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Feminist Reinterpretations of Intergenerational Experience in Family Photography on Xiaohongshu

Shiqin Qiu

Graduate School of Information and Communication, Meiji University, Tokyo 101-8301, Japan; qiushiqin5@gmail.com

Abstract

Older women have often been less visible as photographic subjects within visual conventions that privilege youth and normative feminine beauty. On Xiaohongshu, however, photographic and family narratives about women include portraits of mothers and grandmothers and accounts of their work, care, aspirations, and hardship. This article asks how such posts make older women visible and connect their experiences to feminist meanings across generations. It combines an exploratory collection completed by 10 June 2026 with a second, bounded retrieval on 13 October 2026 using the same sixteen keyword combinations. The second retrieval recorded 450 search hits, representing 376 distinct posts; 255 had evidence of existence by the June cutoff, including twenty-five developed accounts of the poster's own female relatives. Nine information-rich cases selected across the two collections are analysed through captions and ninety-two retained visual files. The cases show several ways of making intergenerational experience visible: collective portraits credit older women's advice, archives reopen questions about family and gender, everyday activity gives material form to care, and constructed images picture opportunities an earlier generation could not pursue. Their feminist significance is not identical. Some posts explicitly challenge son preference, unequal opportunities, bodily ideals, or the assumption that a woman's worth rests on service to others; others primarily offer affection, commemoration, or visual recognition. The article argues that photographing older women can broaden the available images of women and create a shareable language for intergenerational experience, while its political meaning depends on how particular gendered expectations are addressed.

Keywords: intergenerational relations; feminist knowledge; family narratives; mothers and grandmothers; family photography; Xiaohongshu

1. Introduction

Visual cultures that privilege youth and conventional feminine beauty have seldom placed older women's everyday lives at the centre of photography (Woodward 2006). Xiaohongshu portraits of mothers and grandmothers, family archives, and records of daily life offer public visual forms for older bodies, work, memories, and aspirations. This article examines how these images present intergenerational experience among women and how younger narrators use photography and storytelling to connect with earlier generations' lives. Their feminist significance is examined through the images and words of each post.

This study examines Chinese-language public posts on Xiaohongshu, also known as RedNote, a social commerce platform on which photography, captions, and searchable labels circulate together (Guo 2022; Gu et al. 2024). Portrait projects, reworked family archives, everyday documentation, and artistic reconstructions provide different ways of

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presenting female relatives and their relationships with younger family members. The posts are treated as public visual narratives, not as transparent records of family life. Their juxtaposition allows the study to ask what kinds of older female experience become visible and what meanings are attached to them.

Research on family photography shows that images are made, selected, retained, and displayed within relationships (Rose 2010). Feminist scholarship on ageing considers the visual position of older women's bodies (Woodward 2006). Studies of Chinese women's family relations and historical opportunities illuminate the different conditions under which mothers, grandmothers, and younger women have lived (Evans 2010; Hershatter 2011). Bringing these concerns together, the article examines how images of older women carry intergenerational experience.

Photographs record faces, gestures, and activities; captions narrate education, labour, care, and family expectations. Together, they offer a framing through which audiences are invited to understand older women's lives and bring experience from within families into public discussion. The article compares visual form, narrative content, and explicit feminist claims to examine how commemoration and gender critique intersect in particular posts.

Chinese mother–daughter relationships provide a foundation for addressing this question. Expectations of communication and intimacy can change while emotional responsibility remains gendered (Evans 2010). Rural women's memories likewise connect family life to historically specific regimes of work and social change (Hershatter 2011). The present study extends these concerns to public narratives in which a family member selectively relates another woman's experiences to a contemporary feminist vocabulary. It examines the work performed by that connection, including the differences between generations that a persuasive narrative can obscure.

Family photography also enters debates about popular feminism, its ambivalent visibility (Tan 2026), and its relationship to commercial culture (Liao 2025). Affection, gratitude, educational aspiration, consumption, and feminist identification can coexist within one post. Their conjunction allows examination of how ordinary relations become politically reinterpreted, without assuming that every celebration of women critiques gendered power.

Two questions guide the article. First, how do these photographic posts make older women and their intergenerational experiences visible, and what aspects of their lives do images and captions bring forward? Second, how do younger narrators connect those experiences to feminist concerns, and where does that connection remain limited or ambiguous? The questions leave open whether a given post challenges a gender norm, celebrates a relative without such a challenge, or does both. They also keep visibility distinct from evidence that family roles or decision-making have changed.

2. Intergenerational Experience, Older Women's Visibility, and Feminist Narration

2.1. Family Photographs as Intergenerational Narratives

Genealogical inquiry asks how relationships with predecessors are established and made meaningful, not only how descent is traced. Family photographs are one medium through which advice, remembered exclusions, everyday skills, and aspirations can be linked across generations. A younger relative's account selects what is remembered and how it is connected to the present. Its meaning therefore lies partly in the relationship it constructs between the older woman's experience and the narrator's concerns, without requiring both to have named those concerns in the same way.

Family photographs and the accounts accompanying them must be examined together. Klein (2023) contextualises portrait albums as genealogical sources; White (2026) combines family memory with historical research to recover marginalised women's lives. In social

media posts, images may make an older woman's presence and activity visible, while captions explain why those scenes matter to a descendant. Their conjunction can be analysed even when a remembered event cannot be independently corroborated. What a photograph shows, what a caption claims about the past, and what a family member now wishes to express remain distinct kinds of evidence.

Intergenerational experience here means a connection explicitly narrated between family positions, such as a mother's constrained opportunities and a descendant's imagined alternative, or a grandmother's routine and a grandchild's account of learning. The analysis follows relationships stated in the posts. Chinese kinship distinctions are retained where relevant: waipo identifies a maternal grandmother, while nainai ordinarily identifies a paternal grandmother.

The act of telling is examined through narrative sequence, evaluation, and addressed audiences (Riessman 2008). When a post ends with educational or professional success, it makes that achievement the resolution of a public family story. Such an arrangement shows how the narrator asks an audience to understand the intergenerational relationship and invites attention to experiences left outside the account.

Hirsch's (2008) concept of postmemory draws attention to photography's mediation of experience across generations. Receiving advice from a living parent, recalling childhood, and encountering events before one's birth nevertheless involve different temporal relationships. Intergenerational reinterpretation encompasses these differences without classifying every photograph as postmemory or assuming that earlier and later political meanings coincide.

2.2. Gendered Histories and the Possibilities of Feminist Reinterpretation

Feminist epistemology shows how marginalised experience gains the status of knowledge through situated telling and interpretation (Haraway 1988; Scott 1991). A younger relative may newly credit an elder's practical knowledge, reconsider an educational opportunity she lost, or question how her work and body were judged. Such readings connect personal memory with wider gendered histories. Public posts record present intergenerational interpretations whose meaning also arises from the different historical positions of elders and descendants.

Historical inequality is therefore part of the analytic problem. Women's schooling, paid work, and family responsibilities changed unevenly across regions and generations (Hershatter 2007, pp. 61–66; Hannum and Adams 2007, pp. 94–95). Wider educational access did not eliminate the effects of rural location, household resources, or gendered investment in children; paid work did not remove domestic duties. These histories help explain why a daughter might narrate her mother's experience through opportunity and constraint. Yet an individual elder cannot be assigned to a policy cohort solely from apparent age.

Kandiyoti's (1988) account of bargaining within patriarchal arrangements helps resist a simple division between feminist younger women and traditional older ones. A woman may support a girl's schooling while participating in other family expectations; affection may coexist with son preference or unequal care. The question is not which generation is enlightened, but how the post connects a specific life to the gendered distribution of security, responsibility, and possibility.

Research based on mother–daughter dyads can elicit both sides of an agreement or dispute (Pustulka 2024). Studies of collective feminist learning among South Korean students offer another comparison (Jung and Moon 2025). A public post offers a different kind of access: it shows how one narrator attributes influence and presents a relation to an audience. The analyst can examine that presentation while leaving the photographed relative's own response open where it is not reported.

The article distinguishes actors' uses of 'feminist' from its analytical use. The former appear in posts as self-descriptions, claims, or recognisable symbols. The latter concerns how a work presents specific gendered constraints, including son preference, restricted education, standards of bodily beauty, and obligations of care. Together these levels help establish how a family image enters a feminist discussion while allowing for different understandings of experience across generations.

2.3. Photography and the Forms of Visibility

Family photographs acquire meaning through making, arranging, retaining, and circulating images (Rose 2010; Vivienne and Burgess 2013). Newly made portraits foreground a present encounter; old prints leave material traces of another time; constructed scenes express an imagined past. Captions connect these visual forms to family memory and feminist concerns. The analysis considers both the scene presented by each material and the narrative it carries.

Photography is also a narrative form for organising intergenerational experience in this study. Rose (2010) treats family photography as a practice of making and showing within kin relations; Vivienne and Burgess (2013) show how personal photographs acquire new public meanings through digital storytelling and sharing. Research on social media portraiture further links the circulation of images to judgements about what is worth seeing (Trillò et al. 2023). Mothers' and grandmothers' bodies, work, objects, and settings can appear together in a frame, giving viewers a concrete entry into experiences that are difficult to convey briefly in text and inviting them to imagine relations across generations. Captions supply events and historical context, while photographs give these experiences a form that can be viewed and shared. The analysis therefore considers how images and words jointly present intergenerational women's experience.

Making older women visible can expand a repertoire of female images organised around youth and conventional attractiveness (Woodward 2006). Portraits display play and gesture; records of sewing and fieldwork show skills; archival materials bring earlier living conditions into view. The article reads bodily framing together with captioned experience to identify the meanings these images acquire.

The analysis consequently distinguishes visible arrangement, narrated participation, and a relative's own view of the published image. A central position in a portrait can be observed; participation in making it may be reported; agreement with its feminist reading usually requires other evidence. These distinctions protect the study's central interest in visibility from becoming an unsupported claim about consent or practical authority.

Three common questions organise the case comparison: what aspects of older women's bodies, activities, or histories are shown; how these are connected with younger relatives' experience; and which gendered expectations the connection addresses. Posts that explicitly use feminist language and those centred on affection are analysed through the same questions. Image content, captions, and contextual information supplied by public profiles are recorded separately and compared within each case.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Two Sources of Material and Their Different Purposes

Two rounds of collection used the same sixteen keyword combinations, each pairing a thematic term with 女性摄影 (women's photography). The first round was completed by 10 June 2026 using a newly created research account. After screening irrelevant returns, the author retained ten posts per combination, producing a structured export of 160 distinct post IDs. The accompanying screening material retained one further relevant post, so the first-round archive used in this article contains 161 distinct posts. This exploratory collection

identified themes and possible cases; its counts are not used to estimate their frequency on the platform.

Reviewing titles and captions across this first-round archive, the author identified twelve developed narratives or projects concerning the posters' own female relatives and three brief family records. These works address collective portraiture, older photographs, reading, labour, and memories of daily life, providing initial directions for the subsequent comparison.

On 13 October 2026, the sixteen combinations were repeated through the author's existing logged-in Xiaohongshu account. For each query, the first thirty cards shown under comprehensive sorting were recorded before relevance screening; one query returned no results. The 450 recorded hits represented 376 distinct post IDs after deduplication. Titles, available captions, displayed dates, and media were then assessed against the research questions and the 10 June publication cutoff. Table 1 reports the resulting categories, and Table A1 records the query outcomes.

Table 1. Provisional classification and temporal screening of the new retrieval.

Title and Caption Classification	Pool	By Cutoff	Later	Date Unclear
Developed own-family narrative or project	33	25	1	7
Brief own-family record	5	3	0	2
Mediated or general family-related material	69	53	2	14
No relevant family connection	258	167	12	79
Unresolved narrative status	11	7	0	4
Total distinct posts	376	255	15	106

Note: The counts describe the classification and temporal distribution of posts in this retrieval round.

The two rounds used the same platform and keywords and focused on posts within the same temporal scope, yet returned different sets of material. The first round retained ten relevant posts per query after screening, whereas the second recorded up to thirty search cards per query before screening. Only two post IDs appeared in both rounds' developed own-family narratives. The author's regularly used account follows women's issues, women photographers, and women creators. Recording depth, screening procedure, account context, and collection date may all have shaped the posts encountered. This article documents the contrast while leaving the ranking mechanism for dedicated research.

3.2. Platform Visibility and Temporal Eligibility

Xiaohongshu links images, videos, captions, hashtags, profiles, engagement indicators, and commerce while presenting search results in ranked order. Research on feminist advocacy and lifestyle content shows how political expression and commercial uses can coexist in this space (Gu et al. 2024; Guo 2022). Searches pairing women's photography with terms about mothers, bodies, or feminism return personal family records, art projects, photography services, and commentary. The article classifies these materials by content and evidence type before closely examining posts relevant to intergenerational experience.

The study uses 10 June 2026 as the threshold for a post's prior existence. Complete dates displayed on the page were recorded as shown. An edit or comment dated before the cutoff could also establish prior existence. For month–day labels observed on 13 October 2026, a label on or before 10 June established that the post existed by the cutoff; the label alone did not establish its original publication year. Later month–day labels remained temporally unresolved unless other dated evidence established existence by the cutoff. Later posts and temporally unresolved cases were classified separately. The basis for each temporal decision is recorded in the research ledger.

On the basis of displayed temporal information, 255 posts have evidence of existence by the cutoff, fifteen fall after it, and 106 remain temporally unresolved. The latter two groups remain in the retrieval log; the 255 date-eligible posts form the period-specific analysis pool. The image and caption material collected in October provides the visible version analysed here. Collection date, displayed date, basis for temporal eligibility, and media availability are recorded separately.

3.3. Whole-Pool Classification and Intensive Case Selection

The October retrieval recorded 376 distinct posts. Their titles and available captions were classified by relevance and narrative type, while displayed date evidence was assessed separately against the 10 June 2026 cutoff. Table 1 cross-tabulates these classifications. The 255 posts with evidence of existence by the cutoff form the period-specific analysis pool; 15 were later, and 106 had unresolved dates. Together, these classifications establish the search context and the boundaries of the research question. Public profile self-descriptions supply some production context. Posts concerning intergenerational women's experience entered comparison even when they used no feminist vocabulary.

Among the 255 date-eligible posts, twenty-five contain developed own-family accounts, three are brief records, fifty-three are mediated or general family-related accounts, 167 lack the relevant family or intergenerational connection, and seven remain unresolved. The twenty-five developed accounts were compared through the three questions in Section 2.3, and their principal photographic or artistic forms were recorded. Across both rounds, twelve developed first-round accounts and twenty-five date-eligible October accounts, with two overlapping IDs, yield thirty-five distinct candidates. Nine were selected for close image–caption analysis using four criteria together: an explicit relation to the poster's own female kin, sufficient account of intergenerational experience, visual material available for inspection, and contrasts in photographic form and the presence or absence of explicit gender critique. The other twenty-six remain in the comparison ledger and help test the boundaries of these interpretations. For the nine intensive cases, the author examined all ninety-two retained visual files or layouts, recording visible placement of people, gestures, objects, settings, reused photographs, and image sequence separately from captioned explanations.

Case selection is information-oriented (Flyvbjerg 2006). The nine intensive cases were chosen from the thirty-five distinct developed candidates described above. Their contrasts cover newly made portraits, inherited records, everyday documentation, constructed scenes, and different evaluations of older women's experience. Selection did not depend on a post affirming feminist change: accounts of continuing care, unresolved relationships, and an elder's preference for familiar activities remain central. The two collection rounds are kept separate for descriptive counts because their acquisition procedures differ. C1 occurs in both rounds; C3 and C4 come from the first-round archive; N1–N6 come from October. Seven of the nine therefore appeared in the bounded October retrieval.

The nine intensive cases include collective portraits, an inherited photographic archive, shared creative work, everyday documentation, unresolved mother–daughter relations, domestic craft, bodily history, playful portraits, and an imagined maternal adolescence. Table 2 states each case's comparative role and the number of retained visual files. The other developed accounts serve as near comparisons and counterexamples rather than disappearing after screening; Table A2 in Appendix A.2 groups their main analytical roles.

Table 2. Intensive cases and their comparative roles.

Case and Source	Analytical Contrast	Context Supplied by the Source	Files
C1 Both sources	Advice as feminist teaching	Community initiative; photography credited to a friend	12
C3 Exploratory archive	Work preference and family peace	Differing schooling; migration, work and pension; divided creative roles	5
C4 Exploratory archive	Continuity and relational change	Grandchild-led account of joint portrait project; creator gender unestablished	12
N1 New retrieval	Understanding without reconciliation	Visual-artist profile; U.S. IP region at observation; project reportedly made in 2017–2018	7
N2 New retrieval	Archive and gendered entitlement	Art-school profile; France IP region at observation; reported return to a family home in China	13
N3 New retrieval	Worth beyond domestic usefulness	Art-school affiliation; reported geographical distance from grandmother	14
N4 New retrieval	Bodily ideal and historical knowledge	Yunnan upbringing; profile describes translation and study	5
N5 New retrieval	Playful visibility and care-centred praise	Photography-oriented profile; grandmother described as 79	11
N6 New retrieval	Imagined opportunity and lived constraint	Narrator states a twentieth birthday; mother's rural youth; separate photographer credited	13
Total	Nine cases	Profiles and biographies are source-reported, not independently authenticated	92

Note: C1 appeared in both rounds and is counted once. File counts refer to retained material available for inspection.

3.4. Ethics and Scope

The study uses public posts and involved no recruitment or contact with publishers. Institutional ethics approval and participant consent were not obtained. Because photographed relatives may not have chosen to publish their images, the article describes visual material in words, retains a traceable private research record, and avoids reproducing identifiable family photographs. Direct links, full captions, and original images remain in non-public research files. This presentation responds to ethical discussions of publicity, identifiability, and recirculation in social media research (franzke et al. 2020; Cagle 2021; Taylor et al. 2023).

The empirical setting is Chinese-language family storytelling on Xiaohongshu. The intensive cases concern mothers, grandmothers, or other female kin, but the posters, credited photographers, and pictured relatives are not always the same people. Public profiles and captions situate some accounts in mainland China; two selected profiles displayed IP regions in the United States and France at the time of observation, while one narrator describes returning to a family home in China. These source-reported locations do not establish every participant's nationality or current residence. Nor do the available records establish the gender of every publisher or photographer. The analysis accordingly identifies people by their documented family and creative roles and uses geographical context where the posts supply it.

The analysis separately considers explicit gender critique, commemoration, visual experimentation, and praise of care. Public posts provide evidence of how women's experience is presented. Relatives' private understandings, household arrangements, and

audience responses remain questions for further study. The conclusions therefore concern the intergenerational narratives formed by public images and their feminist significance.

4. Results

4.1. What the Retrieved Pool Makes Visible

The October retrieval reveals a varied field of women's photography. Of 376 distinct posts encountered, 255 met the date criterion and formed the period-specific analysis pool; the fifteen later and 106 temporally unresolved posts remain in the retrieval log and delimit what can be claimed about the period. Within the 255, twenty-five provide developed accounts of the posters' own female relatives, three are brief family records, fifty-three address family or generational questions indirectly, 167 concern other subjects, and seven have unresolved narrative status. The 167 show the breadth of searches that combined women's photography with the thematic terms; the fifty-three locate family and gender themes in commentary, art, and mediated material; the brief and unresolved records show why a developed family account was required for close intergenerational reading. These categories give every retrieved post a defined role in the screening account while keeping the intensive argument focused on evidence that can sustain it.

The twenty-five developed family accounts take six principal forms: nine centre on portraits of relatives, three revisit older photographs and archives, two document everyday or long-term family life, five employ constructed forms such as multimedia installation, collage, or imagined reconstruction, three introduce personal family experience through discussion of other works, and three give little detail about production form. Twelve concern mothers, eight grandmothers, four both generations, and one a parent's account of a daughter. Thus, kinship position, image-making practice, and the narrator's relation to the image vary within the relevant pool. Older women appear as portrait subjects, makers of earlier images, figures in inherited archives, and people whose foreclosed possibilities younger relatives picture. The whole-pool comparison prevents the close cases from standing in for a single type of young photographer or a uniform feminist position.

The remaining developed candidates sharpen this comparison. A photobook combines a mother's earlier album with photographs she reportedly made at university, placing her on both sides of the camera. In another post, maternal affection coexists with son preference. Elsewhere, a mother reportedly initiates a joint portrait session, while a daughter describes using an earlier photograph to generate a youthful AI portrait despite the mother's reluctance to be photographed. These accounts complicate any simple story of younger people granting visibility to passive elders: initiative, affection, bias, and control over an image do not always align. Other candidates offer narrower life histories or visual evidence less suited to the present image–caption comparison.

4.2. Older Women as Sources of Knowledge and Family Memory

C1 calls the narrator's mother and maternal grandmother the 'first teachers of my feminist awakening'. The grandmother insisted that girls should study, and the mother left home to find work. The narrator draws on these experiences to explain her later participation in a women's community. The caption also praises the grandmother's effort to hold family life together under difficult conditions. Bringing advice, action, and care into a present feminist vocabulary, the narrator constructs a path of inheritance within the family.

The twelve-image sequence presents intergenerational connection as something arranged in the present. In several frames, three women wear matching slogan shirts and appear together or in smaller groupings; veils, directed gestures, and older prints held in their hands interrupt the ordinary family-pose format. The opening layout juxtaposes a new group portrait with a separate black-and-white bridal image, bringing two photo-

graphic forms into the same composition. Viewers can see three generations assembled and photographic prints held within the portraits; the claim that the grandmother's advice and the mother's actions were feminist teaching comes from the narrator's words. The caption credits a friend with photography and makeup, locating this visual construction beyond the narrator alone.

A thought about mortality led the narrator to make a meaningful photograph with both elders. She also recounts the grandmother's first experience of makeup and a veil. Affection, anticipated loss, and feminist identification converge here. The grandmother's advice and the mother's actions acquire the significance of teaching a younger generation. The caption also honours the grandmother's labour of holding the family together, while the gendered allocation of that labour stays in the narrative background. C1 foregrounds older women's contribution to a younger person's knowledge and shows the tension between affectionate remembrance and feminist evaluation.

N2 makes the handling of an inherited archive politically consequential. The narrator describes returning to China over Christmas, finding old films and prints in the grandparents' home, and removing them out of concern about their future treatment in a reported family property conflict. Subsequent viewing becomes an occasion to criticise son preference and to imagine making a photobook. This is not simply a passage from forgotten images to recovered facts. A present dispute changes the questions asked of the collection and the purpose assigned to preserving it. The narrator connects reported insults directed at both parents with a wider critique of women's devaluation, making this dispute a reason to organise the family past differently.

The thirteen files move between the archive as an object and the people visible within it. Worn studio sleeves, film canisters, strips of negatives, and prints collected in a box show why preservation and handling matter to the project. Other frames reproduce colour and black-and-white portraits, an adult holding a child, groups together, and a scene of cake being cut; a computer screen displays thumbnails of the older material. These images supply traces of ordinary family proximity and occasions of gathering. The alleged property conflict and son preference are supplied by the caption, rather than visible in a particular face or pose. The contrast explains the post's interpretive action: a present dispute leads the narrator to sort and reread images whose original social meanings cannot simply be read from their surfaces.

C1 and N2 demonstrate two routes by which younger narrators make older women's experience visible as part of a feminist story. One gives retrospective public credit to advice and action that shaped a younger woman's commitments; the other rearranges inherited images in response to a present dispute about gendered entitlement. The photographs contribute shared presence and the materiality of an archive, while the captions state why those materials matter now. Neither route requires the older women to have used the same political terms. The feminist connection lies in the specific relation between experience, image, and present critique, rather than in visibility alone.

4.3. Representing Preference, Continuity, and Unresolved Relations

C3 presents influences among daughter, mother, and grandmother through reading and shared creative work. Its caption recounts the grandmother's limited schooling, the mother's migration for work, and the daughter's later feminist understanding. The mother once advised the daughter to accommodate paternal authority for family peace. The caption affirms the mother's wish to continue paid work despite her husband's preference that she stop. Together, these episodes ask how family harmony should be reconciled with a woman's preference about her working life.

Reading forms part of the daughter–mother relationship. The daughter recalls reading Russell aloud to her mother and places feminist reading within her understanding of family change. The mother's decision to remain in work also relates to employment experience, pension resources, and changing family relations. In the photographic project, the mother is credited with the set and visual style, the grandmother appears as a model, and the daughter handles styling and photography. This division of creative tasks offers a further view of intergenerational cooperation.

The five retained files make the grandmother the most visible carrier of the project's feminist sign. One layout enlarges the cover of a book by Ueno between portraits of her holding it; other close frames show her with an open book, jewellery, and styled clothing, and another sequence follows her adjusting sunglasses. The book, dress, and repeated poses construct a deliberately contemporary portrait of an older woman. They establish that she was photographed with a recognisable feminist text, while the developed account of a choice to continue paid work concerns the mother. The daughter brings these different figures and actions together in the caption. The visual sign of reading and the narrated employment decision thus work across generations without turning a pictured book into evidence of anyone's private convictions or the cause of a later decision.

C4 recounts a portrait project completed with a grandmother. The creator links the project to a growing friendship and describes learning repeatedly from her. Asked whether public attention had changed the grandmother, the creator replies, 'she does not need to change'. The work locates its significance in their changing relationship and in a renewed way of seeing the grandmother's familiar life.

The twelve retained portraits do more than offer a single flattering likeness. In one low-angle frame, the grandmother in a dark coat stands against a broad blue sky as bright red spheres cross the foreground. Another looks down on her seated with yellow flowers, a blue dress, and a patterned scarf; closer images bring the face, clothing, and surrounding plants into view. Changes in scale, viewpoint, colour, and props make the same person appear monumental, playful, and familiar across the series. This visual variation is the project's observable achievement. The accompanying account values her continuing routines and says that she need not change. The photographs therefore alter the range of public appearances available to the grandmother without requiring the analysis to claim that her life itself was transformed.

N1 begins with a difficult mother–daughter relationship. The narrator recalls an early separation first described by the mother and considers her constraints as a daughter, wife, and woman. The project has each participant listen to the other's recorded account. The narrator comes to understand more of the mother's hardship, resilience, and limitations while also saying, 'I still cannot like my mother'. This juxtaposition holds understanding and continuing emotional distance together, allowing the mother's circumstances to become visible.

The seven still files present a deliberately fragmented account of relation. A small baby photograph appears beside a thin red line crossing an installation wall; other layouts layer partial faces and hands. One installation view places two vertical portrait screens side by side above a table of printed pages, while outdoor scenes put figures and reflective surfaces at a distance. The paired screens give two accounts adjacent space, but the images do not depict a completed reconciliation. The caption supplies the reported procedure of recording and listening to separate life stories and ends with the narrator's continuing difficulty in liking her mother. The visual arrangement makes parallel testimony imaginable; its emotional outcome remains stated in the text, not legible from screen symmetry.

C3, C4, and N1 offer contrasting accounts of preference, continuity, and unresolved intergenerational relations. C3 makes a mother's preference about paid work significant

against an expectation of accommodation; C4 makes a grandmother newly visible without presenting personal transformation as the purpose of the project; N1 makes a mother's constraints intelligible without turning understanding into obligatory reconciliation. The contrast prevents a single narrative of progress from governing intergenerational experience. It also shows that feminist meaning can arise from a dispute over a gendered expectation without requiring a photographed relative to adopt the narrator's position.

4.4. The Visibility of Everyday Care and Women's Value

N3 centres a grandmother's sewing through a written address, photographs, and collage. Images of fabric, hands, scissors, a sewing machine, and domestic space give her skill a material presence. The caption then questions the grounds on which that work is valued: family approval and household harmony appear as standards through which the grandmother demonstrates her worth. Against these standards, the narrator insists, 'But you already exist', treating her existence as valuable before its usefulness to others is assessed. This supplies a specific feminist question about recognition, rather than a generic celebration of an admirable woman.

N3 also records the grandmother's own valuation of sewing. The narrator reports that she willingly regards the work as her responsibility and writes, 'I cannot call this your prison'. The narrator then reflects on how seldom they had imagined her beyond the sewing machine and invites her towards another world. The work examines two standards at once: a family may measure her value by domestic contribution, while a younger relative may measure freedom by departure from that work. The grandmother's reported preference gives this critique its relational complexity.

The fourteen files make sewing visible at several scales. Close frames isolate hands, cloth, scissors, and the machine; wider views show stacked fabric in an open wardrobe and a figure working in a narrow interior. Cut and torn photographic edges, blue drawn lines, gaps on the page, and repeated red text interrupt any simple presentation of uninterrupted domestic labour. In one textual image, the narrator acknowledges having rarely imagined the grandmother beyond her machine. The composition thus shows the material skill while making the younger person's limited way of seeing part of the work itself. The accompanying address values that skill and asks why family approval or usefulness should determine the maker's worth; the room and its barred window cannot alone answer whether she experiences the work as confinement.

N5 offers another form of grandmother portrait. On a spring outing, the grandmother attends to crops, frost, and fruit thinning, while the younger relative notices photographic possibilities. The caption records the grandmother's responses to locations and poses, including amusement at unusual staging. Her attributed remarks bring her interests and judgements into the account alongside her portraits.

The eleven files place the grandmother among flowers, leaves, and spring light while introducing small visual experiments. A decorated apple fills the foreground in one frame; elsewhere she holds a transparent bottle before her eyes, appears behind bubbles, or puts a hand against a blue enclosure. Close views alternate between her face, hands, plants, and a more distant standing figure. These changing arrangements make her visible as a participant in play, not only as a worker in a field. The caption, however, supplies a second way of attending to the same landscape: she discusses buds, frost, and fruit thinning while the narrator searches for photographs. Its closing praise of her long care for household and land remains beside the playful images. What the photographs expand visually and what the words continue to value need to be read together.

4.5. Picturing Bodily History and Unrealised Opportunity

N4 concerns a maternal grandmother whose feet were bound. The narrator remembers growing up among women with similar feet, later noticing their diminishing presence and asking why this bodily form had once been admired. The grandmother reportedly described loosening her bindings as a child and called the act 'laziness'. This detail gives the elder a specific action and her own vocabulary, bringing a present reconsideration of bodily norms into contact with remembered experience.

The five photographs keep the embroidered, pointed shoes within ordinary movement and domestic settings. Downward views show the shoes and trouser legs on dirt and paved ground; another frame places them near a heater, while an indoor scene includes a person reaching towards a vessel. In the final outdoor image, the body is partly cropped and the shoes remain prominent beneath a textual identification of the grandmother. This repeated framing makes a historically valued bodily form visible through footwear and everyday surroundings, without exposing bare feet or documenting the binding process. The caption adds the grandmother's reported loosening of her bindings and the later need for handmade shoes. It also asks whether she suffered. The image makes that question concrete but cannot answer it through a smile, stance, or shoe shape.

N6 responds to a mother's missed opportunities through staged portraits. Across thirteen files, a figure in a light top and long skirt appears on green paths, near pavilion railings, and beside a stream. One frame sets an open book against leaves in the foreground; another joins several path and portrait views in a single layout. The recurring book and unhurried outdoor poses provide a visual vocabulary for the after-school reading and wandering the narrator wishes her mother had been able to enjoy. The caption contrasts these scenes with the mother's reported rural adolescence, agricultural work, and little leisure. A separate photographer is credited, and the pictured person's identity is not established by appearance. The photographs give an unrealised possibility a present form rather than showing a surviving image of the mother's past.

This counterfactual separates an interest from the opportunities needed to pursue it. The caption attributes the mother's limited time for reading and leisure to poverty and agricultural labour, while also recounting her later development of a personally meaningful business. The constructed portraits make the unrealised interest visible and value her later ambition alongside her earlier responsibilities. Historical research on rural women's schooling provides context for uneven opportunities, while the cause in this family remains the one narrated in the post (Hershatter 2007; Hannum and Adams 2007, pp. 94–95).

N4 and N6 connect the visibility of older women to histories that a portrait alone cannot show. N4's shoes bring an earlier bodily ideal into view, while N6's constructed images present the opportunities a mother might have had rather than documenting what she did. In each case the caption supplies the historical question and the image gives it a concrete form. The posts thereby connect present feminist concerns to remembered or imagined generational experience, but they do not establish the elder's own retrospective judgement or repair an earlier loss.

5. Discussion

5.1. Forms of Intergenerational Visibility

In the analysed posts, older women occupy the centre of photographic narratives through advice, bodily histories, craft, pleasure, conflict, and unrealised aspirations. Portraits, old photographs, details of work, and constructed scenes offer different ways of seeing these experiences. Together they widen the kinds of female life represented within this bounded material, in conversation with scholarship on age and gender in visual culture (Woodward 2006; Rose 2010).

Visibility is relational. C1's staged group portrait associates three generations; C3 places a feminist book in the grandmother's hands while narrating the mother's working-life choice; N6 imagines an earlier possibility from the standpoint of a younger relative. In these accounts, a descendant's present concerns help select and organise what an elder's experience comes to mean. This does not make the experience merely an invention: the posts draw on remembered speech, records, and reported material conditions. It does mean that the public feminist narrative is a contemporary relation between generations, not direct access to an elder's unmediated voice. This extends work on intergenerational memory and situated experience (Hirsch 2008; Haraway 1988; Scott 1991).

The article understands feminist inheritance as an intergenerational interpretive practice. Elders' advice, constrained opportunities, and everyday preferences inform the ways descendants interpret family experience in the present. The different historical positions of the generations give this connection both continuity and an ongoing need for reinterpretation.

5.2. When Visible Experience Becomes a Feminist Narrative

The nine cases show several relations between visual representation and critique of older women's living conditions. C1 credits elders as sources of knowledge; N2 questions son preference through an archive; C3 foregrounds a mother's wish to continue paid work; N3 asks why domestic usefulness becomes a condition of women's worth; N4 revisits an earlier bodily ideal; and N6 links unrealised interests to restricted opportunity. C4 and N5 develop affectionate portraits whose gender critique is less explicit. These differences show how a public image can commemorate a woman, convey her experience, and, in some cases, question the standards by which that experience has been valued.

Affection, commemoration, and playful portraits give older women new visual positions. Works that further connect personal experience with son preference, restricted education, bodily norms, or obligations of care offer more explicit feminist critique. The article grounds each analytical claim in the relation expressed by the post. Whether circulation changes the distribution of household work, resources, or decision-making is a question for future research.

The findings also unsettle a simple story in which younger women liberate older ones. Older relatives can be credited as teachers; younger relatives may offer new interpretive or visual possibilities; both may remain in disagreement. Historically uneven access to schooling, employment, and time makes the possibilities for choice unequal (Hershatter 2011; Hannum and Adams 2007; Kandiyoti 1988). Attending to these conditions prevents the celebration of 'choice' from obscuring why opportunities differed, while avoiding the opposite error of making every familiar domestic practice a sign of false consciousness.

The comparisons also show that making an experience visible and deciding what gives it value are distinct operations. Advice becomes knowledge when a younger narrator credits an elder as a teacher; sewing becomes admirable as skill, yet its praise may still depend on service to the family; a woman's wish to continue work matters even without a narrative of personal transformation. Constructed photographs can make foreclosed opportunities imaginable, whereas a familiar routine can remain worth depicting on its own terms. The feminist contribution lies in asking whether recognition depends on beauty, sacrifice, usefulness, achievement, or change, and in showing how particular posts affirm or question those criteria. The cases do not yield a single preferred image of an empowered older woman. They reveal several competing standards by which intergenerational experience becomes publicly meaningful.

5.3. Photography, Circulation, and the Limits of the Claim

Photography participates in intergenerational storytelling through several concrete operations. Group portraits place generations together in the present; old prints and negatives make an inherited archive material; details of hands, shoes, and labour render everyday skill and bodily history visible; constructed photographs make unrealised possibilities imaginable. Archival images, new portraits, and counterfactual scenes establish different temporal relations. These visual operations provide material details, juxtapositions, and temporal relations through which captioned experiences can be interpreted and shared (Hirsch 2008; Klein 2023; White 2026).

Frames and captions foreground selected aspects of elders' lives. Across the cases, captions and images present care and strength alongside ambivalence, continuing hardship, and unresolved relations. N3 and N5 both attend closely to grandmothers' activities: N3 questions domestic contribution as a measure of worth, while N5 praises labour sustaining everyday family life. The contrast identifies two different public valuations of care without assuming how audiences received either post.

These works also raise a further question: who ultimately decides how an older woman is represented? C3 reports creative tasks shared across three generations, C4 describes a grandmother portrait project as jointly made, and N1 presents reciprocal listening between mother and daughter. Such accounts make older women's participation visible while suggesting that taking photographs, choosing images, writing captions, and publishing may involve different decisions. This article analyses the images and narratives made public. How photographed relatives take part in these choices and understand the published images requires their own accounts. Keeping that question open allows an appreciation of visibility alongside continued inquiry into intergenerational relations of creative control.

The two rounds returned different posts under the same keywords. The October round documented a wider set of family-image materials through a different recording depth and screening procedure, as well as a different account and collection date. The contrast shows why these conditions need to be reported when interpreting the retrieved posts. The collected images and captions make older women's experience available for public viewing and sharing. Some also name gendered arrangements that shape that experience. This cultural form matters even where audience effects and political consequences have not been measured (Tan 2026; Liao 2025; Gu et al. 2024).

6. Conclusions

In answer to the first question, the posts make older women more richly visible through collective portraits, reuse of family archives, records of daily work, bodily detail, and imagined alternative lives. Their advice, care, skills, disagreements, hardship, pleasure, and unrealised aspirations become resources through which younger relatives understand family experience. The visual forms respectively foreground present relations, surviving histories, and younger narrators' reimaginings of the past.

In answer to the second question, intergenerational experience enters a feminist narrative when it is connected with specific gendered expectations. The cases address son preference, restrictions on education and work, standards of bodily beauty, and the assumption that care determines women's worth. Affectionate commemoration and new portrait forms also broaden the images of older women available to a public audience. The article presents these related practices and analyses how photography brings experiences across generations into present feminist discussion. How photographed relatives participate in choosing and publishing images, how they and viewers interpret the results, and what circulation changes in practice remain questions for future research.

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Appendix A. Retrieval and Evidence Accounting

Appendix A.1. Fixed Queries

For the October retrieval, the author recorded up to the first thirty cards shown under comprehensive sorting for each of sixteen fixed combinations. Each thematic term below was paired with 女性摄影. One query returned no cards. The full combinations and original ranks are held in the research log.

Table A1. Recorded query outcomes.

Thematic Term	English Gloss	Hits
原生家庭	Family of origin	30
农村女性	Rural women	30
重男轻女	Son preference	30
家庭纪实	Family documentary	0
奶奶	Grandmother	30
妈妈	Mother	30
东亚家庭	East Asian family	30
中式教育	Chinese-style education	30
裹小脚	Footbinding	30
女性主义	Feminism	30
校园霸凌	School bullying	30
女性力量	Female strength	30
男性凝视	Male gaze	30
中式恐怖	Chinese-style horror	30
自我接纳	Self-acceptance	30
外貌焦虑	Appearance anxiety	30
Total before deduplication		450

Appendix A.2. Relevant Alternatives and Selection Decisions

The two rounds yielded thirty-five distinct developed candidates: twelve in the 161-post first-round archive and twenty-five date-eligible accounts in October, with two overlapping post IDs. Nine cases were chosen for intensive image–caption analysis. The other twenty-six remain in the comparison ledger, and the groups below describe their primary analytical role. The rounds are reported separately because they followed different acquisition procedures.

The earlier education case remains a historical comparison, including its three retained images of the younger relative's graduation and later work. A constructed photographic response to a mother's missed educational opportunities offers a more direct visual compar-

ison for the present question. Two earlier accounts about an elder's appearance preferences and a mother's retirement remain textual comparisons because corresponding images have not been verified. Their relevance is retained without making visual claims from unavailable files.

The remaining twenty-six candidates have three primary analytical roles, summarised below. Each remains in the comparison ledger, and the counter-comparisons inform Section 4.1.

Table A2. Analytical roles of the other developed candidates.

Other Developed Candidates	Posts	Analytical Role
Visual-source boundary	8	Distinguishes own-kin images, third-party art, and unverified family visuals.
Related shorter accounts	10	Situates portraiture, memory, care, and appearance in the wider set.
Counter-comparisons	8	Tests elders' initiative, affection with bias, and control over images.
Total	26	Retained in the comparison ledger; examples appear in Section 4.1.

Appendix A.3. Evidence Trail and Version Boundaries

The research ledger links case codes to post IDs, collection round, displayed dates, temporal decisions, original Chinese passages, translated excerpts, and ninety-two examined visual files or layouts across the nine intensive cases. Duplicate search hits and original ranks are retained for the October round. Public profile information is used as contextual evidence when stated by the account itself. Narrative claims and observations of each retained image are recorded separately. The article analyses the inspected visual material; where the extent of an earlier carousel cannot be established, its descriptions concern only the retained images. N1's visual account concerns the documented still arrangements of its installation, without claims about unobserved moving-image sequences.

The article does not reproduce the original images of the intensive cases. Some depict relatives who did not themselves publish the post; settings, clothing, text within an image, and composition could also enable reverse-image searches to identify the original post and account. To reduce that risk, the main text describes arrangements of people, objects, settings, and image sequences under case codes and explains how they work with the captions. Original images and matching records are held in a non-public research archive.

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