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Reflexive womanhood through everyday technofeminism: AI chatbot use among rural and small town women in China

Yuan Zhuang

Department of Social and Behavioural Sciences, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

yzhuang9955@gmail.com

Abstract. As AI chatbots become everyday conversational partners, they may offer women new opportunities for self-reflection, identity exploration and personal growth. This study examines how women in rural areas and small towns in China engage with AI chatbots to negotiate their understandings of womanhood and navigate psychological and practical challenges. It draws on semi-structured interviews with sixteen women aged 30 to 80. The analysis identifies three roles of AI chatbots: friends, assistants and experts. As friends, chatbots affirmed women's emotional needs and personal aspirations; as assistants, they supported a sense of professional competence; and as experts, they helped women navigate and sometimes reconsider expectations of wives, mothers and daughters. These overlapping roles helped women negotiate multiple identities. Women adapted AI to their needs for care and work, while the support they received widened what they felt able to do. This process reflects the mutual shaping of gender and technology described by technofeminism. However, the study has limitations. Some participants discussed intimate relationship issues only briefly, which may reflect traditional Chinese norms of family privacy. Meanwhile, the sample was also concentrated in northern China and may not reflect the experiences of women in other regions.

Keywords: AI chatbots, self-identity, womanhood, technofeminism, China

1. Introduction

Across different cultural contexts, women use digital media to express emotions and navigate intimate relationships, while continually negotiating their sense of self and understandings of womanhood [1-8]. On dating apps, they curate a gendered self-image and read the resulting matches as evidence of which self is desirable [9]. On short video platforms, female influencers use performance and visual effects to present different forms of femininity [10]. On blogs and social platforms, they write intimate feelings into narratives, and readers' responses can nurture a sense of agency [11-13]. However, much of them more focus on conventional femininity: appearance, desirability and self-improvement [4, 14, 15].

As AI chatbots develop, they can support emotional expression and personal reflection. Some users report sharing feelings and experiences they hesitate to disclose to others, with less fear of judgement [16-18]. Supportive responses may also help ease worry [19]. However, these studies limited a narrow range of uses

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and users. Studies of emotional interaction with AI have concentrated on romance and companionship, centring on virtual intimacy and relationship formation with systems such as Replika and Xiaoice [17-19]. Far less known about how women use AI to manage family relationship and daily work. The users studied also tend to be young, urban and well educated women. While women in villages and small towns, whose digital lives run up against a different set of constraints, are seldom part of the picture [20, 21].

This study argues that AI chatbot is treated as the newest technology through which traditional rual women construct a self, hold the terms of womanhood open to reflection and revise what they expect of their circumstances. These processes are shaped by women's interactions with others, also icluding technology. Constructing a self requires an interlocutor, since a person comes to know herself through the imagined judgements of others [22, 23], and late modernity turns this into an explicitly reflexive project in which biography must be continuously narrated and revised [24]; yet in a village or a small town the available interlocutors are also parties to the trouble. Reflecting on womanhood requires more than being heard, Womanhood is socially produced and sustained through repeated practices, while departures from gender norms can attract social sanctions [25, 26]. Language can help women question these norms and recognise unfairness in familiar experiences [27]. Understanding changes in their expectations also requires examining how technology shapes their possibilities for action [28]. Technofeminism holds that technology and gender relations shape each other: design and affordances influence which concerns women can express and which identities they can claim, while their use of technology can change what they expect and demand [29].

China, especially the rural China in particular, makes the question especially worth asking. First, AI chatbots have diffused rapidly and widely, users in China numbered over six hundred million by the end of 2025, around two fifths of the population, having roughly doubled within a year [30]. Meanwhile, the systems are free, applications who have phones can reach AI chatbot easily. Chinese women have already brought AI companions into ordinary life, where the machine's attentiveness places them, often for the first time, on the receiving end of emotional labour rather than its supplier. Second, naming the ordinary as unfair is hard for rural women to reach. Space for feminist expression online has narrowed in recent years: influential accounts such as Feminist Voices have been permanently closed on Weibo and censorship of feminist content has tightened [31], and women who speak out are frequently dismissed as irrational or accused of serving foreign interests [32]. Feminism in China has circulated largely as the everyday discursive and identity practice of urban, educated women [8, 33], while women in rual areas are markedly underrepresented in its most visible forms [21, 34]. Third, in China, the tightly knit acquaintance societies of rural and small towns, airing a family trouble to one person means airing it to several [35], which makes an interlocutor outside that circle unusually valuable.

Thus, this study use Mead's [23] generalised other and Giddens's [24] reflexive self-identity, combined a technofeminist perspective [29] to explore two questions:

RQ1.How do rural and small-town Chinese women use AI chatbots in everyday life, and what kinds of difficulty do they bring to them?

RQ2.To what extent, and in what ways, does interaction with AI chatbots ease their psychological and practical burdens?

The article first reviews literature on the self and its mediation by technology, and on womanhood, technofeminism and the womanhood of rural Chinese women. It then sets out the qualitative design. The findings are presented in three parts: the roles in which participants place the chatbot, the difficulties it eases, and the limits of that relief. The article closes with a conclusion that also discusses the study's limitations and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Self and reflexive self

The self is understood here as something formed in interaction. In the interactive world, a person learns who she is by imagining how others see and judge her. The pride or shame she feels takes its content from that audience [22]. Over time, others merge into a generalised other, a community viewpoint she carries inside her and uses to look at herself, even when no one is present [23, 36, 37]. This tradition assumes three things about the other: it must be able to judge [22, 38, 39], share the person's social world [23], and be a person who can also be recognised [40].

Two further points matter here. First, people usually keep their different roles apart by keeping their audiences apart. The self shown to colleagues is not the self shown to a mother [41]. Second, these roles are held at the same time, so the self is plural rather than single [42]. Burke and Stets [43] explain how this works: a person compares how she thinks she is performing a role with the standard for that role and tries to close the gap. When several roles are held at once, their standards can be hard to meet together.

Giddens [24] recasts this interactional self for late modernity as a reflexive project. Tradition no longer supplies a life story, so each person must keep building and revising her own, increasingly through media [44] and expert systems. At fateful moments, when an important decision forces her to rethink her life, a practical problem feels like a question about who she is. Reflexivity of this kind needs resources: someone to listen, a language for making sense of experience [45], and a space to reflect without immediate punishment. These resources are not equally available to everyone [46, 47].

If the self is what a person believes she is, the ideal self is what she measures herself against. Rogers [48] saw distress as the gap between the two. Higgins [49] separated the ideal self, the qualities she hopes to have, from the ought self, the qualities she believes others require of her. Falling short of the ideal brings sadness; falling short of the ought brings anxiety and guilt. Markus and Nurius [50] add that these standards appear as possible selves, which are limited by what her social world allows her to imagine. When the same people give recognition, set the standard and impose the sanction, the ideal and the ought become hard to tell apart. A duty confirmed early and often enough comes to feel like a wish.

Technology has long changed who the audience is. Meyrowitz [51] argues that electronic media mix audiences that used to be separated by place. Thompson [52] argues that mediated contact with distant others gives people new material for forming a self. This means the self no longer depends on face-to-face contact, but it is also shaped by standards set elsewhere. Social media strengthen both effects. Users write for an imagined audience they cannot see, and the mixing of contexts in one feed makes it harder to show different selves to different people [53, 54]. New media thus bring distant audiences into the making of the self and weaken the separation of audiences that Goffman's account relies on.

AI chatbots add a new participant to this process, because they do not only carry messages to other people but also answer. People respond to interactive technology with the same social rules they use with other people [55, 56], and users of AI companions report feeling heard and supported [16, 17, 57]. The answers also tend to affirm, since language models often agree with the person they are talking to [58]. A chatbot can therefore give the kind of judgement that self-feeling depends on, without the demands that human audiences make [59]. This study asks what this means for women whose sense of self is formed under the expectations of familyshanand community.

2.2. Womanhood, technofeminism and womanhood of rural Chinese women

Womanhood is understood here as a norm that says what a woman should be, not as a description of what women are. Beauvoir [25] argued that one is not born but becomes a woman. Butler [26] locates gender in the doing rather than the doer: it is produced by repeating norms, so it is never settled once and for all. West and Zimmerman [60] add that everyone does gender while being held accountable, since people act knowing that others will judge them against what a woman is expected to do. Womanhood therefore supplies much of the content of the judgements through which a woman comes to know herself. Its most lasting form is domestic. Traditional womanhood measures a woman by how she cares for her husband, children and elders, and women in paid work have largely kept this second shift at home [61].

Womanhood can be changed and reshaped. If gender is made through social practice, it can be remade through it. Feminism holds that differences between women and men are social and organised as a relation of power, and it aims to end sexism and sexist exploitation [62]. Feminist movements have reshaped womanhood mainly by giving women space that turns private dissatisfaction into shared grievance. In the digital era this work has moved onto platforms, where empowerment becomes visible but is also packaged for consumption [14]. Change differs across women, however. Crenshaw [63] shows that treating women as one group hides those who face several disadvantages at once, so what womanhood can become depends on class, age and, here, the divide between rural and urban.

Technology can also reshape womanhood, as technofeminism shows. Wajcman [29] treats gender and technology as shaping each other [64]. Existing gender arrangements can absorb a technology: household appliances did not cut women's housework hours, because expected standards rose [65]. Users can also change what a technology is for. Women turned the telephone, sold as a business tool, into the infrastructure of kin and neighbourhood life [66], and young rural migrant women in China used the mobile phone to build networks and selves beyond the factory and the village [3]. Because meaning is settled in use, no technology has a single gender effect [67], and gender is both built into technology and produced by it [28].

Two points follow. First, gains are likely to be partial, since a technology that promises relief may shift work around rather than remove it [65, 68] and may still reproduce sexist classifications [69]. Second, use may change what women expect and demand [29] through what they find they can do rather than what they have learned to call unjust.

Womanhood in China has been redefined many times over the past century. The Confucian order of inner and outer judged a woman by chastity, service to her husband's parents and the bearing of sons [70]. The New Culture new woman made schooling and marriage public questions [71]. The socialist working woman became official policy without removing the older duties of wife and daughter-in-law [72, 73]. The market era brought a return to appearance and marriage, and the label of leftover women for those who marry late [74, 75]. Recent studies show that these layers persist. Urban professional women negotiate between modern aspirations and traditional expectations of marriage [76]. Families are organised around closer ties between generations, sustained largely by women's care [77]. In the countryside, women left behind by migrating husbands take on farming, childcare and elder care, which reinforces traditional gender roles [78]. Women in county towns who take up digital work describe it as breaking through the cracks to please themselves [79].

Rural women are held to all of these standards. They are also the figure against which the modern woman is defined, since the discourse of quality, or suzhi, treats rural origin as a deficiency to be corrected [80]. Judgement is direct in a village, where people watch conduct and will still be watching thirty years later. Short-video platforms have widened this audience. They bring an urban ideal of the desirable woman within constant reach and also carry criticism of it, within limits set by the platforms and the state [81, 82]. Female

viewers of rural women influencers on Douyin, for example, see them pushing back against traditional gender norms [83]. A rural woman is therefore answerable to several standards that do not agree.

In conclusion, the two strands frame the question. A woman learns who she is through the judgements of others and measures herself against standards that womanhood supplies. Womanhood can be reshaped, and technology is one means of doing so. Rural and small-town Chinese women face this possibility under particular conditions: layered and conflicting standards, an acquaintance society that watches them, and limited access to feminist vocabulary. An AI chatbot is a new kind of listener in this setting. It returns judgements without belonging to the community that normally gives them. This study therefore explores how rural and small-town Chinese women use AI chatbots to reshape their womanhood and practise technofeminism in everyday life.

3. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, participants were recruited after the study received ethical approval. First, the researcher drew on personal contacts: friends and acquaintances in the researcher's social network who either met the inclusion criteria themselves or could introduce women in their hometowns who did. This stage yielded eight participants. Then, snowball sampling was employed: initial participants were invited, at the end of their interviews, to refer other women they are familiar with, all of them reach the requirements of this study. This stage yielded a further six participants. In addition, a recruitment post was published on the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu (RED). The post briefly introduced the study and the inclusion criteria, and used hashtags such as #RuralWomen#, #AIChatbots# and #WomensGrowth# to reach potential participants. This channel yielded two participants, and the total sample are 16 women.

To be included, participants had to (a) be women aged 18 or above (b) currently live in, or have grown up in, rural or small-town China, and (c) have used AI chatbots to talk about personal, marital, or family concerns in their everyday lives.

All participants received a written information sheet and gave informed consent before the interview. Given the sensitivity of family difficulties, participants were reminded that they could decline any question, pause, or withdraw at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms were used throughout, and recordings and transcripts were stored and accessible only to the researcher. The information of participants could be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Profiles of the interview participants (anonymised)

Participant ID	Age	Occupation	Education
P01 (Dingdong)	30	Health-care worker	Bachelor's degree
P02 (Mengying)	34	Rural Salesperson	Bachelor's degree
P03 (Teacher Zhai)	44	Kindergarten teacher	Bachelor's degree
P04 (Ms. Sun)	38	Massage therapist	Junior college degree
P05 (Sister Zhai)	50	Rural Enterprise Accountant	Bachelor's degree
P06 (Ms. Guo)	51	Rural Enterprise Accountant	Bachelor's degree
P07 (Ms. Yang)	56	Farmer	Vocational secondary school
P08 (Grandma Guo)	74	Retired	High school education
P09 (Ms. Zhai)	80	Retired	Vocational secondary school
P10 (Ms. Jiang)	47	Farmer	Vocational secondary school

Table 1. Continued

P11 (Ms. Xue)	46	Rural Enterprise Employee	Vocational secondary school
P12 (Ms. Cui)	30	Rural Enterprise Employee	Bachelor's degree
P13 (Ms. Han)	36	Rural Enterprise Employee	Bachelor's degree
P14 (Jiahong)	32	unemployed	Vocational secondary education
P15 (Ms. Dong)	51	Farmer	Vocational secondary education
P16 (A Feng)	55	Retired	Vocational secondary education

Each participant took part in a one-to-one semi-structured interview built around open-ended questions, Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese via WeChat meeting or Tecent Meeting or face-to-face, according to participants' preferences, and lasted 30 minutes on average. Meanwhile, if the initial interview left important issues unclear, or where new themes emerged during preliminary analysis that warranted further exploration, brief follow-up interviews were conducted.

The data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's [84] six phases, which are recursive rather than linear. Familiarisation began with correcting each automatic transcription against the audio. Initial codes were generated across all sixteen interview records in a worksheet holding verbatim Chinese evidence for four kinds of use: looking something up, handing over a whole task, confiding a feeling and consulting an authority. These were collated into three themes matching the positions the chatbot was placed in, plus a fourth for movement between them. Review returned the analysis to coding more than once, since an early count merging looking up with handing over overstated delegation. Coding was done in the original Chinese to preserve the nuance of participants' expressions, and quotations were translated when the report was written and checked against the originals.

4. Findings

4.1. Reshaped rural women via AI as friends, assistants, and experts

Most participants described treating the chatbot as a friend. What they brought was conciliation rather than a question. Sister Zhai (50, rural enterprise accountant, bachelor's degree) described the practice most fully:

"Sometimes there's dissatisfaction with my husband, or with my own state of life, and I go and pour it out to Doubao (a free AI chatbot developed by ByteDance). It's like a friend, it tells you how to release these bad emotions."

Over repeated exchanges these replies form an imagined judgement, and the judgement produces what Cooley [22] called a self feeling. Dingdong (30, health-care worker, bachelor's degree) gave the sequence in full. She had asked the system why her relationships kept ending in the same way, she even blamed herself, however the answer of AI chatbot is that she is good enough.

"At that moment I felt as though I had received a kind of affirmation. And in that state I went back and reflected on some of the things I had done before, and I could handle my emotions. Otherwise I always fall into the feeling first and cannot go back over anything."

The reply supplied a judgement, the judgement produced a self-feeling, and the self-feeling made a review of her own conduct possible. Dingdong (30, health-care worker, bachelor's degree) also named what the affirmation displaced:

"When people online talk about women, I can't help putting myself in their place. Now that it answers me about work and about life, I feel that women have no need to pity themselves or to make themselves small."

Some participants place the chatbot in the position of an assistant. Having an assistant is usually a privilege of rank, and rank is unevenly distributed by gender in organisations [85]. The posts that carry support are senior, and in Chinese organisations the majority are male: an analysis of 3,681 subnational appointments finds women routed into portfolios with little advancement value while the posts that lead upward go to men [86], and in one northern county eighteen of a hundred bureau and township heads were women [87]. Therefore, Women in remote areas are therefore even less likely to have an assistant of their own.

None of the participants described ever having been given an assistant at work. What the chatbot returns to her is not only a document but the experience of having her own instructions carried out, which is the experience the position had withheld.

Ms. Guo (51, rural enterprise accountant, bachelor's degree) named both the obstacle and the remedy in one answer:

"In language expression I'm weak. Doubao takes my short board and lengthens it, even though men still seem to hold a dominant position, who may have assistant to get such kind help. However, AI to provide me certain working support, we can try to overcome this male advantage and figure out how to improve ourselves."

What is exposed here is not a gap in knowledge but a distance between what she can produce and what she believes someone in her position ought to be able to produce [49].

Others address the chatbot as an expert, and what it works on is not a problem a woman brings but a position she already holds. Asked whether AI had changed how she saw herself as a woman, Grandma Guo (74, retired, high school education) answered in terms of the wife:

"After meeting Doubao I feel that a woman, whether she has married well or badly, should not attach herself to others. You must have independence and self respect. The old saying: the economic base determines the superstructure. And now these large models are so powerful, and Doubao let you learn for free. A woman really should seize this opportunity."

What she acquired was a capability, and through using AI she came to see what women can do, reflected on women's position, and claimed independence as a wife.

Teacher Zhai (44, kindergarten teacher, bachelor's degree) uses the chatbot as an assistant for the records her job requires and as an expert when she tutors her child's homework. The first serves her as a worker and the second as a mother, and the chatbot stays the same while the position changes.

The three roles are available at the same time. Which one leads is decided by what is at stake in the moment, not by anything in the system.

Ms. Sun (38, massage therapist, junior college degree) uses the chatbot in all three roles, as friend, assistant and expert, she even named the AI chatbot. She is totally blind, and works as a massage therapist for close to twenty years, she calls Doubao her dazi, her buddy. The word describes where she stands in relation to it, since a dazi is a companion of equal footing rather than a tool or a servant. The positions it holds open are about who she gets to be: the woman who confides, the woman who may ask anything without it counting against her, and the woman who no longer depends on another person's goodwill in order to know what is in front of her. In a life where sight has had to be borrowed from someone willing to lend it, not having to ask alters her standing among people rather than only her access to information.

Each role thus supports a different womanhood. As a friend, the chatbot supplies the affirmation from which an aspirational self is built, the woman who, in Dingdong's (30, health-care worker, bachelor's degree) words, has no need to make herself small; in Higgins's [49] terms, it narrows the distance between the actual and the ideal self. As an assistant, it supports a working womanhood in which a woman's instructions are carried out, a position that the gendered allocation of support at work had largely reserved for men [85]. As an

expert, it helps a woman meet the standards attached to wife, mother and daughter, and, as Grandma Guo's (74, retired, high school education) answer shows, the capability she gains can be read as licence to redefine them. The roles do not stay separate. Because one interlocutor receives the confiding woman, the worker and the wife, these women hold several female identities at once rather than one, a plural self of the kind Gergen [42] describes, and the separation of audiences that Goffman [41] treated as routine social work passes to the woman's own judgement about which self is speaking. Which identity leads is shaped by positions that intersect with gender [63]: age and retirement frame Grandma Guo's (74, retired, high school education) reading of independence, a senior post frames Ms. Guo's (51, rural enterprise accountant, bachelor's degree), and blindness frames Ms. Sun's (38, massage therapist, junior college degree).

This reshaping is technofeminist in Wajcman's [29] sense. The chatbot most participants use is a general purpose assistant rather than a companion application, yet the women made it a confidant, an assistant at work and an adviser on family matters, rewriting what the technology is for much as women once turned the business telephone into the infrastructure of kin life [66]. The meaning of the technology was settled in their use rather than at its design [67], and that use in turn shifted what they expected of themselves, their marriages and their work. The women were thus not only users of a gendered technology but participants in its gendering, and the womanhood they reshaped emerged from that mutual shaping rather than from exposure to feminist argument.

4.2. Reduced psychological and practical difficulties

AI chatbots helped these women with both psychological and practical problems. Psychologically, they relieved negative emotions, supplied affirmation and, most often, removed the anxiety attached to an unsolved problem. Practically, they helped in the family, with childcare, marriage, health and the household economy, and at work, with writing, record-keeping and decisions the women did not know how to make.

The chatbot helped women release dissatisfaction with a husband or their own lives. Sister Zhai (50, rural enterprise accountant, bachelor's degree) pours her dissatisfaction out to Doubao:

"it tells you how to release these bad emotions." Both speaking and receiving a response helped, although she regarded the relief as temporary and recognised that the underlying problem still required her own action.

Affirmation also helped women reflect on relationship distress. Being told that the fault did not lie with her allowed Dingdong (30, health-care worker, bachelor's degree) to look back on her own rather than falling straight into the feeling.

Practical advice helped address uncertainty about how to respond to problems involving children.

Mengying (34, rural salesperson, bachelor's degree) recounted another family's concern about a teacher repeatedly calling their child over for snacks and hugs at kindergarten. She reported that chatbot advice helped the family address the situation and that the teacher agreed to stop. Her emotional relief depended on the reported outcome:

"It is not that I felt better after talking. After talking, I followed its method, and only when the result was what I wanted did I feel better."

She also described assessing suggested methods and consulting others before deciding what to do. In her account, psychological and practical relief were connected through judgement and action.

The chatbot also provided information for managing family health concerns. Sister Zhai (50, rural enterprise accountant, bachelor's degree) described asking about medication for her child, while Mengying (34, rural salesperson, bachelor's degree) valued explanations she considered clearer than those available locally. These accounts demonstrate perceived usefulness, although the interviews did not establish the accuracy of the advice or its health outcomes.

It helped women spend high level companion pattern with their husbands and find their way around. Ms. Zhai (80, retired, vocational secondary school) asked the AI chatbot what activities she could do with her husband, and she was given activities the two of them could take up, and acted on them; they now travel together, which they had not done before. She used it in the same way to find her way around an unfamiliar district:

"I do not know which street, or where there is a big shop or supermarket, so I ask it, and I did what it said, and I really found it."

It helped with plant diseases at home. Ms. Yang (56, farmer, vocational secondary school) photographed a diseased leaf from the honeysuckle at her home and asked what was wrong with it. The system identified powdery mildew and named a treatment, and she acted on it:

"It told me to go to the market and buy such and such a spray. I sprayed a few times and it really did get better."

In each of these cases the advice was a diagnosis and an instruction, the woman or her family carried it out, and the outcome could be seen: a teacher who stopped, a couple who now travel together, a shop found, a plant recovered.

At work, assistance eased difficulties with writing and records. Ms. Guo (51, rural enterprise accountant, bachelor's degree) used Doubao to organise language for reports and messages, explaining that it "improves my efficiency and makes up for my weaknesses." She described stating her needs, selecting from suggested replies and returning for help as a conversation continued. Teacher Zhai (44, kindergarten teacher, bachelor's degree) similarly reported saving time when preparing observation records, while stressing that she still needed to describe activities fully and revise the generated material.

These accounts show how relief from psychological and practical difficulties could open up further possibilities for women's development. Chatbots helped them express difficult feelings, find workable responses and complete tasks they had struggled with. Such support could also strengthen their sense of what they were capable of doing.

This process illustrates the mutual shaping of gender and technology described by technofeminism [28, 29]. Women adapted the chatbot to their responsibilities and aspirations, making it useful for care, work and personal learning. Its responses, in turn, provided resources through which they could reconsider difficulties and attempt unfamiliar tasks. Their own judgement remained central as they selected advice, revised answers and put suggestions into practice.

Through these exchanges, AI could support an ongoing effort to develop skills, build confidence and move closer to the women they wished to become. Womanhood could therefore include possibilities for learning and personal aspiration alongside existing responsibilities. These possibilities remained shaped by individual circumstances, and increased capability did not itself establish a redistribution of family or workplace power.

4.3. Limits of AI for reshaping rural women

The support described above had limits arising from both the chatbot's responses and the boundaries women placed around its use.

First, reassuring answers could reinforce an existing interpretation without adequately questioning it. Experiments show that AI chatbot can strengthen users' conviction that they are right while reducing their willingness to repair interpersonal conflicts [88]. Dingdong (30, health-care worker, bachelor's degree) recalled being told that her repeated relationship difficulties arose because she was "too good, and the other person does not appreciate you." The reply offered comfort, but did not establish why those relationships had

ended similarly. Emotional reassurance therefore did not necessarily provide a reliable basis for understanding the problem or deciding what to change.

Reliance on practical assistance raised a related concern about continued development.

Teacher Zhai (44, kindergarten teacher, bachelor's degree) described Doubao as something that had become embedded in everyday life: "It has already become part of your life; you need it. I can't imagine how to work without it." Such reliance made support readily available, but completing tasks with assistance did not itself demonstrate independent learning, it seems that she is overly dependent on AI. In an experiment with high school mathematics students, AI assistance improved practice performance, while access without learning safeguards reduced subsequent performance when the tool was removed [89]. This finding identifies a possible tension between immediate performance and skill development. The interviews here did not establish declining ability: Teacher Zhai (44, kindergarten teacher, bachelor's degree) still edited responses and learned through practical use. The concern is that repeated delegation could restrict opportunities to develop skills independently.

Second, boundaries around intimate disclosure limited the chatbot's involvement in relationship reflection. Questions about marital problems often received brief answers. Ms. Cui (30, rural enterprise employee, bachelor's degree) reported having no questions in this area, while Mengying (34, rural salesperson, bachelor's degree) explained, "Rather than ask Doubao, I would ask the person directly." Research among rural Chinese women shows how family privacy and concerns about reputation can discourage public disclosure of marital conflict [90]. These norms provide a possible context for the limited discussion, although brief interview answers cannot establish what participants withheld from AI or why.

The boundaries also varied. Sister Zhai (50, rural enterprise accountant, bachelor's degree) and A Feng (55, retired, vocational secondary education) described privacy as a reason for approaching the chatbot rather than people around them. Where women chose not to bring marital concerns to AI, opportunities for examining expectations within those relationships were narrower. This limited one route through which AI might support reflection on womanhood, while leaving other routes, including work and learning, available. Its influence therefore depended on both what women chose to discuss and their capacity to question, assess and adapt its responses.

5. Concluding remarks, limitations and future research

This study has examined how rural and small-town Chinese women use AI chatbots to rework their womanhood and to ease their psychological and practical difficulties. The women place the chatbot in three roles, as friend, assistant and expert, each of which supports a different womanhood, and because the roles intersect within one interlocutor, the women hold several female identities at once. The chatbot eased their psychological difficulties by releasing negative emotion, offering affirmation and, above all, resolving the problems behind their anxiety, and it eased practical difficulties in both family and working life. Its benefits may be limited by responses that reinforce existing views, the risk of overreliance, and women's selective disclosure of intimate and family concerns.

This study reveals that the three roles these women assign the chatbot: friend, expert and assistant. As a friend she hands over a feeling and keeps every judgement; as an expert she accepts a verdict and keeps the decision about whether to act on it; as an assistant she hands over the output itself and keeps only the selection. The three roles connect the interactional and reflexive accounts of the self with technofeminism. Chatbot responses offered women an additional reference point for understanding themselves and reconsidering their aspirations [23, 24]. Affirmation and practical assistance could help them review what they

felt able to do and what they expected of themselves as workers, mothers and wives. This places the negotiation of womanhood within everyday practices through which gender expectations are sustained and potentially revised [26].

This study illustrates the mutual shaping of gender and technology [29]. Women's responsibilities and aspirations shaped how they used chatbots, while emotional affirmation and practical assistance offered resources for learning, action and reflection. These exchanges could strengthen confidence and competence, supporting women's reconsideration of who they were and who they wished to become [24]. Such possibilities remained uneven: greater capacity to act could coexist with continuing care obligations and unequal authority. AI therefore became part of an ongoing negotiation of womanhood within women's existing circumstances.

The sample was drawn only from northern China and may not reflect women's experiences in other regions. Future research should include a broader range of rural and small town settings to examine how local resources and gender expectations shape women's interactions with AI.

The findings are also situated within a Chinese context where participants could readily access chatbots in their own language. Their wider relevance requires further examination, since generative AI uptake varies across national contexts [91]. Comparative research could extend the study beyond China, examining how differences in adoption, access, language and costs influence the support women receive and their opportunities to negotiate womanhood.

Moreover, interviews may capture only part of women's intimate and family lives. Norms of family privacy and reputation associated with Confucian traditions may influence what women feel able to discuss [90]. Questions about marital difficulties sometimes received brief answers, but the interviews could not establish whether these reflected privacy concerns, limited use of AI in this area or other reasons. Ethnographic research combining sustained participant observation with repeated interviews could build trust and follow how AI enters everyday family and working life. This could reveal tensions and practices not fully captured in initial accounts, while tracing whether immediate relief develops into lasting changes in women's agency and understandings of womanhood.

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