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The Narrative of Gendered Self-
Development in Chinese-Style Divorce

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‘Love Is A Capacity’:

The Narrative of Gendered Self-Development in *Chinese-Style Divorce*¹

Introduction

In recent years a series of scholarly works have analyzed the economic, political and cultural changes that neoliberalism has engendered in various aspects of post-Mao Chinese society (Harrison 2006, Harvey 2005, Rofel 2007, Wang and Hutters 2003).²

¹ Thanks to Gary Xu, Rania Huntington, Robin Visser, Nancy Abelmann, Yan Hairong, Mathew Hale, Rebecca Nickerson, Dan Shao and anonymous reviewers for offering insightful comments and suggestions.

² The question whether China is fully neoliberalized still arouses many scholarly debates and discussions. On this issue, we can refer to Graham Harrison, ‘Serving the Market or Serving the Party: Neo-liberalism in China’, in Richard Robison, ed, *The Neo-liberal Revolution: Forging the Market State* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Wang Hui and Theodore Hutters, *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Personally I concur with David Harvey’s argument about contemporary China’s ‘neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics’. That means, though China remains a socialist country in name with its one-party bureaucratic system largely intact, China has been radically neoliberalising in terms of its accelerating

However, they have overlooked how China's paradigmatic shift has produced remarkable changes in family structure, marriage pattern and the re-configuration of the domestic space. This article is intended to fill this gap through examining the cultural representation of reshaping family values, intimate relationships and gender dynamics parallel to shifting state agenda, dismantling welfare system and hierarchical division of labor. Specifically, I will investigate the ways in which *Chinese-Style Divorce* (*Zhongguo shi lihun*, 2004), a mega-hit television serial, is conditioned by the converging forces of the party-state ideology and the neoliberal market economy. In general, this study aims to problematize such binary structures as public vs. private and masculine vs. feminine, and to expand the critical scope of feminist theories in contemporary China and beyond.

Chinese-Style Divorce reflects the current social trend of skyrocketing divorce rate. Partly due to the modification of the marriage registration regulations stating that divorcees no longer need permission from their *danwei* (work unit), in 2004 a sudden spike in the divorce rate caught people's attention in China. Over 1.61 million Chinese couples went through the divorce procedure, a 21.2 percent increase from the previous year's divorce rate, earning 2004 the title 'the year of divorce' (*lihun nian*).³ Following on this trend, media reports labeled 2005 'the year of abandoned women' (*yuanfu nian*)

marketization and privatization of state-owned enterprises and other public properties as well as the dismantling welfare system. Furthermore, I would also like to add that the state-sanctioned and market-informed neoliberal competition and self-governing rhetoric has gained its popular currency in contemporary Chinese society as the regime of the party-state has become more sophisticated and 'modernized' than ever.

³ Wang Ying and Di Fang, 'Divorce Rate Rises', *China Daily*, March 2, 2005.

when the divorce rate kept rising.⁴ From 1985 to 2005, the divorce rate more than tripled. In big cities such as Shanghai, the rate was seven or eight times that of 1980.⁵ Hence, divorce has become the focus of national attention and people's everyday talk. There is an unprecedented huge increase in the production of popular narratives of divorce. Most of these popular representations tend to reduce the complexity of the social issue of divorce as a result of political, economic and legislative changes to a personalized victim narrative of 'abandoned woman.' This simplified narrative often neglects the fact that in real life a group of well-educated and highly-paid elite women do not dread to initiate divorce thanks to their financial independence and changing social mores. Moreover, their upward mobility often puts their husbands under great pressure and threatens the men's masculinity.⁶ Standing at a lower rung of social ladder, low-income and laid-off female workers tend to feel more fragile in their divorce procedures.

Among a recent deluge of narratives about divorce, the most popular have been a best-selling novel entitled *Chinese-Style Divorce* by Wang Hailing and the television serial adapted from it that combines conventional victim narrative and neoliberal rhetoric of self-development.⁷ This show shares a similar structure with many other recent family

⁴ Xinhua, 'More Couples Get Divorce', *China Daily*, May 19, 2006.

⁵ Maureen Fan, 'Chinese Slough Off Old Barriers to Divorce', *Washington Post*, April 7, 2007, A01.

⁶ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

⁷ Wang Hailing, *Chinese-Style Divorce (Zhongguoshi lihun)* (Beijing: Beijing Press, 2004). It was first published in *Dangdai*, 2004: 4. pp. 104-202, 226.

melodramas: the wife is confronted with a mid-life crisis and tries desperately to save her marriage, when her husband joins the rising group of the nouveaux riches in contemporary China and alienates himself from her. Going through a series of pedagogical lessons in her ‘gendered quality education’ (*xingbie jiaoyu* in Wang Hailing’s original words), the female lead learns from both younger-generation cosmopolitan women and a perfect maternal figure of ‘good wife, wise mother’ (*xianqi liangmu*).

What distinguishes this formulaic serial is the emphasis on the female protagonist’s lack of *suzhi* (quality), *nengli* (capacity), and *ziwo* (self), which is deemed to be the root cause of her marital failure. This explicit self-development rhetoric resonates with the sweeping popularity of various How-To marriage guidebooks such as *Wife’s Art of War* (*Qizi bingfa*), *How to Make a Man to Love You for a Lifetime* (*Ruhe rang nanren ai ni yisheng*), and the Chinese translation of *Divorce is Not the Answer: A Change of Heart Will Save Your Marriage* (*Lihun wuji yushi: ruhe tiaozheng yu wanjiu hunyin*).

As the new marriage law is often hailed as an indication of the withdrawal of the state from the private sphere, the enthusiastic reception of the above-mentioned self-help cultural products invites the compelling question: How a state-sanctioned and market-informed self-governing rhetoric composed of ideologically tinged terms like *ziwo*, *suzhi*, and *nengli* regulate the representation of gendered subject and domestic space in a neoliberalizing China? In this article I intend to address this central question through a close reading of *Chinese-Style Divorce* in a larger context of sociopolitical conditions and cultural trends, particularly a transnational middle-class culture and the ongoing state-

sponsored ‘harmonious society’ campaign. In addition to prevailing social practices of home decoration and household management, I argue, representations of divorce play a key role in articulating a discourse of domestic and psychic interiority that tend to naturalize the privacy of family life and dismiss its economic and political underpinnings.⁸

⁸ The use of the term ‘middle class’ in contemporary Chinese society has been much contested. Even the translation of the term has not been fixed yet. Instead of ‘*zhongchan jieji*’, a politicized social segment that seems to suggest an explicit connection with the Maoist ideology of class struggle (*jieji douzheng*), middle class has often been translated into ‘*zhongchan jieceng*’ or ‘*zhongjian jieceng*’ to refer to the social group of well-educated affluent urbanites sharing a certain capacity and taste in commodity consumption. A number of prominent sociologists such as Zhou Xiaohong and Lu Xueyi have investigated the demographic constitution of the Chinese middle class. Some have intended to define the great contribution that a stable and affluent middle-class makes to the building of a ‘harmonious society’. See Zhou Xiaohong, *Survey of the Chinese Middle Classes (Zhongguo zhongchan jieceng diaocha)* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2005). Lu Xueyi, *A Research Report of Contemporary Chinese Social Strata (Dangdai zhongguo shehui jieceng yanjiu baogao)* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2002). Zhu Yaoqun. *Middle Class and Harmonious Society (Zhongchan jieceng yu hexie shehui)* (Beijing: Public Security University Press, 2005). Rather than establishing the clear-cut boundaries of Chinese middle class through the use of standardized survey questionnaires or statistical numbers, in this article I am more inclined to examine the imagination, identification and circulation of a middle-class

A Middle-Aged Woman in Transit

First aired during the evening prime time in 2004, the 23-part serial drama *Chinese-Style Divorce* immediately became the mega-hit of the year. According to data from Nielsen Media Research, the average viewer ratings were 10.2 percent in Beijing, 15 percent in Chengdu and 20 percent in Chongqing.⁹ At the end of the year, it received multiple awards of ‘TV Drama of the Year’, ‘Best Female Lead’, ‘Best Male Lead’, and ‘Best Supporting Actress’.¹⁰ Together with ‘harmonious society’ (*hexie shehui*) and other phrases, ‘Chinese-style divorce’ topped an official list of ‘the hottest Chinese keywords’ (*Zhongguo reci*) in 2004.¹¹ Since 2004, the television drama has played in reruns on

domestic culture in televisual representations. As Charles Seller has aptly put it, ‘The so-called middle class was constituted not by modes and relations of production but by ideology’. *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 237.

⁹ *Shanghai Wednesday* (*Shanghai xingqisan*), ‘Chinese-Style Divorce Has Kindled an Explosion of Marriage Dramas on the Mainland TV Screen’ (*Zhongguoshi lihun zai neidi yingpin xinqi yizhen hunyinju rechao*), November 10, 2004.

¹⁰ *China Daily*, ‘TV Dramas Lure Audience with Changing Content’, January 17, 2005.

¹¹ Xinhuanet, ‘Clicking 2004 Chinese “Hot Words” Reflecting Political and Social Transformations of China’ (*Dianji 2004 Zhongguo ‘reci’ zheshe Zhongguo zhengzhi, shehui bianqian*), http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2004-12/28/content_2388092.htm (accessed April 20, 2009).

Central China Television (CCTV) and local television stations. It is reported that many college students viewed this TV show as a textbook on married life in urban settings.¹²

Since the airing of *Chinese-Style Divorce* in 2004, Lin Xiaofeng, the middle-aged female lead, has been widely recognized as representative of the ‘old-fashioned’ wife in need of reform. Compared to Song Jianping, her husband who is a well-educated urban professional, Lin is a middle-aged woman with no special professional training in the growing middle-class occupations (e. g. lawyers, doctors). She belongs to the vulnerable low-income group who cannot take the advantage of the freedom of job-hopping for a better salary but often face the risk of being laid off. Horrified by her marginal position in the market economy of contemporary Chinese society, Lin particularly needs to protect herself with what the marital relationship could provide. Therefore, audiences are brought to witness a fairly dramatic scene at the beginning of the serial: In the hospital cafeteria, Lin runs into the retired head of the state-owned hospital in which her husband works. Insulted by the cafeteria cashier for his persistent bargain over food price, the senior cadre has a sudden heart attack and passes away.

Lin is dumbfounded by what has aspired before her eyes. She is nailed to the ground, staring blankly at the motionless body in front of her. Her mouth is agape, pallid lips twitching in sadness and shock. At a loss what to do, Lin blindly follows the crowd to the gate of the cafeteria, seeing the ambulance carrying away the body. Accompanied by the rhythmic percussion notes of bass drums, the swift cutting of shaky camera shots

¹² Qiu Lihua, ‘*Chinese-Style Divorce* Remains “Hot” Audiences Take It as a Textbook’ (Zhongguoshi lihun Shanghai ‘gaoshao’ butui guanzhong dangcheng jiaokeshu), *Shanghai Morning Post (Xinwen chenbao)*, November 24, 2004.

enhances the sense of panic and commotion in this scene, which forms a sharp contrast with Lin's solitary and stiff body that displays a helpless and fragile figure in a time of unexpected changes and crisis. The emotional intensity of this highly allegorical event is particularly compelling to Chinese audiences who have witnessed the collapse of the old system on the screen and experienced it in their real life.¹³

Lin rushes back home, breaking the news to her husband, which triggers a face-to-face confrontation of the couple. Wearing an oversized apron, Lin impatiently does the dishes in the small kitchen while shouting indignantly at Song: 'We cannot afford a decent life with your meager wage-- two or three thousand *yuan* a month! You don't even have a tiny bit of courage to try competition out there!' In the following weeks, Lin continues to persuade Song not to repeat the former head's fatal mistake to stay underpaid for a whole life in the state-owned hospital. She even refuses to make love to Song as a way of punishing him for his failure to realize his self-value and entrepreneurial masculinity in the market economy. Finally, Song follows her advice to take advantage of the expanding privatization of the medical and health care system. He resigns his job in the state-owned hospital and goes to work in the Pacific International

¹³ For a recent report of the privatization trend and China's current health care crisis, see BBC News Channel, 'China's Punctured Health Care System',

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/7477184.stm

(accessed April 28, 2009).

Hospital (*Taipingyang guoji yiyuan*), an American-invested private hospital, in which his salary gets a generous raise.

A New Type of *Danwei*

However, when Song Jianping accumulates economic capital and upward mobility as a well-paid surgeon and later a vice president of the Pacific International Hospital, Lin has developed a stronger sense of insecurity triggered by her aging body and the prevailing practice of ‘*bao ernai*’ (adopting concubine) among the Chinese male new rich. As a post-reproductive middle-aged woman, she no longer seems to be an appropriate match for her newly rich husband. This incompatibility between gender-divided capitals could be read as an overt reference to the re-positioning of different social strata in contemporary Chinese social transformation. While the economic power and social capitals between husband and wife are being redistributed in the domestic space, divorce means very different things for him and for her. Due to this power imbalance, Lin loses self-confidence and feels neglected. Signs of her husband’s intimacy with other women easily irritate her. Unable to stand Lin’s bad temper, Song initiates a divorce, which is refused by Lin. Hence, constant domestic conflicts, cold wars, verbal abuse and physical violence dominate the serial drama of divorce.

In *Chinese-Style Divorce*, Lin often acts like an old-fashioned ‘abandoned woman’ by resorting to collectivist countermeasures and public opinions to deal with her domestic issues. For example, she chooses to go public with her personal grievances by turning to her husband’s workplace for help. However, she is turned down by the head of the hospital, who comes from America, and becomes the man’s laughingstock for her mixing the realms of the public and

the private (*bufen gongsi*). The man and woman's conflicting views of the domestic problem climax in a scene of Lin and Song's violent confrontation. After a war of words in the previous night, Lin intrudes Song's office without notice. When Song sees her, he says coldly to his colleagues: 'Please expel this person. She interferes with my work.' Bathed in bright lighting, Song and his fellow doctors in white overalls exhibit the professional authority and rational order of the public space aligned with the 'universal' modern science and healthcare system.

However, Lin refuses to retreat from the place where she does not belong nor has any power. Rather, in an 'old-fashioned' manner of appealing to collective moral support, she insists on publicizing their conjugal problem in front of Song's colleagues. Song heaves a heavy sigh, turning around to exit the room. All of a sudden, a deafening sound of glass cracking draws him back to his office where Lin breaks the window and threatens to jump out of it. With her back towards the people on the spot and audiences in front of the television screen, Lin in a bulky black overcoat appears to be a faceless monstrous force that not only causes her man to lose his masculine authority in public but also threatens to transgress the public/private boundaries. Looking up at Lin's dark figure in backlighting, Song slowly kneels down.¹⁴ Following his point of view, the low-angle camera stretches Lin's towering body. A two-minute close-up of his distorted face twitching in pain and bowing head in silent endurance displays this male figure in a more sympathetic light. The contrasting spatial

¹⁴ On an anecdotal note, one male viewer of the serial half-jokingly told me that Lin's image in this scene had reminded him of the grudgeful ghost of 'abandoned woman' in Japanese horror films.

positioning of the male and female bodies disrupts the normative order of the public space in which the male professional exercises his power and authority.

According to Neil J. Diamant, this type of ‘old-fashioned’ and vociferous behavior of ‘airing dirty laundry’, or publicizing one’s domestic problems, was once employed by Chinese rural women as effective political strategies in their collective struggle for gender equality and marriage reform.¹⁵ Based on a solid political sisterhood, various kinds of mass mobilization were made. This not only gave Chinese women a vehicle to mobilize mass support but also give voice to their emotions, identities and political agency in the 1950s’ campaign of ‘revolutionizing the family’. However, in the urban centers of contemporary Chinese society, without the recourse of a legitimate language or social mobilization to bring family issues into public spheres, the same gender strategies have lost their political significance and thus have normally been viewed as a middle-aged woman’s typical psychotic symptoms.

Instead of tackling this gender-related and age-related social problem, the author Wang Hailing, as a middle-aged divorced woman herself, used words such as low-quality (*suzhi di*), irrationality and menopause symptoms to analyze why Lin fails to keep up with the rising living standards and emotional demand of China’s urban middle-class lifestyle, and proposed the solution of women’s self-development (*zishen jianshe*).¹⁶

¹⁵ Neil J. Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949-1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁶ In several places of the novel and the serial drama *Chinese-Style Divorce*, the female protagonist’s ‘low quality’ (*suzhi di*) is criticized. In an interview, Wang Hailing states that a married woman should make enormous investment in self-development to prevent marital crisis in a popular talk show targeted at female audiences. See ‘Yang Lan inquires

Hence, this ‘Chinese-style’ divorce is often characterized as a typical case of Chinese ‘middle-class divorce’, which reflects the rampant marital crisis in contemporary China.¹⁷ Many critics regard ‘lack of self’ (*quefa ziwo*) as the root cause of Lin’s personal problem.¹⁸

Viewers of the divorce melodrama also express similar views on numerous online forums of entertainment websites. For examples, Sina.com, one of the largest Chinese commercial portals, provides a special section for viewers to discuss about *Chinese-Style Divorce*. In total, the web page lists out 742 audiences’ comments. Many commentators regarded the television drama a faithful rendition of rampant domestic problem and criticized that Lin is a crazy ‘old hag’ (*huanglianpo*) who cannot find her own self. Though some female viewers showed sympathy and understanding to Lin, they also suggested Lin to hire a *baomu* (a domestic wage laborer, normally a laid-off female worker or a young woman from rural areas) for household chores. Thus, she could have spent more time on learning marriage management skills and making herself look younger and more attractive. Commenting on the sexual dynamics represented in this

about *Chinese-Style Divorce*, Jiang Wenli is invited to the talk show “Women under the Heaven” ’ (Yang Lan fawen *Zhongguoshi lihun*, Jiang Wenli zuoke ‘Tianxia Nüren’), <http://ent.qq.com/a/20050524/000152.htm> (accessed January 3, 2009).

¹⁷ *China Daily*, January 17, 2005.

¹⁸ Tang Ling and Hu Yusun, ‘Lost Self and Spiritual Besiegement—An Analysis of the Woman’s Tragedy in *Chinese-Style Divorce*’ (*Ziwo sangshi he jingshen weihun—Zhongguoshi Lihun de nüxing beiju tanyin*), *Contemporary Television (Dangdai dianshi)* 201 (2005), pp. 37-38.

show, Liu Siqian, a Chinese feminist critic, has criticized an implicit patriarchal double standard in the serial. However, Liu has also emphasized that the biggest mistake made by Lin is her overlook of the ‘material foundation’ (*wuzhi jichu*) of the marriage, i. e. the man’s desire for the woman’s body.¹⁹

Obviously, the ability of caring and improving one’s gendered qualities and individualized self has become an essential precondition for a woman’s success in the liberal modern society. Thus, divorce is narrated as a central mechanism that does not simply break up a romantic relationship but propels women to engage in a self-development campaign. Lin’s precarious position as a lacking wife is analogous to middle-aged factory women workers confronted with the threat of massive layoffs in contemporary China. For both groups, the prescribed solution is to make self-improvement and acquire the capacity to realize their self-values through constantly adjusting and transforming themselves to meet the demands of the reconstituted political economy and cultural politics.

Retreat to the Domestic Interior

Nonetheless, as the improvement of female factory workers’ capacity is achieved through their performance in a public sphere, the urgent need for Lin’s self-development is produced by her return to a privatizing domestic sphere. In the first few episodes of *Chinese-Style Divorce*, Lin works as a Chinese language teacher in a public elementary school. She often complains to her colleagues that such teachers are extremely underpaid

¹⁹ Liu Siqian, ‘The Tale of Marriage’ (*Hunyin wuyu*), *Feminism in China (Zhongguo nuxingzhuyi)* 4 (summer 2005), p. 177.

and worthless (*yiwu suoyou* in her own words) in the sweeping market economy. Yet, despite all her laments, she is still enthusiastic and conscientious, obtaining a strong sense of fulfillment from her professional accomplishments and interactions with her students.

Following an establishing shot that shows Song reading patients' medical records and walking in the hallway of a busy hospital, the subsequent long take parallels a similar visual image: Lin is walking slowly from the back of a well-lighted and quiet classroom towards the front. Holding a Chinese textbook, she reads aloud a poetic passage along with a group of young students:

Little grasses are green,
And wheat seedlings are green.
I live in the countryside,
So my dream is green too.

Then she pauses, smiling at her students. The golden rays of the sun shining through clean windowpanes lights up her face.

However, the serene pastoral aura fades out soon in the face of the harsh reality. The seemingly perfect balance of the leading man's and woman's professional labor is disrupted by a hierarchical sexual division of labor. When Lin is about to take the school's comprehensive exams, her son falls ill. As her husband is occupied with his professional obligations, Lin single-handedly takes care of the sick child while cramming a huge pile of textbooks to fulfill her own career ambitions. Finally, the ailing son recovers with her nursing care, but Lin herself passes out in the middle of the exam.

Lin's struggle with her double burden reminds us of a similar scene in Chen Rong's influential story *At Middle Age* (*Rendao zhongnian*, 1980).²⁰ Lu Wenting, the female protagonist, is also crushed by the mounting stress of playing the dual roles of a remarkable doctor, on the one hand, and a not-so-successful 'good wife and wise mother', on the other hand. However, Lu's tragedy was not so much read as a gender issue as a post-Cultural Revolution social problem of 'intellectuals' burden'.²¹ As Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter have noted, 'Despite the explicit description of housework in the story, women's double burden of work and housework was never an issue in the public discussion.'²² The term *suzhi* could also be found in Shen's story in which it was used to describe the deteriorating physical conditions of Lu's de-sexualized laboring body.

Nearly two decades later, the educated urbanites, especially male entrepreneurs, have become the privileged class in the booming neoliberal economy of contemporary China. When another middle-aged woman struggles with her double burden, what is at stake now is not a social problem anymore but a personal choice to be made by an essentially gendered being. In order to ensure her son's 'quality education' (*suzhi jiaoyu*), Lin voluntarily resigns from her job and becomes a full-time housewife. This decision precisely reflects the

²⁰ Chen Rong, 'At Middle Age' (*Rendao zhongnian*), *Chinese Literature* (October 1980), pp. 3-63.

²¹ Yan Hairong, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 58.

²² Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980's* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 258.

reconfigured family structure in contemporary China. On the one hand, the modernized new types of *danwei* like Song's American-invested hospital does not intervene into employees' domestic affairs and set a clear-cut line between the boundaries of the private and the public. On the other hand, transformed from an extension of the socialist *danwei* system into a privatized space, the nuclear family in contemporary Chinese society is now responsible for vast financial investments in health care, housing, and children's education.

As the market-oriented economy drives contemporary China towards greater self-reliance and individual development, children's 'quality education' has become the priority in the domestic economy of urban middle-class families. In her insightful analysis of 'quality education', Ann Anagnost argues that *suzhi* 'defines the middle-class family as a theater of neoliberal subject project production'.²³ However, the highly gendered division of labor within the domestic sphere has not been discussed much. In *Chinese-Style Divorce*, the wife alone is shouldering the reproductive duties as a self-sacrificing mother. Her return to the domestic site severs her close ties to the public life as a social subject and transforms her identity from *Lin Laoshi* (Teacher Lin) to *Song Taitai* (Madam Song).

Lack of Consum(er)ability

Busily engaging in domestic chores, Lin seems to acquire more pleasure from her reproductive role in nurturing a high-quality child than from the middle-class privileges of consumption. However, her 'virtuous transaction' in the domestic space does not earn her

²³ Ann Anagnost, 'The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*suzhi*)', *Public Culture*, (spring, 2004), p. 190.

social recognition or affective attention from her husband.²⁴ Totally out of sync with the fashionable middle-class lifestyle, Lin fails to meet the newer expectations spurred by the development of a consumer-oriented economy. For instance, she cannot understand why Song has to buy two cars for their nuclear family. She is also puzzled by the fact that Juanzi, a younger woman character in her early twenties, flies from Beijing to Shanghai merely for a Broadway musical. She does not know how to use a cell phone, how to send text messages, how to drive, or how to purchase luxurious lingerie to ‘seduce’ her husband. Her home interior also looks plain and distasteful, with no much trendy decoration as we can find in numerous popular house decoration advertisements and magazines.

In short, she is not a desirable middle-class wife because she has no capacity or desire to consume in a classy way to distinguish herself as a high-quality middle-class wife from a *baomu*. The wide range of available commodities and services advertised on mass media and targeted at young female consumers do not offer Lin much pleasure but trigger her profound anxiety about aging. As class values gauged by one’s capacity to consume commodities appropriately are displaced into gender identities, Lin’s old-fashioned lifestyle is coupled with her undesirability as an object of male sexual consumption. While Lin tries desperately to please her newly rich husband by way of sex, Song makes every possible excuse (even including a fake erectile dysfunction diagnosis) to reject his wife. We may use the term ‘consum(er)ability’ to designate this dual quality that Lin lacks.

To represent this lack of corporeal consum(er)ability extracted and transferred from the consumability of commodities, Jiang Wenli, a prominent Chinese actress in her forties,

²⁴ Rey Chow, ‘Virtuous Transactions: A Reading of Three Stories by Ling Shuhua’,

Modern Chinese Literature Vol. 4 No. 1&2 (1988), pp. 71-86.

volunteers to perform the serial without make-up in order to give the audience an impression of a jealous, hysteric, and fatigued middle-aged housewife with coarse skin, unkempt dry hair and an unshapely figure. Matching this unadorned look and asexual homeliness, her dress is always loose-fitting, monochromatic, and out of fashion. Shot in grayish lighting, Lin's desexualized laboring body is constantly staged within the domestic setting where she is shown busily cooking in the kitchen, cleaning the apartment, and taking care of her husband's and son's daily needs. Additionally, her exaggerated body language, high-pitched complaint, redundant speeches and volatile temper all enhance the conventional cultural stereotype of an abhorrent shrew's (*pofu*) physical repugnance. Set in sharp contrast with her, Xiao Li and Juanzi, two younger women characters in the show, are shot in delicate make-up, chic clothing, bright and soft lighting, and thus display a more desirable feminine model often framed in a sequence of close-ups shot from Song's point of view.

This new femininity imaginary embedded in televisual representations chimes with a new wave of importing curricula for training women to develop wifely quality from the First World into contemporary China. A report entitled 'Producing Perfect Women for Successful Husbands' (*Wei chenggong zhangfu dazao wanmei nüren*) exemplifies the commercial operation of this thriving industry.²⁵ In this article, we are introduced to Nie Yelan who, after getting a Ph.D. degree in Australia, has returned to China where she has witnessed a good number of broken middle-class marriages due to wives' 'low quality'. To remedy this situation, she opened a 'Perfect Woman' club to teach Chinese middle-aged wives how to

²⁵ Tang Xinyong, 'Producing Perfect Women for Successful Husbands' (*Wei chenggong zhangfu dazao wanmei nüren*), *Chinese and Foreign Women's Digest (Zhongwai funü wenzhai)*, (January 2005), pp. 70-71.

cultivate the middle-class wifely quality in order to preserve their marriages. Based in Guangzhou where *Ernai cun* (concubine villages) have mushroomed, this club was selling a week-long package consisting of two parts: ‘Comprehensive Training of Perfect Wifely Quality’ (*Wanmei furen zonghe suzhi xunlian*) and ‘Extravagant Consumption’ (*Zongqing xiaofei*), which included classes about physical fitness, facial care, social manners, dining etiquette, shopping advice, and so on.

Transcoding commodity aesthetics to corporeal consum(er)ability, the wifely quality training curriculum renders the woman’s laboring body invisible while fetishizing and re-sexualizing it on the basis of biological gender differences and a global middle-class cultural norms. Chinese women are thus redefined to join the universal category of *nüxing*, the sexualized individual as ‘*nanxing*’s (man’s) other’, instead of the Maoist *funü*, a politicized national subject.²⁶ On the one hand, the middle-aged full-time housewives such as Lin are demanded to take on household duties and reproductive role and often confronted with the problems of financial dependence and social isolation. On the other hand, the value of their unpaid domestic labor is not recognized. They have often been criticized as old-fashioned women bound by a set of traditional values generated within the confinement of domestic sphere. With no much community support or political resources, they are only left with their individualized bodies as the resource for self-improvement. Therefore, the suggested solution for this gendered dilemma is to rebuild connections with the outside world through the very means of consumption. ‘Consum(er)ability’ thus becomes the tangible index of their interior

²⁶ Tani. E. Barlow, ‘Theorizing Woman: *Funü, Guojia, Jiating* (Chinese Woman, Chinese State, Chinese Family)’, in Angela Zito and Tani Barlow, eds, *Body, Subject and Power in China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 267.

suzhi, which indicates a measurement of gendered capacity in conducting self-disciplining and management of the body and making constant self-improvement and adaptations to the changing feminine standards.

‘Consum(er)ability’: Self-Development Project on Her Body and Soul

However, the gendered self-development does not simply dwell on the corporeal surface of women’s bodies but rather gets further romanticized and sublimated by a revisionist representation of a female Maoist cadre in the TV serial. In his examination of ‘the transnational politics of visibility, sexuality and masculinity’, Sheldon H. Lu argues that the marginalization of the traditional self-sacrificing Chinese woman goes hand in hand with middle-class Chinese men’s empowerment with their economic ascendancy.²⁷ However, this trend in gender representations has been revised in *Chinese-Style Divorce* to cash in on the most recent nationalist sentiments about the revival of Confucian family ethics. In the 2004 serial, apart from the two fashionable younger-generation women immersed in a transnational consumer culture, Lin’s mother plays the role of another model assigning ‘Chinese characteristics’ to the new vision of wifely quality.

Towards the end of *Chinese-Style Divorce*, Lin’s escalating conflicts with her husband make her neglect her household duties and maternal role. At this point, Lin’s mother furiously chastises Lin, slaps her on the face, and has a serious heart attack. After Lin’s mother passes away, Lin’s father reveals to Lin a long hidden secret that he had an extramarital affair and Lin is his illegitimate daughter. Although Lin’s mother knew about all

²⁷ Sheldon H. Lu, *China, Transnational Visibility, Global Postmodernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 213, 233.

this, she still lavished love on her husband and brought up Lin as her own daughter. This most unexpected melodramatic twist turns out to be a vital lesson in Lin's 'gendered quality education'. She spends a sleepless night on a bench by the sea, gazing into the distance while looking pensive and sober. The wide and calm sea enveloped in grayish twilight dominates the two thirds of the frame, which dwarfs Lin into an insignificantly tiny figure. The deliberate visual imbalance externalizes the suppression of Lin's unrestrained rage and the restored authority of the rational order.

The following day Song's hospital holds a farewell party for him (also an American-style Thanksgiving cocktail party) because he decides to work in Tibet for two years in order to obtain a legally valid separation and consequently a divorce. To everyone's surprise, Lin shows up in the well-decorated banquet hall, determined to carry out an extreme self-reform in front of Song and all his colleagues. For the first time in the serial, spectators get to see a feminine and elegant image of the middle-aged *pofu*. Wearing a well-fitting short jacket, a figure-flattering skirt and a pair of stylish boots, she puts on light make-up that evens her skin tone and covers up her freckles and sagging eye sockets. Going with this carefully groomed image of an understanding and attractive well-educated woman (*zhixing nüren*), Lin's body movements also appear more controlled and graceful than usual.

Stepping up the platform, Lin makes a lengthy self-criticism tearfully. In this heart-wrenching public confession, she first tells a well-known story that tends to naturalize the science of romance: On the eve of the wedding ceremony, a young girl asks her mother about how to maintain a happy marriage. So her mother lectures her that love is like a handful of sand. The harder you try to clench your fist, the faster the sand will slip away

between your fingers. Then Lin scolds herself for making such unreasonable effort to keep a firm hand on her marriage that she loses herself, which turns out to destroy their love and marriage. Therefore, the conclusion is, Lin emphasizes, that love is a capacity (*nengli*) to manage one's marriage wisely and artfully so that one is able to get loved.

Accompanying the unfolding of the educational story, a series of camera shots cut back and forth between Lin's preaching figure and the spectators sitting quietly in the banquet, establishing imaginary interactions and connections of the speaker and the listeners. Prolonged close-up shots particularly linger on the faces of a few young women who listen to Lin attentively and are moved to tears by the revelation of Lin's innermost feelings and secrets about marriage. Empowered by these 'transparent' and 'universal' visual images of women's sentimental faces, the intense emotional communication re-enacts the apprentice structure of the sand story, which seems to identify Lin with the mother who teaches a lesson and female audiences her daughter to be enlightened and disciplined. Touched by Lin's public confession and extreme self-reform, Song stops pursuing the divorce litigation. The serial drama ends on a close-up of Song kissing his wife lovingly. Audiences are left wondering if they finally get divorced or not.

Lin's self-blame and-regulation gesture, which softens her husband's heart, turns the divorce melodrama into a highly gendered narrative of self-development in which each woman plays a role of the producer of consumable romantic fantasy within the domestic sphere. This attaches the interpersonal affective value of her consum(er)ability. To realize the exchange value of the romance, the wife is individually responsible for developing her *lovability* measured ultimately by the criteria of consum(er)ability. Through the radical self-improvement and-reform, a new subject of the wife is established through

subjecting herself to the male desire. Thus, the divorce melodrama is transformed into a guidebook on courtship and marriage, which reduces the complexity of marital conflicts and social struggles into a standard model of a depoliticized and free individual's artful management of risks, gains, desires and pleasures derived from one's love life. Paradoxically, this type of self-help romance narratives exhibit the glamour of 'consum(er)able' female figures, publicize personal matters as commodities of consumable privacy while situating gender-related problems back into the private domain.²⁸

Pursuit for Romantic Love

In this narrative of calculating the self-management of one's romantic life, the younger generation displays the cosmopolitan consum(er)able surface of the highly self-disciplined body, while the mother's generation embodies traditional feminine virtues of loyalty and

²⁸ In addition to this new vision of romantic individualism embedded in televisual melodramas, the 'factual oral accounts' (*koushu shilu*) of personal feelings and failed intimacy in conjugal relationships have drawn people's attention and contributed to their changing perception of 'privacy'. Popular publications of this type include An Dun's bestselling series *The Absolute Privacy* (*Juedui yinsi*, 1998), Liu Jian's *Reports of Chinese-Style Divorces* (*Zhongguo shi lihun baogao*, 2005), Wang Ru's *Why Did We Divorce* (*Women weishenme lihun*, 2006). These popular accounts of failed intimacy and disintegrated conjugal family promote the idea of 'privacy' as a selling point to satisfy readers' voyeuristic desire. On a practical level, these accounts also serve as a combination of warning lessons and self-help handbooks on issues related to marital life.

self-sacrifice that grant the ethical ground and affective value of the gendered self-development discourse. What is most intriguing about this self-sacrificing mother figure is her conspicuous association with the revolutionary iconography, which taps into the recent trend of consuming commodified collective memories of the Maoist era.²⁹ As retired Communist cadres, Lin's parents actively participate in performing revolutionary 'red songs' (*hongge*). Often dressed in a Red Army uniform during the performance, the maternal figure gestures towards a subtle compromise between a traditional 'good wife and wise mother' image and nostalgia for the Maoist era, as well as between romantic love-seeking cosmopolitan woman (global) and traditional feminine virtues (local).

In an article talking about woman's essential gender quality, the author Wang Hailing reveals that the inspiration for the characterization of the maternal figure comes from her own mother. Having lived through tumultuous years of the Maoist-era political movements, Wang's mother remains devoted to her husband and always positions the maintenance of domestic bliss above politics.³⁰ On the surface, the virtuous image of the motherly figure resembles the character of Liu Huifang, the female lead of *Yearnings (Kewang)*, China's

²⁹ Dai Jinhua, 'Redemption and Consumption: Depicting Culture in the 1990s', in Jing Wang and Tani E. Barlow, eds, *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), pp. 172-188.

³⁰ In this article, Wang Hailing also states that a married woman's gendered quality is the most important factor conducive to children's education. Sha Lin, 'Where is the Way Out of the *Chinese-Style Divorce*—A Story of Wang Hailing's Marriage' (*Zhongguoshi lihun lu zai hefang—Wang Hailing de hunyin gushi*), *Biographical Literature (Zhuanji wenxue)*, 2005:1, pp. 30-36.

first soap opera, which aired in 1991. However, the two apparently similar figures of ‘good wife and wise mother’ yield a remarkable difference under closer scrutiny. As Lisa Rofel has suggested, Liu’s working class background makes her self-sacrificing behavior relevant to ‘the iconization of a model socialist citizen Lei Feng’.³¹ In other words, the redeeming power of Liu’s image retains close ties with vestiges of socialist labor aesthetics.

Compared to Liu, the characterization of Lin’s mother is premised on a revisionist rewriting of the Maoist memories through a ‘romantic love’ narrative with ‘Chinese characteristics’. In the serial, Lin’s mother chooses to make a lifelong sacrifice out of her whole-hearted true love for Lin’s father. She is represented as a genteel, loving, and well-bred lady who gains her personal value from her unconditional dedication to the maintenance of a happy and harmonious marriage. Rather than stirring any relevant memories of the historical specifics, the characterization of the elderly Maoist cadre is completely depoliticized and re-gendered as ‘a televised object’, a simulacrum that situates moral and affective values not so much in the revolutionary tradition but more so in ‘a network of incessant, unreal circulation’ of the signs of a transnational imaginary of undying romantic love in contemporary Chinese cultural politics.³² The value of consumability is not only attached to the female figure in the divorce narrative but also to the revolutionary legacy that has been romanticized and feminized to cater to the contemporary Chinese TV audiences.

³¹ Lisa B. Rofel, ‘“Yearnings”’: Televisual Love and Melodramatic Politics in Contemporary China’, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 21, no. 4 (November 1994), p. 711.

³² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 14, 50.

The circulation of romance narratives with Chinese characteristics has been warmly received by Chinese audiences and resonated with contemporary Chinese intellectuals' efforts to rupture the gender-erasing regime of 'revolutionary love'. Ever since the 1980s, the large-scale translation and spread of Freudian theories have rendered the individualized psyche as the primary site producing heterosexual desires and sentiments as *the* foundation of one's identity formation. It is worth note that women writers' works have played a central role in promoting and circulating the imaginary of romantic love since the 1980s. Zhang Jie's widely-read short story 'Love Must Not be Forgotten' (*Ai shi buneng wangji de*) has launched the post-Reform literary tradition of depicting women's yearnings for romantic love and liberal individualism.³³

To rewrite the asexual and bodiless revolutionary subjects, a new account of gendered individualism is couched in terms of inner feelings, the (re)sexualized body, and heterosexual romantic love. All these are crucial ingredients of contemporary Chinese family melodramas as well as imported Japanese, Korean, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese romance fiction and films, in which the gendered interior world of innermost human feelings and desires are usually reified through the externalization of details of middle-class material life. The gendered division of labor is also crystallized and naturalized through the circulation of a transnational imaginary manifested in the popular gender representations since the 1990s.

³³ 'Love Must Not be Forgotten' was first published in *Beijing Literature and Arts* (*Beijing wenyi*), 1979: 11, pp. 19-27. Its English translation by Gladys Yang was included in Perry Link ed. *Love Must Not be Forgotten* (San Francisco and Beijing: China Books, Panda Books, 1986), pp. 1-13.

Discussing the transformation of how desire and intimacy rewrite the politics of interpersonal relationships in everyday life in modern society, Anthony Giddens contends that in marriage and other intimate relationships ‘egalitarian communication’ serves as a mechanism through which interpersonal equality and democracy could be pursued.³⁴ However, this interpersonal democracy becomes vulnerable when confronted with the formidable alliance of the expanding neoliberal economy and a revived patriarchy. In the case of *Chinese-Style Divorce*, while Song’s attraction to a fashionable middle-class woman only testifies to his wife’s lack of feminine charm, Lin’s efforts in seeking interpersonal democracy through pursuing intimate relationships are ridiculed and punished.

After resigning from her job, Lin has been socially isolated and economically dependent. Meanwhile, at home the value of her domestic labor is unrecognized, although her husband’s and son’s everyday life heavily depends on it. Commenting on her ‘stark poverty’, Song says, ‘She has nothing but me’. Upset with a strong sense of loss, Lin constantly pleads for emotional support from Song. However, her yearnings for affection and communication are totally dismissed. Rather, Song resorts to purchasing expensive things such as a sleek new car to mollify his wife’s resentment and steer her attention and energy to the realm of consumption. Commodities become the token of love that translate the interpersonal democracy based on egalitarian communication into a ‘democracy of consumption’, an illusionary equality of everyone’s ready access to the privilege of commodity consumption.³⁵

³⁴ Anthony Giddens, *Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 188.

³⁵ Harvey, *A Brief History*, p. 125.

Driven by her yearning for interpersonal communication on an equal footing, Lin turns to online chatting to vent her anger and search for virtual intimacy. Coincidentally, a male friend of Song's spots her online. He tells Song about this, and the two men conspire to set Lin up via the use of instant messenger: In order to obtain the evidence of Lin's disloyalty to her husband, they decide to ask Lin out for a date. At the agreed time, Lin paces back and forth anxiously, facing towards the wide sea rolling in the burning light of the setting sun. Song shows up, walking slowly towards Lin. Following his point of view, audiences are placed in a position of power, watching the visual image of Lin's back view coming closer and closer as a trapped prey of the predatory camera gaze. Then Song stops, calling out Lin's Internet name 'Blossoming Peach' (*Taohua shengkai*). Lin turns her head, looking startled, disappointed, and then fearful.

The next shot is cut to the domestic interior of their home. Its dim lighting strikes a sharp contrast with the splendid sunset in the vast open space. In the cramped living room, Song stands firmly against the wall, reading out aloud the evidence of Lin's 'extramarital affair', the record of Lin's online chatting. Lin curls herself in an armchair, bowing her head, disheveled hair covering her face. This contrastive spatial positioning renders the man morally superior and the woman powerless and invisible. All of sudden, Lin drags herself up and breaks the windowpanes that guard the boundaries of the domestic interior. Then she continues to smash everything in sight. Her fierce body movements, glaring bloodshot eyes, swelling nostrils and gritting teeth magnified in a series of slow-motion frames externalize visually her mixed feelings of enormous shame, anger, and frustration when she loses control of a life-situation mired in the patriarchal power networks. All these, however, are simply viewed as symptoms

of an incomprehensible spell of hysteria of a stereotypical middle-aged *pofu* in Song's eyes. Disgusted, he shakes his head and closes his eyes.

The explosive sounds wake up their young son who is sleeping in the next room. He steps out his room, cutting his own hand to call his mother's attention. Lin brings him to the hospital immediately, crying out repeatedly: 'I am sorry! I am so sorry!' Thus, Lin's violation of the domestic order is finally reined in by the demand of her maternal role. Her initial attempt to negotiate for equalitarian communication and interpersonal intimacy is shattered by the reinvented traditional family ethics that imposes a double standard in regulating the respective bodies, fantasies and desires of women and men. This outcome deviates radically from the 1980s' feminist tradition of exploring women's agency in pursuing an individualized utopia of romantic love. The shifting representation of gender politics bears the significant imprints of recent state ideological regulation and cultural policies.

'Democracy of Consumption' in a 'Harmonious Society'

Since 2000, the General State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) and the Chinese Propaganda Bureau (*Zhongxuan bu*) have joined forces to promote the 'socialist mainstream melody' (*shehui zhuyi zhuxuanliu*) works. Meanwhile, the authorities have severely criticized popular urban dramas such as *To and Fro* (*Lilai wangwang*, 1998), *Love Rules* (*Rang ai zuozhu*, 2000) and *A Taste of Love* (*Aiqing ziwei*, 2001) that disturb the social morality with excessive depictions of 'unhealthy male-female love' and extramarital

affairs.³⁶ The tightened control of media broadcasting and cultural products taps in the need of the current ‘harmonious society’ (*hexie shehui*) campaign that prioritizes the maintenance of a stable and proper domestic order and places great value on ‘traditional’ family ethics.³⁷

Aiming to provide preconditions of peace and stability for further economic development, one of the goals of this political project is to encourage the ‘democracy of consumption’ to divert people’s attention from struggles for gender equality and social justice to economic

³⁶ Ji Bingxuan, ‘Promote the Mainstream Melody, Produce More Quality Dramas’

(*Changxiang zhu xuanlu, duochu jingpin ju*), Speech given at the 2000 Television Drama Subject Advisory Meeting, *Chinese Television (Zhongguo dianshi)*, 2000:7, p. 3.

³⁷ The concept of ‘harmonious society’ is considered to be a major contribution of Hu Jintao, the current president of China, to Chinese political thought during his reign. The Chinese government first proposed it during the 16th CCP Central Committee Conference in 2004 (*Zhongguo gongchandang di shiliu jie zhongyang weiyuanhui*) in the face of increasing social disparities and conflicts. Marking the historical discontinuity with the Maoist ideology of class struggle, Hu’s campaign aims to serve the ultimate harmony of a middle-class oriented ‘affluent society’ (*xiaokang shehui*). In his series of talks about the vision of ‘harmonious society’, Hu Jintao cites lengthy paragraphs from Confucian canons and emphasizes the key role that the ethical education including a rehabilitation of domestic virtues (*jiating meide*) should play in realizing the society harmony. As a result, ‘harmonious society’ has become the central theme of many state-sponsored and sanctioned cultural products and activities such as the annual CCTV Spring Festival Gala, television melodramas celebrating ‘Asian values’, and Yu Dan’s best-selling spin-offs of traditional classics.

gains and commodity consumption. As the middle-class family has become a basic unit of contemporary Chinese consumerist society, wives are remodeled to be the primary agents of the ‘democracy of consumption’ so as to produce a harmonious interior. Three years ago, at the 2001 conventions of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Wang Xiancai, a member of the CPPCC, proposed that women should go back to the domestic space. In the proposal he argued that the proper gender labor division is an indicator of social progression and will contribute to economic development.³⁸ The government’s promotion of women’s domesticity exposes its strategy in manipulating traditional family ethics to support the neoliberal development mentality of contemporary China.

As the ‘harmonious society’ project is sanctioned by the state as a warranty for desirable political conditions and economic development, familial harmony is theorized into a foundational drive of the social productive forces. ‘A 2004 Survey of the Life Quality of Chinese White-Collar Workers’ (*2004 Zhongguo zhiye bailing shenghuo zhiliang diaocha*) shows that the majority of the informants consider a high-quality family life indispensable for social development because it has a direct effect on boosting their working efficiency and competition capacity.³⁹ In various narrations of this new economic theory, a translated British report distinguishes itself with ‘well-tested’ data to

³⁸ Shen Yifei, *Constructed Woman: Contemporary Social Gender Theories (Beijiangou de nüxing: dangdai shehui xingbie lilun)* (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 2005), p. 209.

³⁹ *The Career Development of Chinese College Students (Zhongguo daxuesheng jiuye)*, ‘A 2004 Survey of the Life Quality of Chinese White-Collars’ (*2004 Zhongguo zhiye bailing shenghuo zhiliang diaocha*), (July 2005), pp. 41-42.

prove that men with virtuous wives make more money.⁴⁰ These ‘scientific’ theories support the prevailing view that a well-qualified wife should maintain the proper middle-class domesticity so that her husband can fulfill his self-value through a market competition of individual bodily capacity.

Notably, urban elite women have contributed greatly to this new political discourse. In 2005 the Beijing Women’s Federation organized a series of female college students’ debate contests and seminars to articulate the connection between building a ‘harmonious family’ and a ‘harmonious society’. Yu Dan, a woman professor at the Beijing Normal University, has lead a surging wave of adapting traditional classics into self-help handbooks that allegedly guide people to cultivate a harmonious inner world and build a harmonious society.⁴¹ By the same token, the Qiong Yao-style romance fiction and TV

⁴⁰ Ren Qiuling, ‘Men with Good Wives at Home Can Make More Money than Bachelors’ (*Jiayou xianqi de nanren bi danshenhan zhuanqian duo*), *Life Daily (Shenghuo bao)*, July 8, 2005.

⁴¹ In addition to giving a series of lectures about ‘Constructing a Harmonious Soul’ (*Goujian hexie xinling*), Yu Dan has also published a book and DVD entitled *Yu Dan’s Thoughts on Harmony (Yu Dan hexie xinde)*. In an interview, Yu suggests that Chinese women should learn from traditional classics such as the *Analects* to build up a harmonious interior world for the sake of preserving her marriage. See ‘An Interview with Yu Dan: A Woman’s Inner World Should be At Ease’ (*Yu Dan fangtan: Nüren de neixin yao congrong*), *Chinese Woman (Zhongguo funü)* 2008: 1. Also see ‘The Commonalities of the *Analects* and the Harmonious Society’ (*Lunxu he hexie shehui you xiangtong*), a transcript of Yu Dan’s online chat with Chinese Internet users organized by

melodramas are re-read as an integral vehicle for realizing feminism with ‘Chinese characteristics’, or the ‘harmony of both sexes’ (*shuangxing hexie*).⁴² Soap operas highlighting the theme of romantic love with these ‘Chinese characteristics’, many of which are produced by well-known female authors, including *Holding Hands (Qianshou)*, *A New Married Life (Xin jiehun shidai)*,⁴³ *The Days of Burning Passion (Jiqing ranshao de suiyue)*, *The Eldest Sister (Dajie)*, *The Mother-in-Law (Popo)*, *Romantic Matters (Langman de shi)*, and *Golden Anniversary (Jinhun)*, have flooded Chinese TV screens and won high viewer ratings.

As stark political ideology is losing its appeal nowadays, the ‘harmonious society’ discourse often resorts to the cultural to harness nationalist feelings and create the pleasure of consuming a melodramatized ‘structure of feeling’, in which ‘the ideological principles that support a given arrangement of power are translated into regularized patterns of emotion and sentiment’. Throughout these melodramas, the dominant interior

the commercial portal of sina.com. [http://book.sina.com.cn/author/2006-12-](http://book.sina.com.cn/author/2006-12-01/2324206939.shtml)

[01/2324206939.shtml](http://book.sina.com.cn/author/2006-12-01/2324206939.shtml) (Accessed January 3, 2009). An English report of the ‘Yu Dan phenomenon’ can be found in *LA Times*, ‘Confucius more popular than Harry Potter’, May 7, 2007.

⁴² Yu Jun, ‘Harmony of Opposite Sexes, the Incessant Pursuit for the Ideal Love of the Films and TV Shows—A Case Study of Qiong Yao’s Romance Melodramas’ (*Shuangxing hexie, yingshiju dui aiqing lixiang de buxie zhuiqiu—yi Qiong Yao yanqingju weili*), *Feminism in China (Zhongguo nüxingzhuyi)*, no. 5. (Fall and Winter, 2005), pp. 238-39.

⁴³ These two family melodramas and *Chinese-Style Divorce* are regarded as Wang Hailing’s best-selling ‘marriage trilogy’ (*hunyin sanbuqu*).

setting, excessive sentiments and emotions and redundant drama of family relations among other representational conventions feminize the divorce melodrama. Compared to male genres focusing on important historical events or political issues, the woman's genre is consumable but insignificant, and the problem represented is trivial and only meaningful for women in the domestic terrain. As a result, these similar family melodramas form an inter-textual relation to produce an emerging discourse of interiority and accumulate an institutional power in regulating the imagination of gendered subject position and domestic space.

Compared to the Maoist era when the family served as a fundamental unit for both genders participating in social production and political activities, the urban middle-class in contemporary China is substituting for the collectivization of the family with the apoliticization and privatization of 'a sweet home'.⁴⁴ The once blurred boundaries between the public and private has been redrawn. Cut off from the outside world that is marked by relentless competition, exploitation, and the dismantling of the socialist cradle-to-grave welfare system, the middle-class family is represented as a harmonious haven, soothing the pain of radical social changes, or a site where the quality of life is materialized through consuming high-quality commodities including feminine sexualities and romantic fantasies. As a result, the converging forces of a transnational middle-class

⁴⁴ This being said, what should not be ignored is the fact that even during the Maoist era, the heavily sexual division of labor still persisted in domestic sphere and the burden of domestic labor largely fell upon women. The Maoist tenet that one's value was fulfilled through his or her social labor enhanced the devaluation of the value of unpaid domestic and reproductive labor.

culture and an indigenous ‘harmonious society’ campaign work towards reshaping women’s role to be the administrator of domestic consumption as well as the repository of romanticized traditional feminine virtues.

Paradoxically, this imaginary ‘harmonious’ middle-class interiority is operated in the same logic of the market-oriented self-development discourse. This discourse not only inscribes a differential value to various professions (e. g. Lin as an elementary school teacher vs. Song as a surgeon in an American-invested hospital) and a hierarchy of gendered division of labor (productive vs. reproductive, paid vs. domestic), but it also fosters relentless competition between women on the basis of their corporeal and emotional consum(er)ability. As ‘traffic in women’ becomes a crucial indicator of male entrepreneurs’ masculinity, the prevailing practice of ‘adopting concubines’ (*bao ernai*) contributes directly to the currently skyrocketing divorce rate and many middle-aged women’s deep sense of anxiety.⁴⁵ In this sense, the state’s re-invention of Confucian family ethics and gender conservatism evokes memories of the ancient concubinage system.

⁴⁵ Shu-mei Shih, ‘Gender and a New Geopolitics of Desire: The Seduction of Mainland Women in Taiwan and Hong Kong Media’, *Signs*, vol. 23, no. 2. (1998), pp. 287-319. Rachael DeWoskin, ‘Wife Sentence’, *The Sunday Times*, 22 October 2006. Literally, *ernai* means ‘second wives’ in Chinese. The ‘*ernai* adoption contract’ (*ernai hetong*) refers to the agreement signed by a wealthy married man and a young single woman who consents to be his mistress. Normally it entails the obligations of each party, such as the housing arrangement, living expenses and a certain amount of compensation that the man should provide for the woman who in return would cohabit with him in a ‘second home’ established outside of the institution of marriage.

Conclusion

As the neoliberal governmentality of contemporary China turns to ‘the art of exercising power in the form of economy’, the population is managed with the political rationale supported by institutional power, scientific statistics, disciplinary knowledge, cultural reproduction, and nationalist sentiments.⁴⁶ Rather than merely counting on the enforcement of laws and legal codes, state intervention often takes the form of governing through each individual’s capacity to manage herself or himself. Much like school curricula for children, domestic fiction, women’s magazines, media reports, advertising, TV shows, and *suzhi* training clubs are the educational tools to help women master the art of accruing and managing the symbolic capital of consum(er)ability, making ‘free choices’ about their lifestyle and emotional capacity to accomplish a certain quality of domestic life and sense of self-fulfillment.

Read in this context, *Chinese-Style Divorce*, among many other family melodramas penned by renowned women writers, has played a dominant role in promoting a formula that combines transnational middle-class culture and traditional family ethics with ‘Chinese characteristics’. In the place of interpersonal interactions and egalitarian communication, love is re-defined as a highly gendered interior quality that an individualized woman is demanded to achieve through meticulous management and control of her own mind and body. This has led to the internalization of domestic sphere in two senses: First, it refers to the historical process of privatizing the domestic space

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, ‘Governmentality’, in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller, eds, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 92.

and cutting off its links with public sphere or political economic conditions. Secondly, a rich lexicon of individual sentiments, emotions and self-construction has been invented and circulated through literary and cultural representations of divorce to regulate people's imagination of the domestic sphere and conjugal relationships.

The neoliberal validation of individual freedom and self-reliance embedded in the gendered discourse of domestic and psychic interiority has not yet been fully addressed by Chinese feminists. Rather, *suzhi*, self-development, and individualism are often keywords of post-Mao Chinese 'market feminism' and *Fulian* (All China Women's Federation)-sponsored activities.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, contemporary male intellectuals disavow the historical legacy of women's liberation by suggesting that, in a 'post-women's-liberation' era, the problem to be solved is how to tame and re-gender the 'over-liberated' Chinese woman within the domestic sphere.⁴⁸ Their criticisms of communist revolution often take the form of 'an implicit revival of the Confucian patriarchy by means of misogynistic discourse'.⁴⁹ This postfeminist trend cancels 'the contemplation of structural

⁴⁷ For instance, see Li Xiaojiang, 'From "Modernization" to "Globalization": Where Are Chinese Women?' trans. Tani E. Barlow. *Signs*, vol. 26, no. 4 (2001), pp. 1274-1278. In addition, the self-development rhetoric is central to the women-oriented TV program 'Half of the Sky' (*Banbian tian*) run on the state-owned and-controlled Central China Television Station.

⁴⁸ Zhong Xueping, 'Post-Women's-Liberation and Self-Imagining' (*Hou funü jiefang yu ziwo xiangxiang*), *Dushu* (November 2005), pp. 13-20.

⁴⁹ Tonglin Lu, *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism, and Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 14.

inequities'.⁵⁰ The re-established binary between male/outside (*wai*) and female/inside (*nei*) has led to the exclusion of 'the question of women, from public discussions and intellectuals' concerns. The rampant gender-related problems caused by uneven distribution of resources and sexual division of labor are simply dismissed as belonging to the individual's untouchable private sphere. Hence, the story of divorce is retold as a personal issue free from moral or political interventions of either kinship networks in a traditional agrarian community, or socialist state mediation. Instead, the allegory of free market competition of gendered bodies and sexualized femininities is brought in to redesign the domestic order in the face of the prevailing neoliberal governance in contemporary China and beyond.

⁵⁰ Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 5.