shows what Winch terms a "loving meanness"<sup>100</sup> that sentimentalizes disciplinary power by a combined gesture of humiliation and love.

In a similar tone of contempt, excerpt 9 employs the rhetorical device of ridicule by evoking the moralized category of a "good woman." In the Chinese context, this label is typically linked to gender ethics enshrined in the Confucian scripts of "three obediences" and "four virtues," urging women to be submissive to men. The posting's sarcastic tone is amplified by its repeated mobilization of the second-person singular pronoun, a crucial linguistic device in the Chinese language for engaging the recipient by mimicking the style of interpersonal and verbal communication.<sup>101</sup> In this scenario, ridicule establishes the dominance of a postfeminist gender ideal who can free herself from traditional gender oppression. While expressing a degree of dissent against patriarchy, they offer a distorted solution by reinscribing a victim-blaming logic. This logic holds individual women liable for any risks and harms they encounter in intimate relationships, attributing the fault to their love brain

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99. Paige L. Sweet, "The Sociology of Gaslighting," *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 5 (September 20, 2019): 851–75.

100. Winch, *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood*, 14.

101. Yung-O Biq, "The Multiple Uses of the Second Person Singular Pronoun Ni in Conversational Mandarin," *Journal of Pragmatics* 16, no. 4 (October 1, 1991): 307–21.

and bondage with outdated gender ethics. Accordingly, the solution they posit firmly targets the individual, not only undermining the urgency of collective actions to redress institutionalized gender injustices but also tightening control over women's subjectivity, specifically through surveillance over emotions.

### *Exhibition of Emotion Makeover*

Aiming to realign each other with postfeminist feeling rules, sisters turn Douban groups into a gynaeopticon where members display their progress, practices, and techniques of emotion management for peer monitoring and surveillance.

Excerpt 10: What I do is to crazily brainwash myself, magnify his various shortcomings, double my study load and exercise load, and shift the attention to myself, until I feel it is more worry-saving and energy-saving to love myself. . . . I will do what men do: selfish and self-loving.

The posting is illustrative of how the poster combats her lovesickness through a deep acting strategy. Coined by Hochschild, "deep acting" refers to a strategy of emotional management, which involves inducing, altering, allowing, or suppressing certain feelings through conscious mental work.<sup>102</sup> Compared to surface acting, which aims at persuading others by changing one's outward appearance, this strategy manifests itself as self-deception and manipulation. As seen in excerpt 10, the poster's employment of this strategy is revealed by her lexical choice ("brainwashing"). Specifically, the poster performs two illocutionary acts: narrating her personal experience and offering advice for emotion management; in doing so, she constructs both the self and other sisters as someone in need of mental manipulation for the sake of self-redemption. Interestingly, brainwashing mobilizes tactics

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102. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 125.

akin to gaslighting, which erodes or twists self-concepts and the sense of reality to control one's beliefs and thoughts.<sup>103</sup> Both brainwashing and gaslighting are predicated upon a stereotypical association of femininity with irrationality and childishness.<sup>104</sup> The lexical choice, thus, implicitly evokes the pathologized stigma of "love/ovary brain," yielding the perpetuation of a gendered stereotype that portrays women as overly emotional. This alludes to a reiteration of entrenched gender asymmetry, which repeatedly relies on a sex-essentialist portrayal of womanhood to legitimize gender-based discrimination and violence against them. Only this time the discrimination and violence are incited by members of the female cohort themselves.

The latter half of excerpt 10 repeatedly references the notion of self-love, glorifying the argument with a feminist veneer. Emotional self-regimentation serves the ambition of academic achievement, promoting a neoliberal feminist template of womanhood characterized by career success. The beautification of emotional self-discipline as an act of self-love echoes Gill's observation that surveillance has become a "feminist" issue in postfeminist culture.<sup>105</sup> The label "selfish" is proudly proclaimed and justified as "what men do." Its usage in this specific context is built upon a homogenous construction of men as self-centric, serving a pseudo-feminist conception of ideal womanhood that equates empowerment with "becoming more like men." Such a framing of women's empowerment resonates with Liu's observation that Chinese female urbanites repudiate traditional femininity and identify with "masculine" qualities such as toughness, ambitiousness, and competitiveness to meet new institutional demands that assume women as equal competitors to men without destabilizing the male-favoring social structure.<sup>106</sup>

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103. Sweet, "The Sociology of Gaslighting."

104. Stephanie A. Shields, "Passionate Men, Emotional Women: Psychology Constructs Gender Difference in the Late 19th Century," *History of Psychology* 10, no. 2 (May 1, 2007): 92–110.

105. Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism."

106. Liu, "From Degendering to (Re)gendering the Self."

In addition to mindfulness of the self, another widely propagated technique of emotional remodeling references the buzzword “throwing the ball straight” (*da zhiqiu*). Originating from baseball terminology, it describes a fastball tactic used by power pitchers who rely on maximum-speed throws to prevent the ball from being hit by batters. The term is metaphorically appropriated by Douban users to denote a favored strategy for one to end a nonexclusive dating phase and the accompanying internal friction; namely, by straightforwardly “confessing her feelings to the crush.”

Excerpt 11: After MoveOn| I Always Prefer Throwing the Ball Straight at Light Speed. If Turned Down, I Will Delete Him and Reject Internal Friction.

Every day, I felt upset if I didn't get his reply but turned extremely happy if he initiated a chat or replied to me. . . . I could chat with him for three days at most. After three days, if I still didn't receive any positive response or couldn't ask him out, I would think “Okay bye.” A waste of time and energy. . . . Every time I set a limit for myself: three days. If he rejected my request on the third day, I would blacklist him altogether . . . Probably too hurry indeed.

In the excerpt above, the poster detects her mood fluctuation and problematizes it as a sign of internal friction when she feels that her affection has not been paid back with equivalent responses. To minimize her “waste,” she resorts to “throwing the ball straight.” Although the headline adopts an assertive tone, the body text is not without hedges, hesitation, and ambivalences (e.g., the use of ellipsis) about the self-imposed “three-day limit,” revealing the inner tension between the urge to purge internal friction and her doubt about the self's impatience. However, the poster's self-doubt is soon dispelled by the overwhelmingly affirmative comments, a shift indicated by her follow-up replies. Sisters' endorsement creates an echo chamber that amplifies her purely rational voice. Engineered by the peer pressure of conformity, the post-comment loop functions as a mechanism of emotional

realignment by amplifying expressions that align with postfeminist feeling rules and censoring the ones that question the legitimacy or even the very feasibility of such feeling rules.

Peer surveillance also takes the shape of a “floor-building” thread, where young women check in their daily efforts at resisting the impulse to contact the crush. The “floor” is initiated by the posting below.

Excerpt 12: You have deviated from the set route. GPS has planned a new route for you. Please turn around somewhere appropriate ahead.

The posting mimics the language style of the GPS navigation system when drivers’ deviation from the planned route is monitored. The metaphor of *deviation* implies deviance from the feeling rules, implicitly evoking the pathologization and stigmatization of women’s longing for intimacy. Deviation from the feeling rules” is perceived to result in deviance from the desired life path, obstructing the pursuit of a neoliberal self-development agenda. The feature of floor-building incentivizes users to record and report their emotional self-regimentation daily. Capable of attracting users’ attention by inviting users to pay attention to others’ comments and reply to them,<sup>107</sup> floor-building also motivates young women to energize each other with encouragement and tailored guidance. The public staging, witnessing, and appraisal of each other’s feeling management effectively consolidates the gynaeopticon, where peer surveillance ferments more radical self-disciplinary acts.

In the Chinese context, scholarly scrutiny of social media surveillance tends to emphasize the top-down form exercised by state agents.<sup>108</sup> While an emerging body of literature started paying attention to the participatory dimension of social media surveillance, their foci remain overwhelmingly on

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107. Peng and Sun, “A Dialectical-Relational Approach to Anti-Trans Sentiments on Hupu.”

108. Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong, “What Is Made-in-China Feminism(S)? Gender Discontent and Class Friction in Post-Socialist China,” 6.

its interplay with state politics.<sup>109</sup> Yet, as the above analysis reveals, the regime of peer surveillance is also established on Chinese social media to further a seemingly apolitical trajectory of manipulation, which is self-voluntarily mobilized by women themselves to align their bodies and psyches with a neoliberal rationale of empowerment in gender power relations. Encouraging each other to climb up to the power pyramid of the meritocratic and corporate systems, such peer surveillance is packaged as part of grassroots mobilization, signaling a dissent against and a departure from the patriarchal scripts of womanhood defined by domesticity, subordination, and self-sacrifice. However, without scrutinizing entrenched structural injustices, the sponsoring of individualistic struggles merely considers personal economic standing as a means to gain respect from their partner or increase one's competitiveness in the marriage market.<sup>110</sup> This thesis reiterates how neoliberal tenets operationalize as an invisible hand of the market and, by extension, the party-state, which has authorized its functioning in China behind the scenes to undermine the momentum of collective endeavors championing women's emancipation.

## Conclusion

This study has uncovered how young women's romantic feelings are discursively constructed and disciplined in the context of Chinese postfeminist culture. Drawing on an analysis of postings extrapolated from romance-focused Douban groups, the findings show how female users hail a postfeminist selfhood characterized by independence and self-optimization and promote an instrumentalist attitude toward romantic relationships. Intimate relationships are reinterpreted in business jargon and measured by

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109. Zhen Ye, Qian Huang, and Tonny Krijnen, "Douyin's Playful Platform Governance: Platform's Self-Regulation and Content Creators' Participatory Surveillance," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, April 17, 2024.

110. Peng, *A Feminist Reading of China's Digital Public Sphere*.

“emotional value,” which reveals the infiltration of market logic into the most private and personal sphere in post-reform China. This extends Liu’s<sup>111</sup> account that the only-child generation of Chinese women has developed strong emotional reflexivity and pragmatic reasoning on balancing the need between emotional fulfillment and life responsibilities.<sup>112</sup> Women’s aspiration to embody the postfeminist selfhood gives rise to a set of feeling rules that delegitimize the desire for intimacy and disclosure of neediness, based upon a sex-essentialist reduction of women’s emotions to biological mechanisms. Such sex essentialism pathologizes affection as a manifestation of the love brain. It contributes to a consistent discursive pattern penetrating the Douban forums, which is further rationalized by pseudo-scientific references from the field of popular psychology. The feeling rules on Douban urge women to stay self-centered, rational, calculating, thrusting, and nonchalant to the crush/boyfriend to ensure full devotion to their life goals.

The inner conflict between women’s sex-essentialist pathologization of their psyche and the urge to embody postfeminist selfhood impels women to appeal for peer surveillance, which constitutes a recurrent theme of the postings. Group members established the daily ritual of exhibiting their own romantic experiences with a particular focus on emotional fluctuations for peer review. Peer surveillance is thus enacted by members of the group, as they mobilize both the intimate sociality of sisterhood and the provocation of shame to assess each other’s emotional journey. Such discursive practices facilitate the (re)production of a girlfriend gaze on Douban, indicating an intensification of surveillance over women’s emotions, psyche, and subjectivity, which converges with a broader postfeminist imperative of surveillance and self-transformation in Chinese society today.

The agenda of career advancement poses no challenge to the core values of male dominance fundamental to China’s patriarchal socioeconomic

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111. Liu, Fengshu. “An Expressive Turn with a Chinese Twist,” 950–65.

112. Kailing Xie, “The Gendered Construction of Exemplary Middle-Class Identity: The Hegemony of Chenggong (Success),” in *Gender, Sexualities and Culture in Asia*, 2021, 155–98.



structures. Instead, it encourages women to suppress their desires for intimacy and masculinize their psychological dispositions, paradoxically perpetuating the stereotypical association of women with emotionality, irrationality, and hysteria, upon which misogyny lies. Further, the emphasis on women's dedication to financial success for enhancing their consumer agency aligns perfectly well with the post-socialist restructuring of the economy, where the government's prioritization of economic development and promotion of depoliticized consumer culture function as an ideological response to structural inequalities produced therein.<sup>113</sup> Taking the form of individualized and commodified empowerment rhetoric, it strengthens a sense of urban, middle-class privilege to depoliticize women's power struggles, marginalizing their potential to inform social movements collectively challenging the status quo.

Specifically, emotional self-discipline often reiterates individuals' self-responsibility for their life success, effectively deflecting their attention away from institutional and structural causes of gender inequalities. The imperative to perform upbeat and lighthearted femininity and the sanction on disclosure of vulnerabilities conceal the injuries and injustices women experience in a patriarchal society, thus further silencing discussions on structural issues. To prevent themselves from opaque yet widespread gender violence such as PUA/gaslighting, they actively engage in peer surveillance to maintain clearheadedness and full control over the self. Yet, such a resort of "surveillance for self-protection" personalizes the causes and the solutions of systemic gender violence. Group members seldom question the meritocratic regime of neoliberal competition that compels individuals' relentless pursuit of self-enhancement, nor do they question the institutional barriers that disadvantage women in educational and professional fields. Although women form girlfriend networks on Douban, their girlfriendship does not facilitate inclusivity and solidarity among women as a collective. Rather, the delimitation of *jiemei* is class based, and the mobilization of girlfriendship is

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113. Yin, "Re-Articulating Feminisms."

strategic.<sup>114</sup> Girlfriendship serves the individuated project of increasing one's wage-earning capacity and purchasing power because the peer monitoring network of comparison, comment, and motivation is crucial for emotional rectification. Assuming the economic and social privileges of urban middle-class elites and complying with the reproduction of social stratification, the surveillant culture of these Douban groups can easily evolve into a kind of cyberbullying and victim blaming against underprivileged women who have little access to such relationship self-help discourse and are not "qualified" as girl-powered, independent, and modern subjects.

In addition to the infiltration of neoliberal and individualistic ethics, the absence of structural critiques on Douban, in part, reflects China's current repressive political climate. Indeed, critiques of gender asymmetry not only sanction scrutiny of the state's prioritization of economic growth over social justice but also have the potential to fuel broader civic engagement that threatens regime stability. Consequently, a rigorous surveillance and censorship system now spans Chinese social media platforms, with a core mission to suppress radical expressions of women's emancipation.<sup>115</sup> This leads to a noticeable decline in politicized feminist voices on the Chinese-language Internet, paving the way for their postfeminist counterparts, as evident in the current case study.

Responding to the call for a decolonial understanding of postfeminist culture as transnational,<sup>116</sup> the current research builds upon existing Western-based accounts by offering a recontextualization of postfeminism and subjectivity formation as manifested in Chinese social media discourses. Both contexts foreground confidence, independence, and individual self-making, but the emphasis on sexual liberation and "wild," "excessive," and hedonistic social behaviors<sup>117</sup> that characterize youthful postfeminist self-representations in Western contexts is largely missing in the narratives

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114. Winch, *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood*.

115. Yin, "Re-Articulating Feminisms."

116. Dosekun, "For Western Girls Only?"

117. Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures*.

of these Douban groups, which extends Liu's observation on the disparity between Western and Chinese postfeminist media culture and young female subjectivities. In sharp contrast to being "spontaneous and fun,"<sup>118</sup> Douban sisters display tremendous effort at containing their romantic desires out of perennial anxiety with self-optimization. Although career success is a shared aspiration across both contexts, Douban sisters' anxiety is heightened by their role as the only child in the family who shoulders higher parental investments and pressures.

Previous studies on postfeminist media culture in the Chinese context have largely focused on the intertwining between aesthetic norms, consumerism, and surveillance over the refeminized body. Our research engages the debate by foregrounding the discursive construction of emotional norms and surveillance over the psyche for cultivating postfeminist selfhood. Given the exploratory and case-study nature of the study, the findings are limited in fully capturing the complexity and diversity of the culture among young middle-class Chinese women. More importantly, the findings are not intended to offer a generalizable account of surveillance among Chinese women with diverse backgrounds. Due to the unevenness of neoliberalization in the highly stratified Chinese society, neoliberal ethics penetrate different populations varyingly.<sup>119</sup> Postfeminist discourse discussed in this article mainly targets young middle-class women, regulating how they engage in emotional self-discipline integral to the gendered process of neoliberal subjectification in post-reform China. It does not pay due attention to women from the margins, including but not limited to rural women and female migrant workers who have little to no resources to negotiate their positions within segments of Chinese society, where gender injustices remain operational in its most entrenched and overt form. Despite such limitations, the findings engage a timely debate concerning the increasingly

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118. Brown and Gregg, "The Pedagogy of Regret," 357–69.

119. Bingchun Meng, "When Anxious Mothers Meet Social Media: Wechat, Motherhood and the Imaginary of the Good Life," *Javnost* 27, no. 2 (March 25, 2020): 171–85.

observable neoliberal distortion of feminism that undermines women's emancipation efforts in the Chinese context. We encourage future studies to continue this trajectory of inquiry by scrutinizing the interplays between the technological architecture of social media and neoliberal regimes of peer surveillance.