



To fight, to confront, and to resist: exploring the representation of Chinese Zhangjie in *sister*

Janno Yanjun He & Liming Liu

To cite this article: Janno Yanjun He & Liming Liu (02 May 2024): To fight, to confront, and to resist: exploring the representation of Chinese Zhangjie in *sister*, *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2024.2346764](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2346764)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2346764>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 02 May 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 58



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

To fight, to confront, and to resist: exploring the representation of Chinese Zhangjie in *sister*

Janno Yanjun He ^a and Liming Liu ^b

^aSchool of Communication, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia; ^bHugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA

ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have explored the multifaceted portrayal of Chinese women, yet limited attention has been given to older sisters, specifically “zhangjie (长姐),” both in social and academic contexts. This study employs intersectionality as a theoretical framework within which a three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to decode the representation of zhangjie identity in the recent Chinese blockbuster *Sister*. By closely examining both verbal and nonverbal elements, the study aims to elucidate the triple set of jeopardy that zhangjie encounter, as well as their resistance to three layers of deprivileged identities (in relation to gender, class and social infrastructures) in contemporary China. Furthermore, we argue that centralising the intersectional predicaments of Chinese older sisters highlights critical questions about the effectiveness of neoliberalism in the face of structural oppressions.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 June 2022
Revised 16 April 2024
Accepted 19 April 2024

KEYWORDS

Contemporary China;
zhangjie; intersectionality;
CDA; power holders

Introduction

China introduced a three-child policy in 2021 after a period that included a strict one-child policy and a moderate two-child policy. The birth control plan, as a fundamental state policy (Avraham Ebenstein 2010), impacts the family values of millions of families in Chinese society and further influences future generations as key players in China’s cultural production. China’s rapid economic growth, in particular its rise in the 21st century, had a profound impact on the global economy, as well as on the developed world and Asia. Among the various forms of cultural production emerging in China, movies have taken on a central role. This study continues the voices of young generations by exploring the neglected character of zhangjie (长姐), or older sister in English, in Chinese families. Zhangjie is a term that has been used and circulated in China to refer to older daughters with younger siblings. It is a polymerization of women’s identities as daughters and sisters, representing a core traditional value of ideal womanhood in contemporary China that suspends the goals of female liberation, characterised by “filial piety” and “sacrifice.” We see that their sacrifices and performance of filial piety have constructed them as difficult women (Liming Liu and Yanjun He 2022) in their everyday practices of

CONTACT Janno Yanjun He  Yanjun.He@student.uts.edu.au  School of Communication, University of Technology Sydney, UTS Building 10, 235 Jones St, Ultimo, NSW 2007, Australia

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Chinese gender politics. By investigating how older sisters are represented in a Chinese movie titled *Sister*, this study aims to explore the image of zhangjie in mass media in postsocialist China, with a special focus on how they are represented in the film.

After the Chinese economic reform in 1978, the decentralisation of state planned business and the rise of private individualised enterprises sowed the seeds for a spirit of self-reliance. Fran Martin (2022) describes this zeitgeist as saturated by “a neoliberal-style discourse of enterprising selfhood and competitive self-advancement,” impacting women’s perception of subjectivity and gendered roles (14). The emphasis on the “self” amplifies individualism and arouses women’s exploration of selfhood. At the same time, China is a country whose family and social values are embedded deeply within Confucianism, and Confucian belief still conditions what women are able to be and how they can dwell in the world. Confucian gender beliefs about women are exemplified by the normative concept that daughters should be filial, wives should be virtuous, mothers should be self-sacrificing, and older sisters should be responsible (for younger siblings). Qi Ling (2022) points out popular feminism grants high visibility for marginalised women like housewives, yet hasn’t been successful in challenging the “structural, gendered, materialistic dimensions of domestic labour” (1842). However, we argue that *Sister* does the work that popular discourse does not always do—challenges the deep-rooted structural inequalities (Ling 2022, 1843). First, *Sister* sheds light on issues encountered by working-class women, drifting away from the popular focus of upper-middle-class women. Second, by revealing the obstacles of Chinese zhangjie—a complex character who epitomises the intersection of class, gender and social infrastructures—within the historical and social contexts of Chinese women, *Sister* eulogises female’s agency in overcoming predicaments and questions the extent to which personal endeavours can resist systematic and institutional unequal powers.

In modern Chinese cinema, images of power are represented frequently and in various ways, and films can generate their own criticism through the messages they deliver. Therefore, we contend that *Sister* is able to present how Chinese zhangjie build their identities in a male-dominated society where discrimination, power, and control prevail (Evgenia A Musalitina 2019; Rhessa Zuhriya Pratiwi, et al. 2022). Examining the construction of the zhangjie identity in film responds to the “cultural turn”—that is, the notion that “social categories are not natural but instead are constructed”—in the social sciences (Gillian Rose 2001, 10). To explore the interplay of power dynamics in the construction of the social category of older sisters, this study applies critical discourse analysis (CDA) to scrutinise how the identity of the older sister is represented in *Sister* in combination with class, gender, and other social infrastructures. In line with the conflicts of living as a neoliberal woman and as a self-sacrificing and filial zhangjie in the traditional Chinese family with its orientation on a collective ethos, this paper explores two research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: How does the film *Sister* represent older sisters in Chinese families and society?
- RQ2: What and how are zhangjie struggles and resistance represented cinematically in relation to the power holders she interacts with?

Therefore, in the following sections, we discuss tradition and modernity as gender issues in postsocialist China, and then we contextualise older sisters and Chinese women in

mediatised representations. In keeping with our CDA lens, we explore zhangjie representation in *Sister* following an introduction to the data collection and research methods. The study illuminates the set of triple jeopardy that the zhangjie tenaciously resist. Regarding intersectional elements such as gender, class, and social infrastructures such as family and marriage, we also demystify the construction of a multidimensional identity for older sisters in contemporary China.

Tradition and modernity as gender issues in postsocialist China

China's gender issues have primarily stood between tradition and modernity by combining traditional gender ideology and modernised gender awareness. Feminist ideas were one of the elements of the environment that allowed the revolution to occur in China. Chinese gender ideology can be traced back to the feudal dynasties thousands of years ago. The establishment of Confucianism as the dominant ideology resulted in the introduction of gendered concepts such as the Three Obediences and Four Virtues, which regard women as a kind of property that can be defined and occupied by men (Margery Wolf 1985). After the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, the Communist Party claimed that "women hold up half the sky" to emancipate women from feudal patriarchy (Raewyn Connell and Rebecca Pearse 2009, 172). In the late 1970s, when China began its economic reform policy, the marketization process triggered sweeping changes in the social, political, and economic spheres, and gender and sexual politics became crucial concerns (Lisa Rofel 2007). Rofel (2007) argued that China has evolved from cultivating "consciousness" in the socialist revolution to a new situation in which "postsocialist power operates on the site of 'desire'" (6). Despite the marketization processes that have given rise to neoliberal feminism in China, the one-child policy and other state-managed birth-control measures have made gender issues prominent (Liming Liu 2021; Altman Yuzhu Peng 2021). To reduce rapid population growth in China, the one-child policy was adopted as the basic state policy (Ebenstein 2010). The policy changed the conventional birth rates between the genders, as preferences for sons, who extend the family blood lines, have led to the abandonment or abortion of many female infants (Wei Xing Zhu, Li Lu and Therese Hesketh 2009). As one of the most costly lessons in China's public policymaking, the policy succeeded in slowing population growth, but it caused long-term and irreversible harm to Chinese society due to a continuing fertility decline, population ageing and an imbalanced sex ratio (Wang Feng 2011; Martin King Whyte, Wang Feng and Yong Cai 2015). The one-child policy fundamentally strengthened gender inequality in family systems so that daughters could be abandoned. The acceleration of marketization since the mid-1990s has introduced neoliberal feminism in the Chinese context by significantly strengthening Chinese women's self-reflexivity and appreciation for the fulfilment of their desires (Rofel 2007). The desire for liberation attracts many women and redefines modern Chinese women. As an expression of Chinese women's independence during modernisation, neoliberal feminism in China has begun to emphasise the urgent need for women to manage the balance between home and work responsibilities (Xin Li and Liming Liu 2023; Cara Wallis and Yongrong Shen 2018). By taking a radical step towards work—life balance as a woman's responsibility, Chinese officials introduced the concept of leftover women in 2007 to describe eligible but unmarried women between the ages 27 and 35 (Leta Hong Fincher 2014). The

lexical indication implies that marriage is necessary for Chinese women, and fewer positive terms are used to describe independent women who do not get married for the sake of traditional values (Sandy To 2013). In this sense, the slippery struggle on gender issues provides a particular lens through which to consider Chinese women from both traditional and modern approaches.

Intersections among Chinese women, older sisters and mediated representation in China

As the most fundamental social structure in China, the family system with patrilineal characteristics has circumscribed all parent–child relations because there remains a social, economic and cultural need for sons in the post-reform era (Rachel Murphy, Ran Tao and Xi Lu 2011). Older sisters are expected to drop out of school, work and defer their marriages to support younger brothers (Feng Ding, Limin Du and Jinchuan Shi 2020; Xiaoyan Lei, et al. 2017). The harsh conditions expected of older sisters result in the exacerbation of “free-rider” syndrome, a common and important economic problem in which young brothers exploit common family property (household production, marriages and child investment) by requiring older sisters to sacrifice their benefits in family structure (Gary S Becker 1991; Martin Browning, Pierre-André Chiappori and Yoram Weiss 2014). Older sisters who are unmarried face severe problems because they are responsible for fulfilling the educational goals of their younger brothers, providing significant material wealth and assistance in pregnancy care and childrearing, easing their younger brothers’ financial burdens, and increasing their younger brothers’ children’s chances of survival (Ding, Du, and Shi 2020).

Despite widescale recognition of the patrilineal family system and patriarchal dominance of society in China, older sisters have not received enough attention at either the societal or academic level. There is an absence of media products directly related to older sisters in the Chinese context, and sisters are even more marginalised in different types of media productions. As an integral part of Chinese female identity, the hegemonic definition of a woman, as well as an older sister as presented in the media, was continually “renewed, recreated, defended and modified” throughout social changes in different periods of Chinese society (Yunjuan Luo and Xiaoming Hao 2007). The economic conditions and status of older sisters in the Chinese family system have always been central in previous research (e.g., Ding, Du, and Shi 2020). However, in addition to the economic perspective, what other aspects should we further acknowledge and consider in media representations?

To comprehend the complicated identities of older sisters as also daughters, sisters, mothers, and women within Chinese family systems, we applied intersectionality as our theoretical frame. Intersectionality, originating from Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, was developed from critiques of analyses of race and gender as mutually exclusive categories (Kimberlé Crenshaw 1989). This paper uses C. Jennifer Nash’s (2008) definition of intersectionality that “subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality.” In this study, we focus on three intersectional elements—gender, class and family—considering China’s cultural, political and social background and the film’s emphasis on these specific aspects. Through intersectionality, our frame can be stretched to understand gender, feminism and women as

multidimensional subjects under contextual influences (Gina Miranda Samuels and Fariyal Ross-Sheriff 2008). Hence, intersectionality makes possible the logic of thinking about women's experiences as an assemblage of various elements. In response to Brittney Cooper's (2015) accurate understanding of individual identities and larger organisational systems of power and oppression, this study explores the representation of older sister as an individual identity category and as shaped by networks of power and structure within society at large.

To understand how Chinese older sisters act as active agents resisting the structural inequalities, it is crucial to first identify the oppression they experience "within the established power systems" (Meng Li 2022, 89). To achieve this goal, we explore the main character, An Ran (Zifeng Zhang), and the narratives about her family, work, and romantic relationships. Then, we explore how she resists and confronts these three-fold predicaments.

Methodology

CDA is employed methodologically to expose social dominance and social inequality by demystifying ideologies and power relations buried in discourses (Ruth Wodak and Meyer Michael 2009). Discourse is seen as social practice and socially constitutive "both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status-quo and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it" (Norman Fairclough and Wodak Ruth 1997, 258). Considering CDA's deeply rooted Foucauldian perspectives on power, power is understood as the means to create and sustain inequality between different social groups and individuals within society (Michał Krzyżanowski 2010). As CDA is interested in analysing how structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control manifest themselves in discourse, it is ideal to explore the social inequality and power struggles behind zhangjie. To explore the dialectic relationship between a specific discursive event and the situation, institution and framed social structure (Fairclough and Ruth 1997), this study applies the three-dimensional model of CDA established by Norman Fairclough (2003, 2013). Three dimensions involve the analysis of textual, discursive and social practices (Norman Fairclough 2013). The textual dimension is formed and meaning analysed by exploring dialogic organisation, grammar, vocabulary and interwoven meanings (Fairclough 2013). The discursive analysis explores the production and interpretation of the relationship between the text and discursive practice (Fairclough 2013). The social dimension investigates the interaction between discourse and sociocultural processes by exploring how discourse is contextualised within a specific social context (Fairclough 2013; Peng 2021). Textually, the languages of both film and discourse, such as *mise-en-scène* and cinematography, are accounted for because film, as a multimodal product, creates meaning through verbal and nonverbal resources (Richard Janney 2012). Wodak and Michael (2009) explicitly signpost film as an appropriate target for one of the nonverbal aspects of communication.

On the basis of this analytical model, this study explores in detail the film *Sister*, which premiered in Mainland China on April 2 2021. The film was produced by Ruoxi Duan and had a box office gross of approximately RMB 860 million (approximately 129 million US dollars). It has since become a massive sensation in China, with more than 346 thousand reviewers evaluating it on the biggest Chinese

review website, Douban, for an overall average rating of 6.9/10. In *Sister*, there are several storylines, among which the most intense and central one is that of An and her younger brother (Yaoyuan Jin). An is an ambitious, independent, and hard-working woman who works as a nurse in a local hospital; she has been her own breadwinner since she was a college student, and is preparing to pursue her dream of receiving further education in Beijing. All plans seem to go smoothly until a deadly accident abruptly shifts An's life direction. Her autonomy in personal life choices disappears with her dead parents since they leave behind a brother, who is almost 20 years younger than her, to take care of. Therefore, through the application of CDA to *Sister*, this study endeavours to unravel and reflect on the dominant ideologies, representations, and power relations behind the discourse of women's rights (Fairclough 2003).

Findings

Through the application of CDA, this study investigates how zhangjie struggles and resistance are represented through verbal and nonverbal filmic texts. The film is found to achieve two major tasks: 1) revealing the triple jeopardy faced by older sisters in China and 2) revealing zhangjie resistance to class, familial, and gendered oppression.

Familial jeopardy: being a filial daughter

The idea of the "family" is the basic fundamental unit that constructs Chinese society in all its complexity. Unlike Western culture, East Asian culture relies on "filial piety" to restrain and regulate the enduring relationship between parents and children (Manshu Liu 2023). The traditional interpretation of filial piety stresses unconditional obedience and hierarchical family order (Yuezhu Sun 2017). The interpretation of "filial piety" evolves in keeping with changes in time and space. In modern China, the virtue of filial piety continues to prevail and affect modern family lives, but the understanding of this notion has changed from that in ancient times. For those who are born in urban areas in contemporary China, being filial is not a unilateral social practice but rather an egalitarian and mutually respected behaviour that incorporates the conception of independence for both children and parents (Sun 2017). Unconditional obedience to one's parents underscores a relatively conventional style of filial piety, while acknowledging and respecting the mutual needs of both parties exemplifies a contemporary style of filial piety. *Sister* showcases these two distinct types of filial piety through its two female characters: one representing rural and conventional values (the aunt) and the other embodying an urban and neoliberal ethos (An). The following conversation between An and her aunt reveals the distinction between conventional and contemporary interpretations of filial piety.

Excerpt 1¹

- (1) Aunt: Your brother is fairly obedient and easy to take care of. Last night, it didn't take me much time and effort to lull him to sleep. When I was young, I gave your dad the only chance to study at college. I was a newbie to my job, receiving a salary of forty-five yuan every month. I supported your dad financially, giving him fifteen

yuan on a monthly basis. Nobody forced me to do so, but I believe that an older sister is like a mother (thus, I insisted on providing him with financial aid).

- (2) An: Your choice has nothing to do with me.
- (3) Aunt: How could you say it has nothing to do with you? If your dad didn't go to college, how could he have "jumped over dragon gate" and passed the *gaokao* examination? Furthermore, how would it have been possible for him to support your study at university? Not to mention you want to get a master's degree now.
- (4) An: I covered the four-year tuition fee and living expenses by myself. It has been tiring enough to just take care of myself. It is my parents who insisted on having my brother, not me. Why should I be responsible for my brother's life? If I agree to raise him, I'm doomed. So is my brother.

In line 3, An's aunt contends that An could not have completed her higher education without her father covering tuition. In making this assertion, An's aunt criticises her for neglecting her responsibility towards her natal family, that is, paying back what she owes. Attributing An's accomplishment to her father's dedication discloses the fundamental element of filial piety—the reciprocity between parents and children. Notably, filial piety is not realised directly through the work of adult children to return the material and emotional care and support that parents invested in them (Lisa Eklund 2018) but rather by taking over the parents' responsibilities in childrearing. The life course of An's aunt reveals that a zhangjie is expected to fulfil her traditional filial duties by sacrificing her individual life and caring for her younger siblings. In addition, Yun-Jeong Kim and Hyun-Jung Kang (2015) reported that, in addition to parents, other family members are potential subjects of financial, emotional and social support from a filial child. This argument finds support in line 3, when the aunt emphasises that a zhangjie's personal life should take a back seat to that of her younger brother, requiring her to sacrifice her educational resources and provide him with economic support. Furthermore, the notion that "an older sister is like a mother" ("长姐如母") blurs the line of these two social roles. Blending maternal duties with sibling responsibilities legitimises the transferability of childrearing duties in Chinese multi-child families. Notably, the flow of childrearing responsibilities is unidirectional, flowing from the parents to the older child, not in the opposite direction or reciprocally. As parental duties are irrevocably transferred to the older daughters—An and her aunt—they unavoidably bear the disproportionate burden of childrearing responsibilities that should have traditionally fallen on their parents. This situation is obvious and ubiquitous, especially in rural China.

Following the Chinese economic reform in 1978, the increasing demand for inexpensive labour has propelled rural residents to migrate to cities in pursuit of better employment opportunities. However, due to the constraints of the household registration system—the *hukou* system—rural migrants often choose not to bring their children along. The hurdles to registering children as urban residents impede their access to social welfare, particularly free education, leading to the phenomenon of left-behind children (Xiang Biao 2007, 182). Both policy obstructions and cultural norms are responsible for rural children taking on the role of a caregiver for younger siblings. By the end of the film, An's aunt reflects on her past, lamenting, "I used to have a chance to study in Russia, but my brother (An's father) was admitted to college. Our family was too poor to afford tuition for two kids, so I left the chance for education for my brother." Education holds significant

value in Chinese society, as a higher degree is a key determinant in securing higher-paying jobs and navigating the challenges posed by the *hukou* system (Yang Xiao and Yanjie Bian 2018, 1521). In line 3, the metaphor of “jumping over the dragon gate” symbolises children from impoverished, often rural, families achieving upwards social mobility by succeeding in the national college entrance examination (*gaokao* examination). Therefore, An’s aunt is an exemplar of those whose lives are shaped by policy restrictions, gender disparity, and patriarchal norms.

In contrast, An champions filial piety modified by urbanisation and modernisation. In contrast to the aunt’s persistence in performing the role of a mother-like *zhangjie*, An holds a liberal and individualistic beliefs about a moderate filial piety that allows room for freedom of choice and rejection of unasked for duties. Nonetheless, An is at risk of being stigmatised as an unfilial and egocentric daughter when her rejection of obedience leads her to challenge traditional filial duties.

The clash between traditional values and modern beliefs regarding filial piety establishes a robust foundation for understanding the familial jeopardy that An encounters. In the scene where An has a furious argument with her relative over her brother’s custody, An is positioned in the most distant place in the frame, where everyone’s eyesight traces her body through the living room and the frame of the door. With the spatial distance between An and her other family members, there is a sense of physical distance, creating a sense of relational alienation. Another narrative that exposes An’s traumatic experiences as a disfavoured and overlooked female child in the family involves her recurring childhood nightmare of pretending to be handicapped. Restricted by the one-child policy, which stipulates that each typical urban household should have only one child, families were permitted to have a second child if the first was unhealthy. In an attempt to avoid fines for policy violations and to fulfil their preference for a son, An’s parents ask her to simulate a handicap. This implicitly underscores the nuanced consequences stemming from the one-child policy, including imbalances in sex ratios, sex-selective abortions, and a surplus of unmarried men (Avraham Y Ebenstein and Ethan Jennings Sharygin 2009; Zhu, Lu, and Hesketh 2009). An’s traumatic experiences as the disregarded daughter in the family are driven by the interplay of social and ideological forces—specifically, the one-child policy and Confucian filial piety—in contemporary China. The clash between tradition and modernity, the persistent influence of the patriarchy, and changes in national policies compound An’s struggles, resulting in her stigmatisation as an unfilial daughter and placing her in familial jeopardy.

Class-based and gendered jeopardy: stigma as a leftover woman

To understand the status quo of Chinese older sisters, it is essential to account for the far-reaching implications of “leftover woman,” a term first coined by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2007 and applied to single women older than twenty-seven (Xiaomeng Li 2023). The biased label blames women for not committing to a marriage in their twenties (Wei Luo and Zhen Sun 2015, 243). In *Sister*, the reconsolidation of the stigma around “leftover woman” is a dual outcome of both social and institutional endorsement of the prejudiced term and the internalisation of imbalanced gender norms by the stigmatised individuals. On the one hand, An expresses her concerns about difficulties in marriage. While conversing with her aunt in the kitchen about issues related to her brother’s

custody, An states, "If I take over custodial responsibilities, that will be the end of my life. Can you think about my situation, please? I will have to marry and have kids someday." This dialogue suggests that An was apprehensive about adverse effects on her future life from the need to care for her younger brother. By analysing two documentary films, Angie Chau and Qian Liu (2023) find that single women's quest for love is impeded by career achievements, social discrimination against well-educated, unwed women over thirty years of age, and familial barriers (3). Clara Wai-Chun To (2021) argues that women who are seen as dedicated single mothers with children are placed in a disadvantaged position in marriage (8). If not entirely the same, the plight of an unmarried sister with a younger brother shares similarity with that of a single mother. An's unsettling anxiety over accepting custody of her younger brother is ingrained in the social constraints and state-level regulations of single womanhood. By examining the analogy of single mothers as a stand-in for older sisters, it is notable that kinship systems, patriarchal culture, social discrimination and the undesirability of women with custodial duties discourage older sisters from fulfilling ideal marriage expectations in China.

"Having it all" can also explain the predicaments encountered by a modern woman. Natasha Campo construes this notion as a promise that women can simultaneously take up multiple roles, including "career woman," feminine life partner, and independent child-carer (Natasha Campo 2005). In the Chinese context, another term resembling women who "have it all" is middle-class women, referring to a high-income, professional and well-educated group (Fan Yang 2020). An puts in tremendous effort to secure a coveted opportunity for admission to a higher institution in Beijing. For those lacking robust social and financial resources in China, education serves as an equal and effective avenue to access better-paying jobs in the future. However, from the perspective of An's aunt, marrying someone wealthy is the fastest way for single women to ascend the social ladder. When An's uncle requests money from her and faces rejection, he teases An for having a goofy boyfriend who lives in Baoli Garden (a local luxury neighbourhood, a counterpart of Beverly Hills), hinting at the social, familial, and financial gaps between An and her boyfriend. An is ambitious and wants to pursue her dreams in the cosmopolitan capital city through complete self-reliance; the other is comfortable with stepping into a new stage of life at home while supported by handy resources. Affected by post-reform Chinese consumerist culture, the rationalisation of the gender hierarchy supports the patriarchal objectification of women (Altman Yuzhu Peng 2020). Luo and Sun (2015) explore the predicaments that challenge single women in the transition between China's neoliberalism and consumerism by investigating the Chinese TV dating show *If You Are the One*. They found that women are objectified by their physical qualities, such as "having fair skin, wealthy family background, and beauty," as well as other characteristics such as "a graceful demeanour, and agreeable personality traits" (Luo and Sun 2015, 247). In the Chinese context, a woman who bears the caregiving load of a younger brother is stigmatised as a "fudimo" ("a monster bearing up the younger brother"), implying that the emotional and financial resources of an older sister are always ready to be eroded by her sibling (Yi Lin and Yanning Huang 2022). The lack of a strong family background, her physically unattractive appearance, and a brother who is dependent on her are deemed threats to her competitiveness in the marriage market. The zhangjie bear a double stigma as a leftover woman who is at risk of being excluded from the marriage market, as well as a woman who discards the possibility of upwards social mobility through marriage.

Resistance of zhangjie and the effectiveness of neoliberalism

Zhangjie, portrayed through An, faces three sets of expectations by making free choices, challenging traditional filial piety, and striving for professional success. An's defiance of the conventional style of filial piety is evident in her decision to reject taking on custodial responsibility for her younger brother. This refusal becomes a focal point around which conflicts between An and her family unfold. Notably, in the second half of the film, the narrative tone shifts from cold and unsettling to warm and touching, mirroring An's emotional transition in her evolving relationship with her younger brother. Several scenes depict An's younger brother expressing his enduring attachment to her. When he confesses his dependence, stating, "You (An) are the only person I have in my life," the camera captures a close-up of his poignant, innocent, and loving gaze towards An, followed by a medium shot of the siblings cuddling on a bed. Additionally, a long shot from a god-like perspective, showing An carrying the younger brother home, emphasises their mutual dependence and genuine attachment. The emotional climax of the film underscores the difficulty An faces in sending her younger brother to an unknown family and the grief he experiences upon separating from his only sister. By portraying the ebb and flow of love and hate in siblinghood, the film makes the argument that a woman's quest for self-actualisation is a complex process. This journey involves intertwining acts of resistance with the reconciliation of her painful past.

Making individual decisions about marriage serves as a means to experiment with women's freedom of choice. Accessing higher education, achieving an urban professional life, and catering to consumerist choice and lifestyles form the ground of the rhetoric of freedom of choice (Yang 2020, 8). The film recognises the contradiction that marriage can pose to women's career pursuits. As Yang (2020) points out, women's freedom of choice is deemed possession of the right to "select Mr. Right [and] plan career development, marriage, and reproduction" (9). For An, marrying her boyfriend entails giving up her dream of going to Beijing because her partner has already made the decision to stay in Sichuan for work and a stable future. Acquiring higher education and self-development are more important than marriage to An, so she breaks up with her boyfriend and chooses to pursue her dream in Beijing. Situating in the post-recessionary context, Beatriz Oriá (2023) finds that seeking "professional stability becomes chick flicks' real quest," which highlights the feminist awareness of individual autonomy and achievements (3801). An's decision to forgo her love life not only aligns with the core values of self-determination and self-reliance in neoliberalism but also signifies female autonomy to make choices independently. However, the emerging feminist ideal of a balance between life and work becomes problematic, as it emphasises the significance of individual efforts for fulfilling life while downplaying structural and institutional inequalities (Claire Shinhea Lee and Jin Lee 2023, 3727).

Older sisters in China are regulated by social expectations to share childcare responsibilities for their younger siblings with parents, fulfilling the social role encapsulated in the metaphor "an older sister is like a mother" ("长姐如母"). However, adhering to the role of a dutiful daughter, as exemplified in the film, comes into conflict with the idealised image favoured by the marriage market. In this market, good-looking, well-educated, and financially stable single women are considered outstanding and competitive, while women with children are perceived as underprivileged and undesirable (Chau and Liu

2023; To 2021). An, as a woman bound by social roles such as older sister and daughter, finds herself caught in the dilemma of navigating the resurgence of traditional values amid the evolution of a consumerist economy. In her search for identity as a zhangjie, An courageously resists familial, gendered, and class-based expectations. She is also diligent in seeking love, confirmation and reconciliation. These painful yet profound efforts are anchored in her determination to remedy the cultural, social and gendered sense of lack as a marginalised woman. While the film does not explicitly state whether An leads a happy life after her personal endeavours and resistance of life's hardships, the ups and downs depicted in the first half of the film prompt the following question: How effective can neoliberalism be when women face the triple jeopardy of competing expectations from class, gender, and social infrastructures? Can women overcome these triple obstacles solely through personal effort, without substantial systemic or institutional change? Nevertheless, the film appears to celebrate the feminist spirit of both self-autonomy and self-reliance while also questioning the effectiveness of neoliberalism in addressing the challenges posed by class, gender, and social infrastructure in China.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has answered two research questions by employing CDA to explore how the image of zhangjie is constructed in the film *Sister*. In response to RQ1, we find that the film represents zhangjie through delineating and exposing the difficulties experienced from the familial, social and gendered perspectives. RQ2 is answered by suggesting that a zhangjie resists the structural inequalities by rejecting stand-in filial responsibility, discarding upward mobility through marriage, and pursuing higher education by complete self-reliance. By investigating the aesthetic depiction of power relations between An and her younger brother, her fiancé-to-be, and other relatives, this study makes explicit the familial, social and gendered expectations faced by zhangjie in the context of contemporary China. While demonstrating zhangjie's resilience to the resistance of multi-dimensional inequalities, we contend that the film critically questions what effect can neoliberalism take and how effective can neoliberalism be if women want to overcome class-based, gendered, and other structural difficulties.

We contend that zhangjie is a discursively concentrated character from which the possible struggles of contemporary women are encompassed and revealed. One of the valuable and effective resources for studying the representation of the zhangjie identity is Chinese women's cinema, which is gaining increasing recognition and popularity domestically and internationally. An increasing number of feminist films follow this trend by creating female characters with awakening consciousness and subjectivity, such as Peipei (Yao Huang) in *The Crossing*, Jianbo (Lei Hao) in *Spring Tide*, and Fang Lei (Siyuan Zhao) in *Longing for the Rain*. John A Bateman (2017, 619) noted that there should be more substantial and robust film discourse analyses that are "capable of unravelling in detail the fine-grained interaction of 'filmic text' and the take-up and use of those patterns by recipients." By decoding the cultural representation of zhangjie in the selected film with CDA, the familial, social and gendered circumscription of women becomes manifest. Notably, *Sister* is groundbreaking in the sense that it does not cut off the female lead's struggles. Instead, the pure and unpolished suffering of a Chinese zhangjie touches audience hearts, reversing the

stereotypical representation of glamorous modern womanhood shaped by pseudofeminism and revealing the trauma and emotional difficulties that zhangjie experience along her journey of resistance. This study strives to provide an urgent exploration of an ignored yet significant female character in China, which can further encourage critical investigations in this area at the societal level. Future research can trace the trajectory of the changing representations of zhangjie in media to explore how the zhangjie identity is influenced by the social, economic, political and cultural transformation of contemporary China.

Note

1. Original piece of the conversation:

1. 姑妈: 你弟弟乖的很, 我昨晚上哄他睡觉, 一下子就哄睡着了, 带他真的不费什么事, 以前我把读书的机会让给你爸, 他念中专的时候, 我才刚工作, 每个月四十五块, 还要资助你爸十五块, 没有人规定我要这么做, 但长姐如母。
2. 安然: 你的选择关我什么事。
3. 姑妈: 什么叫不关你的事, 你爸要不考取中专能跳出龙门? 能供你上大学? 这会儿你还想考研。
4. 安然: 我大学四年的生活费学费都是我自己解决的, 我养我自己已经够辛苦了, 凭什么还要我养他? 是他们非要生的, 凭什么要我负责? 我要是养他, 我这辈子就完了, 他也不会好。

Acknowledgements

We want to extend our gratitude to the editor for providing us with repeated opportunities for revisions. We also want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their unwavering support. This paper would not have reached its publishable state without the insightful and constructive comments provided by the reviewers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Janno Yanjun He (MSc, University of Edinburgh, UK) is a PhD student in Communication at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. Her research interests lie in the intersections of motherhood studies, migration studies, Chinese cinema, and feminist theory. Email: Yanjun.He@student.uts.edu.au

Liming Liu (MA, Uppsala University, Sweden) is a PhD student in Communication at the Arizona State University, United States. His research interests lie in socio-cultural implication of emerging technologies, with a specialisation in AI-driven cultural production. Email: limingliu@asu.edu

ORCID

Janno Yanjun He  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7982-4843>

Liming Liu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8873-3097>

References

- Bateman, John A. 2017. "Critical Discourse Analysis and Film." In *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*, edited by John Flowerdew and John E. Richardson, 612–625. London: Routledge.
- Becker, Gary S. 1991. *A Treatise on the Family*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Biao, Xiang. 2007. "How Far Are the Left-Behind Left Behind? A Preliminary Study in Rural China." *Population, Space and Place* 13 (3): 179–191. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.437>.
- Browning, Martin, Pierre-André Chiappori, and Yoram Weiss. 2014. *Economics of the Family*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Campo, Natasha. 2005. "'Having it All' or 'Had Enough'? Blaming Feminism in the Age and the Sydney Morning Herald, 1980–2004." *Journal of Australian Studies* 28 (84): 63–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443050509387992>.
- Chau, Angie, and Qian Liu. 2023 October. "Complicating Images of the Modern Chinese Woman, from Only Child to 'Leftover Woman'." *Feminist Media Studies* 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2263658>
- Connell, Raewyn, and Rebecca Pearse. 2009. *Gender: In World Perspective*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity.
- Cooper, Brittney. 2015. "Intersectionality." In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, 385–406. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139.
- Ding, Feng, Limin Du, and Jinchuan Shi. 2020. "Lucky to Have a Sister: The Effects of Unmarried Sister on Brother Outcomes in Late Imperial China." *China Economic Review* 64: 101–544. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chieco.2020.101544>.
- Ebenstein, Avraham. 2010. "The 'Missing Girls' of China and the Unintended Consequences of the One Child Policy." *Journal of Human Resources* 45 (1): 87–115. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhr.2010.0003>.
- Ebenstein, Avraham Y., and Ethan Jennings Sharygin. 2009. "The Consequences of the 'Missing Girls' of China." *The World Bank Economic Review* 23 (3): 399–425. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wber/lhp012>.
- Eklund, Lisa. 2018. "Filiial Daughter? Filiial Son? How China's Young Urban Elite Negotiate Intergenerational Obligations." *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 26 (4): 295–312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2018.1534887>.
- Fairclough, Norman. 2003. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough, Norman. 2013. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough, Norman, and Wodak. Ruth. 1997. "Critical Discourse Analysis." In *Discourse As Social Interaction*, edited by T.A. van Dijk, 258–284. Vol. 2. London: Sage.
- Feng, Wang. 2011. "The Future of a Demographic Overachiever: Long-Term Implications of the Demographic Transition in China." *Population and Development Review* 37 (s1): 173–190. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2011.00383.x>.
- Fincher, Leta Hong. 2014. *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*. London: Zed Books.
- Janney, Richard. 2012. "Pragmatics and Cinematic Discourse." *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 8 (1): 85–113. <https://doi.org/10.1515/lpp-2012-0006>.
- Kim, Yun-Jeong, and Hyun-Jung Kang. 2015. "Effect of Filial Piety and Intimacy on Caregiving Stress Among Chinese Adult Married Children Living with Parents." *Indian Journal of Science and Technology* 8 (S1): 434–439. <https://doi.org/10.17485/ijst/2015/v8iS1/59361>.
- Krzyżanowski, Michał. 2010. *The Discursive Construction of European Identities*. Vol. 35. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Lee, Claire Shinhea, and Jin Lee. 2023. "Migrant Mothers and Neoliberal Feminism: Diasporic Audience Research on the Korean Reality Show *Strangers*." *Feminist Media Studies* 23 (8): 3724–3740. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2135560>.

- Lei, Xiaoyan, Yan Shen, James P Smith, and Guangsu Zhou. 2017. "Sibling Gender Composition's Effect on Education: Evidence from China." *Journal of Population Economics* 30 (2): 569–590. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-016-0614-z>.
- Li, Meng. 2022. "Only Mother Is the Best in the World': Maternal Guilt, Migrant Motherhood, and Changing Ideologies of Childrearing in China." *Journal of Family Communication* 22 (2): 87–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2021.2019742>.
- Li, Xiaomeng. 2023. "Constructing the Ultimate 'Leftover Women': Chinese Media's Representation of Female PhDs in the Postsocialist Era." *Feminist Media Studies* 23 (3): 902–917. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.2016884>.
- Li, Xin, and Liming Liu. 2023. "Book Review: A Feminist Reading of China's Digital Public Sphere by Altman Yuzhu Peng." *Feminist Media Studies* 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2229049>.
- Ling, Qi. 2022. "Empowering Housewives: Exploring Popular Feminism in China." *Feminist Media Studies* 22 (7): 1842–1846. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2125036>.
- Lin, Yi, and Yanning Huang. 2022. "The Rural as 'The Other' in Urban Women-Centred Dramas of Contemporary China." *The Twelfth International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 12)* 794–803. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789048557820/icas.2022.092>.
- Liu, Liming. 2021. "Discursive Construction of Chinese Women: Exploring the Multi-Perception Discourses of the Reality Show Sisters Who Make Waves." Master's thesis, Uppsala University. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-446358>.
- Liu, Manshu. 2023. "Love in Shadow: The Narrative of East Asian Mother-Daughter Relationship in Contemporary Films." *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 11 (April): 58–63. <https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v11i.7503>.
- Liu, Liming, and He Yanjun. 2022. "Book Review: Difficult Women on Television Drama: The Gender Politics of Complex Women in Serial Narratives." *Media International Australia* 190 (1): 176–177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878x221125237>.
- Luo, Yunjuan, and Xiaoming Hao. 2007. "Media Portrayal of Women and Social Change: A Case Study of Women of China." *Feminist Media Studies* 7 (3): 281–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/146807701477891>.
- Luo, Wei, and Zhen Sun. 2015. "Are You the One? China's TV Dating Shows and the *Sheng Nü*'s Predicament." *Feminist Media Studies* 15 (2): 239–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2014.913648>.
- Martin, Fran. 2022. *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Murphy, Rachel, Ran Tao, and Xi Lu. 2011. "Son Preference in Rural China: Patrilineal Families and Socioeconomic Change." *Population and Development Review* 37 (4): 665–690. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2011.00452.x>.
- Musalitina, Evgenia A. 2019. "Representatives of Chinese Society As Power Holders in the Images of Chinese Cinema." *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 8 (4): 347–360. <https://doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v8i4.2383>.
- Nash, C. Jennifer. 2008. "Re-Thinking Intersectionality." *Feminist Review* 89 (1): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2008.4>.
- Oria, Beatriz. 2023. "Women on Top? Challenging the 'ManceSSION' Narrative in the 2010s Chick Flick." *Feminist Media Studies* 23 (8): 3793–3808. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2137830>.
- Peng, Altman Yuzhu. 2020. *A Feminist Reading of China's Digital Public Sphere*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peng, Altman Yuzhu. 2021. "Neoliberal Feminism, Gender Relations, and a Feminized Male Ideal in China: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Mimeng's WeChat Posts." *Feminist Media Studies* 21 (1): 115–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1653350>.
- Pratiwi, Rhesa Zuhriya, Eny Susilowati, Joni Rusdiana, and Arina Rohmatika. 2022. "Femininity and Women's Resistance: Deconstruction of Meaning by Sara Mills' Critical Discourse in 'Mother' Movie." *MUWAZAH: Jurnal Kajian Gender* 13 (2): 193–220. <https://doi.org/10.28918/muwazah.v13i2.4563>.

- Rofel, Lisa. 2007. *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rose, Gillian. 2001. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. Sage Publications. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/visual-methodologies/book277282>.
- Samuels, Gina Miranda, and Fariyal Ross-Sheriff. 2008. "Identity, Oppression, and Power: Feminisms and Intersectionality Theory." *Affilia* 23 (1): 5–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109907310475>.
- Sun, Yuezhu. 2017. "Among a Hundred Good Virtues, Filial Piety Is the First: Contemporary Moral Discourses on Filial Piety in Urban China on JSTOR." *Anthropological Quarterly* 90 (3): 771–799. <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2017.0043>.
- To, Clara Wai-Chun. 2021. "Mother, Wife, or Worker: Life Course and Motivations of Remarried Mainland Chinese Immigrant Women in Hong Kong." *Migration Studies* 9 (3): 514–533. <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnz051>.
- To, Sandy. 2013. "Understanding Sheng Nu ('Leftover Women'): The Phenomenon of Late Marriage Among Chinese Professional Women." *Symbolic Interaction* 36 (1): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.46>.
- Wallis, Cara, and Yongrong Shen. 2018. "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 (4): 376–389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2018.1475745>.
- Whyte, Martin King, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai. 2015. "Challenging Myths About China's One-Child Policy." *The China Journal* 74: 144–159. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681664>.
- Wodak, Ruth, and Meyer, Michael. 2009. "Critical Discourse Analysis: History, Agenda, Theory, and Methodology." In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, edited by Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, 1–33. London: Sage.
- Wolf, Margery. 1985. *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Xiao, Yang, and Yanjie Bian. 2018. "The Influence of Hukou and College Education in China's Labour Market." *Urban Studies* 55 (7): 1504–1524. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017690471>.
- Yang, Fan. 2020. "Post-Feminism and Chick Flicks in China: Subjects, Discursive Origin and New Gender Norms." *Feminist Media Studies* 23 (3): 1059–1074. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1791928>.
- Zhu, Wei Xing, Li Lu, and Therese Hesketh. 2009. "China's Excess Males, Sex Selective Abortion, and One Child Policy: Analysis of Data from 2005 National Intercensus Survey." *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 338 (apr09 2): b1211–b1211. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.b1211>.