

**THE EMBODIMENT OF TRANSFORMING GENDER AND CLASS: SHENGNU  
AND THEIR MEDIA REPRESENTATION IN  
CONTEMPORARY CHINA**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This thesis examines a large number of middle class, single, career women in China's metropolises. They are sensationalized and problematized as Shengnü (left-over women) by popular newspapers and magazines. Empowered by the market economy and Western vision mass media displays, they hold new expectations in relationship and future marriage. Meanwhile, their prospective conflicts with the social ideal of women: a "good wife wise mother" with a job. This failure of fitting the ideal is socially constructed by the socioeconomic complexity, because their whole identity and routine of life is also determined by the current development trend. Young Chinese including Shengnü, who pursue the maximum personal benefits, are conducted to cluster in limited residences, industries and occupations. This development mode is also male-centric and devalues women's domestic contribution. Particularly, Shengnü are constructed to be self-interested middle class and materialists by intersecting political agenda and mass media. It leads to resentment from the populace due to the sharp social stratification in post-Mao China. Worse still, Shengnü's middle class lives are not legitimized in family or marriage, which makes them a threatening exception from the middle class ideals in both political agenda and public culture. Then as vulnerable as Shengnü are, they tend to be the convenient target for various anxieties engendered by disorders in sexual ethics. Shengnü, as a hot topic, packets other negative social phenomena and resentments about them into one outlet.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### CHAPTER 1 Introduction

Introduction.....	1
Methodology.....	7
Literature Review.....	9

### CHAPTER 2 Shengnü in Media and Reality

The Media Representation of Shengnü.....	17
Shengnü in Reality.....	19
The New Gender Dynamic.....	27

### CHAPTER 3 The Social Construction of Shengnü

The Genealogy of Good Wife, Wise Mother.....	30
Iron Girls, Strong Women and Shengnü.....	33
Shengnü and the Current Trend of Development in China.....	37

### CHAPTER 4 The Embodiment of Social Anxiety

Middle Classness of Shengnü.....	46
Integrative Embodiments of Social Anxieties.....	52

### CHAPTER 5 Conclusion

Conclusion.....	56
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REFERENCES.....	59
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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

At the end of 2007, Shengnü (roughly translated as left-over women) was announced by the Ministry of Education to be a new official Chinese word. According to Hou and Zhou (2008:11), Shengnü, among 170 other new words, “were screened out and verified by the National Center for Study of Chinese Language based on frequency, circulation and popularity. These new words were collected as snapshots of prominent social phenomena or indicators of special clusters of people.” *Baidu*, the biggest search engine in China also shows that Shengnü is one of the most popular words. It has 11.6 million articles as search results (Tang 2010:19-21). All these indicate the popularity of Shengnü as a catch phrase and a social phenomenon.

Despite various interpretations of Shengnü, the common definition of Shengnü in *Baidu Lemma* (Chinese version of *Wikipedia*) is succinct: “Shengnü are modern metropolitan women with a high education, high income, and high age (relatively old in the marriage market). They hesitate about marriage as they stick to high standards in choosing husbands. Probably because they are professional, intellectual, white-collar, career women, they are too intimidating to be taken.” Further interpretations of this term continually proliferate in all kinds of media, such as newspapers, journals, websites, TV, and radio programs. This thesis mainly does text analysis of articles in popular newspapers and magazines. It also incorporates match-making advertisements, and reality shows into the whole display of Shengnü phenomenon.

First of all, to demonstrate how many Shengnü there are, some striking numbers are frequently quoted in Shengnü news. Shengnü reports always start with, “There are 0.8 million Shengnü in Beijing alone. The number hits 0.5 million in Shanghai, and 30% of 25-32-year-old female residents in Shenzhen are single. Shengnü have accounted for nearly 5% of the total populations, 15% of young people in their twenties or thirties. Statistics also indicates this single wave sweeps the capital cities of every other province” (Yang and Xiao 2011:B2). But these shocking figures of Shengnü are in contrast with well-informed demographic data. One of the most significant effects of the one-child policy is the unbalanced male-female ratio in newborns, which reached 117:100 in 2005 (Liu 2009:23-59). Theoretically, there should be more unmarried men than women in China. It is intriguing that Shengnü appear more prominent.

The primary explanation offered by Shengnü reports is the double standard in age. Liu (2008:C13) indicated, “The husband is supposed to be older than the wife in Chinese-style marriages. Career-oriented Shengnü miss their best time. This merciless paradigm makes those Shengnü’s male cohorts to target women around 25 year old. Shengnü are left over.” According to the Chinese Association of Studies of Marriages and Relationships (2010), “Ideal marriage age for women is 25 in a man’s perspective, while women consider men’s ideal marriage age is 30. Only 8% men would like to marry women over 27-year-old.”

Later on, supplementary reports succeeded to convince readers that the marriage market for Shengnü is gloomy and competitive. Take, for example, the following headlines: “Too many Shengnü in Shenzhen; Four women fight for one man in blind dates” (Zhu and Wang 2009:C19); “Hong Kong Shengnü march northward to seek husbands; more

competition in Guangzhou and Shenzhen” (Wang 2010). Other reports present Shengnü trying hard to find a spouse but being persistently defeated in single clubs or blind dates. Take, for example, the following headlines: “One Shengnü failed on 300 blind dates; Too perfect to be taken?” ( Qi and Chen 2007:A13) or “Unwilling to lower the bar, Shengnü are stuck in their own high standards” ( Wen 2007:C1).

From analysis by experts to autobiographical stories, popular newspapers and magazines attributed Shengnü problem mostly to Shengnü themselves, who have the wrong attitude and lifestyle, such as “Shengnü: they are left over for being picky” (Zhou 2010:B8). Later on, Shengnü discourse in media is generally critical in its reviews of Shengnü and regulative instructions, such as “Learn to get rid of the curse of being Shengnü” (Ning 2009:12-5). After Shengnü became a social hit, catching attention from all aspects, there appeared inevitable exaggerations and overgeneralization in media discourse. Modern journalism has been inclined to manufacture stereotypes and identity distortions (Gitlin 2003:204). The media representation made Shengnü a negative figure and problematic group.

During my two months of fieldwork in the summer of 2010, I became aware of the social construction of both the media representation and real life experiences of Shengnü. Based on this, I intend to answer four questions in two main threads: (1) Why Shengnü existed? How the current socioeconomic situation constructed them; and how they manifest changes in gender ideology in cotemporary China? (2) Why the media discourse of Shengnü exists? Why Shengnü have been disadvantaged and demeaned in media discourse in the context of various social transformations?

In the case of Shengnü, I argue that gender norms of certain historical period are

interwoven with specific economic, political and social situations. Shengnü, as a gendered category, is essentially determined by the social complexity in China.

The most significant element of this social complexity is the market economy which shapes the post-Mao age. Shengnü were born mainly in late 1970s or 1980s when the government started to boost economy. The open and reform policy was initiated by the Party in December 1978. Deng Xiaoping claimed the goal of Chinese economic reform was to transform China's stagnant, impoverished and planned economy into a market economy (Liu 2008:92-108). Within planned economy, production, consumption and resource allocation were all pre-determined by the government. In Maoist age, even reproduction and gender norms were highly manipulated by the communist agenda, to serve particular demographic policies and infrastructure construction (Li 1997:14-20). For marriage, Gu (2006:36-8) states "The Western concept of romantic love was alien to Chinese culture for a long time: free love was taboo and marriage was an expression of filial duty. In Mao's China, love for any person or thing other than the party was denounced as bourgeois sentiment."

The open and reform policy established market economy in China, and then production and consumption are mainly determined by the mechanism of free market and free price. Chinese individuals, who are motivated by self-interest instead of nationalism or collectivism, pursue the maximum of their own benefits. This mechanism brought economic growth and well-being of Chinese citizens (Liu 2008:123-78).

As a result, Loren and Rawski (2008:30) found, "China's reforms brought momentous shifts, from poverty to growing prosperity, from plan to market, from public toward private ownership, and from isolation to global engagement." And only in this context, Chinese are

enabled to get rid of the direct rein of national willpower and pursue free love. However, the rising free love is bound with the perils of the market: insecurity. As Xiao (Gu 2006:36) states, “Traditions for arranged marriage and the old faith in communism are merging with consumer choice. This has brought romantic freedom, which comes with its own problems”. For example, out of feudal patriarchy or communist ethic, the past two decades has seen China’s divorce rate soar by 500 per cent (Gu 2006:38).

Then in contemporary China, lingering patrilineal tradition, free love and market logic have converged. Li et al (2010:679) argues “Marriage is still a highly valued social norm, traditionally universal and an obligatory first stage in family formation. Marriage is a means not only to perpetuate the family line and filial piety but also to establish new kinship ties useful to the development of social and economic networks.” Most Chinese people, especially elders such as Shengnu’s parents, holding this tradition, think marriage is imperative.

With further practice of free love, young Chinese were enlightened to seek love, romance, and company through marriage (Yang and Yao 2007:14-9). But in China, marriage involves much more than a couple truly in love. The material base is given lots of consideration. Men and women act with market logic, considering their own needs and backgrounds when choosing spouses (Xiang and Liu 2011:14-67). Then marriage becomes a domain of market, the incompatibility of supply and demand between two genders caused the Shengnü phenomenon.

To interpret how Shengnü, as a gendered category, is socially constructed by intersecting mass media, government, market economy and changing ideology, I begin in

Chapter 2 providing an overview of media representation of Shengnü. Then I introduce several Shengnü informants. They talk about their work and life. They present their views about relationships and marriage. I conclude that the Shengnü phenomenon is both an embodiment and consequence of changes in gender ideology.

In Chapter 3, I begin to elaborate how Shengnü are socially constructed by particular ideological, social, economic and political situations. First, modern day China set a new ideal to Chinese women: being one *xianqiliangmu* (good wife, wise mother) plus a job. Shengnü fail this model as they develop a career. Second, in comparing with precedents of problematic women in contemporary China, I demonstrate gender norms are shaped by particular social, political and economic situations. Third, I argue the whole routine of Shengnü is socially determined by the current development trend of China, which overemphasizes economic growth and neglects differences in gender, region, and individual.

In Chapter 4, I analyze why Shengnü are seriously criticized in media discourse. Not only because they are single, but also being middle class. Shengnü, along with other Chinese middle class, are socially constructed by political campaign and mass media to be quite material and self-interested. So, they are not favored by average citizens. Worse yet, Shengnü's middle class life is not legitimized in family or marriage according to the ideal portrait. They are the most vulnerable group in the middle class and are easily attacked in the media discourse. Second, I present media discourse of Shengnü, with bias and exaggerations, involving other negative social phenomena. Shengnü discourse depicts chaos in sexual morality and people's anxiety about them.

In Chapter 5, I conclude that the gendered category of "Shengnü" is a social

construction. Media, market economy, governmental campaigns, and individual Shengnü all constitute the category. Both Shengnü and the problematization of them are rooted in intersecting political, economic and social situations.

### **Methodology**

My ethnography consists of two major steps. The first is a general review of Shengnü literature in print media. I define print media in this thesis as popular magazines and newspapers, excluding propaganda agencies that are directly sponsored or controlled by the government.

The main audience of popular magazines and newspapers are average urban citizens. This type of publication survives in the publishing industry through circulations and advertisements. It includes thousands of urban, local daily newspapers and hundreds of commercial magazines. They cater to the taste of citizens with superficial reports which focus on people's daily lives. And social topics full of conflicts, dramas or scandals seem to be the popular (Chen 2010:73-98). The School of Journalism and Communication of Wuhan University (2011:332-367) revealed, "As commodities they serve and represent the interest of average citizens. Within the framework of up-down censorship of journalism, they can not get rid of the willpower of the government. As products of professional journalists, they are also vehicles of thoughts of well-educated middle class people."

In the case of Shengnü, I noticed a special genre of popular newspapers and magazines, such as *New Weekly*, *Chinese News Weekly*, *Sanlian Life Weekly*, and *Xinmin Weekly*, or women-oriented fashion magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, *Rayli*, *Elle*, and *Vogue*. They target middle class, elite, professional, and intellectual people. They are named as middle class

media by Chinese communication scholar He (2009:76-98), “It has a profound interaction with the burgeoning Chinese middle class because it contributes to create them in details. The middle class media is also reserved as a middle class privilege with deep and specialized content, exquisite bindings, high-class printings, and high prices.”

While most popular magazines and newspapers define Shengnü as a social problem and personal misfortune, middle class media defend them as liberal single women. Generally, however, they both contribute to putting Shengnü in spotlight and making them sensational.

The second part of my ethnography is the fieldwork in the summer of 2010. I met urban middle class single women who fit the general profile of Shengnü. I selected my interviewees through personal contacts. They are my distant relatives, colleagues and supervisors during my internships or schoolmates who graduated several years earlier than I. There are 13 formal interviewees, residing in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Wuhan. The former three cities are categorized as tier-one cities, which are characterized as the biggest, full of opportunity, wealth, and upward social mobility. They are also acknowledged as the most developed areas in China (Su and Min 2010:14-55).

My informants’ ages range from 25 to 32. They hold occupations as sales representatives in foreign companies, client managers in banks, college teachers, and journalists for famous media outlets. Most of them are migrants to the cities they currently work and live in, and most of them are only children. Their incomes are high enough to be considered middle class. Most of them live alone in their own apartments, either rented or purchased. Except for one Shanghai local and Wuhan local, my interviewees were born in tier-two or tier-three cities and migrated to the tier-one metropolises they currently live in.

The interviews were usually conducted in a place designated by my interviewees, such as a cafe, a restaurant like McDonalds, or at the interviewees's home. Questions I asked, included but were not limited to whether they accepted the label of Shengnü, how they perceived their career and love life, and what their parents' attitudes towards the Shengnü phenomenon were. Three of my interviews took place in my informants' homes, so the interviews naturally included house tours and relevant daily topics. One of my interviewees even set up a meeting between me and her parents and I when she was absent. My ethnography also extended to male colleagues and friends of my interviewees, or married men in their twenties to fifties around me who were familiar with the term Shengnü. We talked about their thoughts in regard to Shengnü, their experiences with Shengnü, and how they interpreted Shengnü image.

### **Literature Review**

In Chinese academic writings about Shengnü, Chinese social scholars first reached a consensus that conventional praxis of marriage and relationships is the primary barrier for Shengnü, because it not only couples a younger wife and a older husband, but also “inferior” women and “superior” men (Wang 2011:253-4; Wei and Zhang 2010:22-4; Tang 2010:19-21; Ning 2008:222-3; Zuo 2010:9-13; Yang 2010:259-88). This paradigm directs women to marry men better than them, in terms of wealth, education, social status, etc. Qualified candidates are quite rare for Shengnü, who themselves exhibit many of the qualities they would look for in a potential husband. At the same time, more Chinese men, distributed over rural areas and in manual labor industries, are excluded from marriage, and they suffer from mental frustration and sexual deprivation (Li et al 2010:679-94).

In this context, Wang (2011:253-4) and Zuo and Li (2008:11-6) argue that the media discourse, on behalf of a male-centric hierarchy and those left-over men, deliberately attack high-achieving single women. Wang (2011:253-4) and Zhou (2010:6-9) further indicate media propaganda of Shengnü overexposes single women but veils their counterparts, left-over men. Media discourse embodies patriarchal values and criticizes women in gender issues. In reality, men are the ones who reinforce gender bias to keep women objectified, subordinate, and passive. Cheng and Lü (2011:8) even think, “Shengnü are made to be problematic because media is a business about attention.”

My ethnography echoes many of the perspectives above, since the media discourse represents Shengnü with exaggerations and judges them with bias. However, media discourse disciplining Shengnü is not only manipulated by gender norms. I argue that it deeply interacts with socioeconomic reality and in this thesis, beside the new gender dynamic, I will demonstrate how Shengnü embody various aspects of social complexity.

Other researchers attribute the Shengnü problem to greater social context. Li (2010:34), Wang (2010:22-4) and Tang (2011:19-21) contend that Shengnü are not only suffering from the patriarchy but are also inevitable by-products of urbanization and market economy. Urbanization has mobilized people into a few metropolises, which intensified unbalanced gender ratios in certain regions and industries. Moreover, urbanization interrupted the original social networks of those migrants, creating a competitive and indifferent environment. Establishing intimacy becomes more and more difficult and risky for all urban residents.

But Shengnü's autonomous hesitation concerning marriage still remains a question. Tang (2011:19-21) and Wang (2010:22-4) explain, on one hand, that transitional society which manufactures a lot of temporary disorders in sexual morality makes women lose faith in marriage. Ning (2008:222-3) and Tang (2011:19-21) point out, on the other hand, that individuals have been enlightened by the market economy to maximize personal revenue. Therefore, some people take marriage as an investment, strategy or project in which they expect the maximum of benefits. Not only for marriage, Li (1997:19) and Davis (1993:77-105) find that market economy teaches Chinese to make the best use of their resources--sexual, physical, and intellectual.

However, this group of views only considers women as active subjects in the market economy. I argue that Chinese women have also been utilized and distributed by market dynamics. Shengnü, as objects of market economy, are confronted with the demands of various gendered human capital--sexual, physical, and intellectual. Pun (2005:4-58) and Yan (2008:1-76) argue that women are inexpensive laborers with their physical capital in light manufacturing, and the food and service industry. Evans (2002:355-9) and Jankowiak (2002:361-79) find that the conventional roles for women as wives and mothers in market economy also rouse demands of women's sexual capital. Davis (1993:77-105) states women's feminine virtues to create a sweet home for men are highly valued in the market economy. So Shengnü are disfavored in the marriage market.

In regard to these demands of gendered capital, Zuo (2010: 13) and Tang (2011: 21) give an interesting point. They state that Shengnü embody the gap between two kinds of

production. “Shengnü’s success in production ironically hinders their achievements in reproduction. The gender gap in career is narrower and narrower while patriarchal value still defends the hierarchy in family.” In summary, this group of views indicates that Shengnü discourse represents the inferior status of women.

Nevertheless, other Chinese social scholars, Zuo and Li (2008:11) hail Shengnü as precursors who represent advanced and modern values to challenge the conventional marriage paradigm. Yuan and Tu (2009:183-4) also indicates Shengnü appeared to be the embodiment of the profound transformations in gender ideology. They cast doubts on the necessity, nature and function of marriage.

On one hand, post-Mao era removed some imperatives of marriage. As Li (2010:39) argues, “Before PRC founded, marriage to Chinese women was the mainstream way of living. Husbands were their financial resources. Husbands’ families were their social space.” In Maoist age, women were imbued with emancipation and equality from the nation. They gained some rights via serving the country in their jobs. Marriage, however, was still necessary to be the only legitimate means of reproduction and sex (Li 1997:17-20). Part of a woman’s duty and devotion to the nation had to be fulfilled in family via social roles like being a wife and mother (Evans 2002:335-45).

In post-Mao era people are supposed to enjoy free love out of the direct rein of patriarchy and willpower of the nation. The lingering traditional values I stated in the Introduction which are practiced and reinforced by the elders still defended the imperative of marriage. Besides that, some irreplaceable social and emotional functions are reaffirmed. For example, Huang and Zou (2008:21-5) argue “Marriage provides women a complete

experience of life in which women are able to be wives and mothers.” Ju (2006:35-9) further indicates “In China, family is responsible for taking care of elders. This has not been wholly socialized by nursing homes or social welfare yet.” Emotionally, Yang and Yao (2007: 14-9) state “Family offers emotional bounds and happiness which cannot be replaced with achievements in career. Women could gain trust, love and support unconditionally from their own families.”

These points are echoed by my interviewees. Instead of being practitioners of celibacy, my informants believe marriage bears some potential to make them happier. They claim they stay single just for now, not permanently, hoping to get married for their own happiness, not for conforming to social norms or parents’ will. I argue, in this sense, Shengnü’s single status is a compromise rather than advocacy, and is socially constructed by the transforming ideology and socioeconomic complexity.

Besides their marital status, the whole self-presentation of Shengnü could never be isolated from social construction. Shengnü are just one group of young Chinese who have been encapsulated into the development trend of China. I argue that Shengnü imagine themselves to be women with a successful career and part of Chinese middle class, which is essentially shaped by expectations and demands of the society. Then Shengnü phenomenon is not merely a gender issue. They are middle class urban residents who have high income and social status. I argue the problematization of Shengnü in media discourse is deeply interwoven with the unique nature of the Chinese middle class. In this thesis, I will highlight this theme, which is also one of the unique contributions of this thesis.

Middle class only gradually became a common and sensible term when Chinese were

taught to handle class in a different way in the market economy. The concept of class in the Maoist age was just vacuous political labels assigned to everyone based on political needs. There was little economic ground to differentiate class, because the extreme poverty along with egalitarian communism homogenized every Chinese (Li and Xiao 2008:31-79). In post-Mao era, the class pyramid was rebuilt purely on the economic differentiations. “Let some people get rich first” was set up by Deng Xiaoping as an imbalance strategy, which immediately led to the social stratification of Chinese society (Davis 2000:10-58).

Owing to social stratification, the gap between rich and poor broadens every year (Loren and Rawski 2008:30-3). Since the middle class is observed to form the largest segments of populations in the most developed countries, Chinese scholars and government started to advocate the growth of a middle class as a necessary tool for balancing the contradictions between economic growth and social stability (Li and Xiao 2008:210-272). Wang (2009:54) states, “This had been evolved to an official construction and political regulation of the middle class, which represented an important effort for inventing a new technique of government in managing current and future risks and uncertainties.”

Existing literature about the Chinese middle class, exemplified by Li and Zhang (2008:1-19), Li (2011:14), and Sun (2009:48-9), primarily announced a triumph of the middle class. According to the study of Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), “Almost one quarter of urban Chinese is middle class and this group grows at the speed of 1% per year after 2008.” Experts of CASS such as Lu (Sun 2009:48), Li (2011:14-8) Li and Zhang (2008:1-19) indicate the mainstream academy use occupation, income and education as an integrative system to define the middle class. In this context, the Chinese middle class is

defined as people who have high education, mid-level or above income, and white-collar jobs.

Li and Zhang (2010:6) states the overlap population of these three variables takes up 25.4% of the total urban population. According to my interviewees and the common definition of Shengnū, they are middle class.

Then in the academy and political agenda, middle class refers to and ought to be a content, mild and stable cluster of citizens (Li 2008:172-221). They are expected and constructed by the government, according to Ren (2010:109),

Contribute powerfully to the cultivation of responsible subjects; who govern themselves within their residential communities; who stimulate market growth through their high consumption without challenging the sociopolitical orders; and who act as exemplary models of self-improvement and high quality.

In reality, China's middle class is first noticed to be confident and aggressive in consumption, since they have demonstrated their strength with an astonishing rate of consumption with regards to daily necessities (O'Leary 2007:12-4). Recently, they are noticed to be enthusiastic in purchasing luxuries to display their superior identity (Gao 2009:34-5).

Chinese middle class suffer from its anticipatory nature, when the government and academia are mapping out the emerging categories of social difference to produce their emergence in fact (Anagnost 2008:508). The Chinese middle class is still learning to maintain and perform their social status. Mass media plays a significant role in this process. But based on media's own imagination, it generally instructs the Chinese middle class to convey its social status in superficial symbols, such as living in guarded communities, taking Yoga classes and drinking coffee in Starbucks. They do not really like these, but they are likely to practice these to exhibit the membership of the middle class (Wei 2005:84-90). Shaped by the political agenda and media instructions which both emphasized on consumption and

materials, the Chinese middle class did become an ideal social stratum for both the media and government.

Some Chinese political sociologists, such as Ren (2010:105-27) and He (2006:67-83) have noticed another characteristic of the Chinese middle class who are shaped by the political will. On one hand, politics advocates the middle class to alleviate the polarization. On the other hand, politics constructs the Chinese middle class to be distant from politics. Wang (2009:53-54) argues, “The Chinese middle class is not the ideal style, carrying democratic values and acting as a mediator between the rich and the poor. In fact, they are primarily concerned with their wealth, personal finance, private properties, jobs and career training.” Li (2010:135-230) also finds the Chinese middle class’ interest in their own well-being and life enrichment reflects a strong utilitarian and pragmatic culture. They seek recognition and protection of their personal wealth from the government. That is their only motive to participate in political life. Shengnü are just typical Chinese middle class. They possess a high social status and maintain extensive consumption habits, but their political passion is weak.

However, the Chinese middle class are not monolithic. Previous academic writings of Chinese middle class did not elaborate on the female middle class. It is different from the male middle class because its right to an affluent life has to be verified by unit, family or marriage. I argue that Shengnü are not only disadvantaged for being middle class, but also for being middle class in a wrong way in public opinion. Moreover, existing literature, such as Wang (2011:153-4), only treated Shengnü as subdued victims in media discourse. But some media practitioners have launched a counterattack for Shengnü in middle class magazines.

## CHAPTER 2

### SHENGNÜIN MEDIA AND REALITY

#### Media Representation of Shengnü

The cover of the 21<sup>st</sup> issue *Xinmin Weekly* 2010 was titled as “The Complot of Shengnü.” It stated the integrative discourse of Shengnü was made out as a hook. “It dramatized single women’s lives and their misery. It overstated the competitive marriage market and Shengnü’s disfavored situation. The whole project was elaborately planned by the commercial force who aims at the match-making business or single people’s consumption.” *Xinmin Weekly* argues, “Shengnü are not abnormal. They are just enjoying another alternative of live. Being single, is a reasonable choice to them. They contributed to cultural diversity in metropolises. Therefore, they should be tolerated and respected.”

This defense of Shengnü from *Xinmin Weekly* came after the 11<sup>th</sup> issue of *New Weekly* named as *Shengnü Is a Reactionary Term*. *New Weekly* argues, “Media discourse demonized Shengnü and criticized their evil, as coming from their own vice, but single women are never devils. Their private business should not be interfered with by others.”

Despite this late defense, the melodramatic motif of Shengnü since 2006 has irrevocably defined the Shengnü issue as a serious problem. They are a bother to their families, even the whole society. On behalf of average citizens and grassroots, the prevailing trend of media discourse targets and markets Shengnü as a tricky problem or a symptom of over-liberation. Shengnü phenomenon was further elaborated by the popular newspapers and magazines, so that Shengnü are personally responsible for their problematic single status. After describing how many Shengnü there are and how pessimistic their situation is in the

marriage market, Shengnü reports came up with diagnosis. They pinpoint main problems that block a Shengnü's way to marriage.

In summary, Shengnü are not popular in the marriage market because they lack qualities or techniques to initiate and manage a relationship. Countless articles in popular newspapers and magazines analyze Shengnü in details, reaching similar conclusions to reveal their flaws.

For example, Shengnü articles claimed the majority of Shengnü are from the only-child generation. They have been coddled and spoiled by over-protective parents. Their self-centeredness leads to the picky and arrogant attitude (Ning 2009:14-5). In addition, they are basically materialists or gold diggers who request too much from their future husbands. Furthermore, Shengnü are devoid of ethical virtues that a good wife and mother should possess, such as cooking, cleaning, and needlework. Especially, news such as "China has become the second market in luxury business; Shengnü bolster the luxury market" (Wang 2010), claims Shengnü are selfish and narcissistic, prioritizing their own needs with huge amounts of consumptions. They are never ready to sacrifice their extravagant lives for real responsibilities (Zhang 2011:A11).

Moreover, Shengnü are not active enough. They are always passively waiting for men to court them, and they restrict themselves to the office in a fixed routine from home to work. They do not have a rich social life to meet potential spouses (Zhu 2009:C9). Based on this interpretation, Shengnü are indisputably responsible for their pathetic single status.

Correspondingly, Shengnü phenomenon that bothers vast families and the whole society was judged by the popular media as those single women's own faults.

Media discourse first problematized Shengnü, and then it manufactured self-help literatures to help Shengnü out. Fashion magazines, women sections in newspapers, and female channels in websites provide special guidance for Shengnü. Match-making companies also benefited from this expanding Shengnü phenomenon. The top 3 biggest Match-making websites in China, *Shijijiayuan* (Century Luck), *Zhenai* (True Love), *Baihe* (Lily), declared they have 27 million, 4 million and 20 million registered members respectively (Zhang 2009:45-8). Later on, several match-making reality shows on satellite TV channels ignited another national enthusiasm about love lives, among which *Feichengwura* tops. Probably because it is delicately programmed with dramas, gender wars and erratic, mean, and money-worshiping female figures (Gao 2011:35-9).

The blooming match-making business feeds media by commercial advertisements. Then media keeps reproducing Shengnü news and reviews as a rewarding theme. At the same time, the popular media conveys the mainstream will of average citizens who are most married men, women and elders. Those people still think marriage is a necessity for life. Shengnü are weird, pitiful and deviant in their eyes. The force of normalization is expressed in the popular media. It furthermore disseminates anxiety and panic among single young women and their parents. They have to resort to commercial assistances to solve their problem of being single. In summary, media discourse has problematized the single status of Shengnü. Their lives and characteristics are dramatized and sensationalized. Eventually, both vulnerable Shengnü and Shengnü phenomenon are commoditized.

### **Shengnü in Reality**

After reviewing news, articles and comments about Shengnü in journalism, they turned

to be a negative image. I looked forward to some reflective views. Then I tried to start my ethnography in the field which manufactures both Shengnü identity and discourse: journalism. My first interviewee, Xiao, is an editor from a famous middle class-oriented weekly in Guangzhou. At the time of our interview, she was just recovering from her boot of fatigue alone at home a few days ago. She initiated our conversation with a depressing prologue: “I know how miserable it sounds when a woman is passed out in her own home alone and has to call her colleagues to send her to the hospital, but that’s my life.”

As a chief editor of one of the most famous and influential weeklies in China, Xiao’s job is extremely demanding. She always works from 10 AM to 9 PM and frequently stays up late. Talking about Shengnü as a catch phrase, she frowned as most of my other interviewees did. It revealed their hearty dislike to this term. After briefly reviewing the media reports about Shengnü, Xiao led me in her home, a two-room-two-hall apartment, exquisitely decorated, in a newly constructed community in suburban Guangzhou. Including Xiao, 10 out of 13 informants rejected being identified as Shengnü, or accepted this naming reluctantly.

Xiao explained:

This word is full of discrimination and misunderstanding. Married media practitioners created this to make catchy news since the love life topics always get lots of attention, especially elders’. I used to do blind dates but gave up quickly. I hate the humiliating feeling of blind dates. It felt like I was a cabbage, being picked up and bargained with. You know being a journalist is definitely a deal breaker. Men prefer women with easy and stable jobs such as an elementary school teacher, or a secretary in a state-owned company. They need someone who can generally devote their time to the family and housework. But I cannot sacrifice my career. What I’m irritated most by is that they shaped Shengnü as workaholics not because they love their jobs but because they are not desired by men. That’s a man’s big ego.

As a professional journalist, Xiao is sensitive to the power of media discourse. She added:

I'm seriously concerned about mass media's effects upon Shengnü. A lie becomes truth when it's repeated. I'm just one of the thousands victims. I can read my male colleagues' eyes. They look at me with sympathy and disdain. It's like I have to be a workaholic to cover up my solitude. Married women' eyes are loaded with sympathy coupled with superiority. It was like marriage is the only path to happiness and I'm a lost lamb. I do not exclude marriage from my life on purpose. I'm just keeping dignity and taste. I act with caution. It's unfair only single women are devalued when they pass a certain age. Look, there is no such concept in America. Shengnü do exist in Japan as loser dogs. Japanese men are blamed for that instead of women.

Like Xiao, all my other interviewees said Shengnü was carved out to be sensational topic. They said it was an image invented by mass media and unfairly projected upon them.

All my informants admitted that they are "single aristocracy" (*danshengguizu*), single but keeping a decent and free life. They denied the discourse of Shengnü operated by the popular media as censors and interference. Wang, a 29-year-old website technician in the same weekly with Xiao in Guangzhou, explained:

Shengnü are highlighted by media to make money. But, yes, it's everywhere, newspapers, magazines and websites. They were irritating and annoying to begin with. It's like I'm depreciating every day. They intensified my anxiety and sense of crisis for a while. But now I'm getting used to it. People need entertainment after all. What topic can be better than Shengnü? It is full of drama and conflict between two generations, two genders and two camps (married and single). If you use feminism or liberalism to lecture people they will think this woman is so pathetic and desperate that has to use weird theories to defend herself. I don't want to make unnecessary arguments in my life. Let it be. I noticed there have been some good points in *China News Weekly* and *New Weekly*. That's great. Feminists in journalism started to fight back.

Bothered by the mocking term Shengnü, most of my informants would like to accept descriptions such as white-collar, middle class and career women in Shengnü discourse. They rejected words such as money worshipers, workaholic, and shopaholic that popular media threw at them. They wondered why society bothered so much with their single statuses.

Being single, is their private issue, not a huge social problem. My interviewees also

expressed their regrets at being a woman in China. Western women are frequently referred by them as ideal examples, because they think Western women freely enjoy their single lives without social pressure. In response to characteristics of luxurious fanaticism, being spoiled, or materialism, Xie, a 30-year-old junior bank manager at Wuhan had a lot to say.

I'm not going to look up to my future husband. I don't think men are worthy of reliance or trust nowadays. You still think marriage is a guarantee of happily living forever? I have to be a good money saver and smart at financing. Actually it was my parents' financial support that allowed me to purchase my own apartment. Even one day if I fight or quarrel with my husband I will have a place to cry. And they are very willing to offer me a graceful dowry such as decoration and furniture for the marital house. So I won't be looked down upon by my in-laws as a gold digger.

Like Xie, Shengnü's financial situations are usually very good. They do not have to rely on marriage for a living. Their parents do not expect betrothal gifts to make a big fortune either. Most of my interviewees have their own apartments. They are totally responsible for mortgages and other expense every month. Some of them even send money back to their parents to improve elders' life and show their filial piety. Parents' financial aids usually come as the down payments for housing. It is common praxis for parents to sponsor their only children's education, job searching, dating, weddings, housing and child-rearing nowadays in China (Chen 2008:21-3). My interviewees can be considered financially independent in daily life. Because they live independently far away from parents and reject their financial aids except for at critical moments.

Despite their good financial situations, most of my interviewees do not lower their standards when it comes to marriage, relationship, and ideal spouse. They stick to the same level of income as the bottom line, Wang, a 28-year-old magazine editor in Guangzhou represented this perspective of my interviewees. She said,

If his income is much lower than me, he is probably not middle class or white collar. It means a lot of unpleasant differences in habits, values and lifestyles so that our marriage would possibly be undermined. Establishing a family and having children is very expensive these days. Certainly no woman expects a poorer marital life than her single one.

Besides moderate financial situations, my informants particularly underscored communication, gender equality, and mutual respects in marriage. They expect their husbands to split housework and children-rearing fifty-fifty. They insist women still have the right to further promote their careers. Men should respect women's dedication to careers and help with housework. Wives' consumptions in makeup and clothes could be reduced but not ruled by men. My interviewees also expect to solve arguments and problems in marital life via communication and negotiation. More importantly, couples should give each other enough private space.

This perspective was claimed to relate to their growing up experience. "My parents didn't pay so much money to raise me to be someone's servant," Wang, the 28-year-old magazine editor in Guangzhou added. Parents love their single daughters and are proud of them. As one-child policy profoundly transformed gender norms in contemporary China, urban parents raised their daughters as their only hope. They expected their only daughters to realize their dreams and ambitions which had been violently smashed in Maoist age, such as going to university. The expectations for sons such as a well-paid job or a brilliant career are transferred to daughters (Feng and Yu 2009:23-37).

Therefore, a paradoxical situation of daughters in one-child generation was integrated into their growing up experience. Zhang, a 25-year-old magazine editor, and a rootless migrant in Beijing described, "Girls are expected to compete with boys in grades. They also need to establish a proper career by virtue of high education. Relationships were usually

forbidden when I was at school. But all of a sudden, my parents are shocked to find I had no boyfriend when I graduated.”

When only daughters are raised as sons in some respects, young women from the one-child generation are witnessed to achieve more and more (Wang 2007:75-9). Some of my informants indicated, it is men who fail to evolve with the new age. Liu, a 27-year-old game programmer in *Sina* at Beijing, the biggest web portal in China, said:

It seems to me that Shengnü are too good to be taken as a wife or girlfriend. It's ridiculous that men expect us to bear children, do all housework, and manage a sweet home for them as a harbor. Career women should do all of these along with their financial contributions. How shameless Chinese men are! Men and women have been evolving at different speed, and in contemporary China, men are not as superior as they like to think.

In summary, my interviewees cherished their careers very much and were disappointed by men. They pointed out Shengnü as a catch phrase, was created by men to shame single women. After finishing our theme of marriage, relationship, and family, my interviewees immediately shifted the topic to their leisure time. “I watch American TV programs, use Japanese or South Korean makeup, and I do spend a lot of time and money going to beauty parlor, gyms, on books, movies, CDs and traveling. But I'm not spending anyone else's money, that's all my earnings. How do I bother someone?” Li, a chief editor of a famous magazine in Guangzhou expressed her discontentment. At the same time, she was showing photos of her collections and travel pictures in her new iPhone4 to me.

Shengnü usually go shopping, hang out with friends or colleagues, and surf on the Internet when they are free. They usually listed reading, watching videos, and exercising as hobbies. Their consumption was obviously full of high-end and foreign brands. It is not rare to identify these women with Dior perfumes, Louis Vuitton handbags, and Burberry coats.

Sony cameras, Toshiba LCD screen TVs and Mac laptops are common in their homes. But their finances are in control, they said. And their consumption matches their income, Luo, a 27-year-old supervisor in a big foreign company at Shanghai explained:

I'm not a Shopaholic or fans of luxuries. The brands I consume are not luxurious or high-class. They are everywhere in the magazines and newspapers I read. Sometimes I'll purchase luxuries to reward myself. It's not like some vicious Shengnü news say that single women are healing their solitude with materials. Maybe I don't look like a good wife, wise mother (*xianqiliangmu*) in traditional Chinese ideology. I'm not good at cooking and housework, but I like to learn and improve these domestic skills when men do not completely exclude themselves from duties.

Luo is a Shanghai local, but she lives in her own apartment far away from her parents'.

My other interviewees are migrants to metropolises. Their parents live in their hometowns.

Media discourse also present parents of Shengnü using every way possible to help their single daughters. Take, for example, the following headlines: "Parents interview candidates in blind dates, but Shengnü themselves are absent" (Wu 2008) or "To push a Shengnü granddaughter to get married this year, a grandma pretends to be ill" (Hu 2009). But my informants said their parents' push is just limited in long-distance calls and hurried holiday visits.

I met Luo's parents when the supervisor in a big foreign company in Shanghai traveled to the U.S. for business. Although they frankly expressed their worry, this set of parents appeared calm and reasonable. The father knew there was little he could do about it: "I usually don't say anything to her although I'm very worried. Her mom talks to her about this. They have better communication since they are both women." As any other typical Chinese men born in the 1950s, Uncle Luo behaved as a reserved and serious householder. Aunt Liu, the mother added: "he just knew asking favors from acquaintances to seek out proper candidates. He doesn't talk to our daughter about this directly." Uncle Luo then defended his

daughter: “She is too busy. Why should I bother to trouble everyone in the family when she has just a little time to spend with us.”

Luo’s family is similar with my other interviewees’. Parents of Shengnü also realize the paradoxical situation for their daughters. Few of them ask their daughters to stop pursuing careers whole heartedly. Instead, parents are very proud of their daughters’ achievements. For example, when we finished talking about Shengnü, Uncle Luo immediately shifted the topic to announce a recent promotion of his daughter with pride glaring on his face. He concluded: “You should know that it is not just my daughter. Family or career? That’s always a question for career women.”

In regard to those flaws pointed out by media discourse, Shengnü do suffer from their demanding jobs which makes them too busy to date. They do not rely on men, but themselves to make huge personal consumptions, with loyalty to certain high-end brands. They have ambition in their careers. Therefore, they expect less duty or sacrifice in marriage. They are concerned about their own gain and loss in future marriage, which makes their choices and decisions about love life full of utilitarian weighing and comparison. They are not “good wife, wise mother” who are good at domestic skills or smart managers of family, but they think duties should be shared between them and their partners. Most importantly, my interviewees declared that they are not left over by men but stay single based on free choices.

They try to ignore the media representation of Shengnü but the reflection of them from people around them feeds back. They enjoy mass media at the same time, as well as embracing the global vision that popular newspapers and magazines provide in gender ideology as American or Japanese example they referred to were read in somewhere, and they

find themselves vulnerable to abundant materials the market and mass media display. They have been intensively affected by mass media, especially those middle class magazines and newspapers to arrange their consumption even lives.

### **The New Gender Dynamic**

Apparently, the primary reason of Shengnü's existence is the incompatible supply and demand in the marriage market. From male perspective, Shengnü do not match the ideal portrait of *Xianqiliangmu* (good wife, wise mother). By Shengnü's standpoint, no men are ideal enough to remove all their hesitation about marriage. The post-Mao China renders an unbridgeable chasm between two genders' outlooks in relationship and marriage. Higgs et al (2002:75-89) find out in their survey that "Chinese men hope for wives who are chaste, beautiful, healthy and inferior to themselves. Chinese women, after personality, place greater value on intelligence, income and occupation in the mating process, and they are more concerned to seek a husband who is superior to themselves."

The post-Mao China also renders a gap between women's outlook and reality. It is well known that the working mother is indeed the majority in urban China, because housewives are not as acceptable and affordable in China as in Western societies (Gong 2009:478-80). Since women are supposed to be in charge of housework and child-rearing, working mothers juggle jobs and families at the same time (Zhang et al 2008:1529-60). But the jobs they keep should be easy, flexible and trivial. Hence, women who are elementary school teachers or secretaries in administrative institutions are preferred than journalists or doctors in the marriage market (Chinese Association of Studies of Marriages and Relationships 2010). Marriage means changing jobs to an easy and trivial one which

relentlessly ruins Shengnü's ambitions and past efforts. According to Cao and Hu (2007:1548), "Married women are found less likely to change jobs to improve their work/career but more likely to experience family-oriented job changes and involuntary terminations." Otherwise, the laborious juggling will decrease women's beauty, leisure time and consumption. Shengnü are well acknowledged that in the Chinese context they have to quit the positions they struggled to possess, or bear double burdens.

Shengnü emphasize on the equal share of family chores and harmonious companionship for benign marital interactions. Unfortunately, in contemporary China, Xu (2011: 45) find in their survey that "For women, expectations for change seem to be occurring faster than actual change in domestic labor." Tu and Liao (2005:545-66) also argue:

The push to egalitarianism in family and social structure and state-mandated attitude seems to have produced a backlash among men, such that younger men are far less egalitarian than their older counterparts. Men married before or during Maoist period are happier in their marriage when they are more egalitarian in attitude and in actual behavior. Men who came of age and married after their reacting quite negatively to ideals of gender equality and place their wives of egalitarian in way that is destructive to marriage.

In this context, the new gender dynamic in both career and family Shengnü wishes are not well realized in reality. As a matter of fact, domestic labors are still devalued or at least underestimated in China. Women's contributions and sacrifices for family are barely respected or compensated, both in legal system and public culture (Li 1997:16). In their current condition, the only attractiveness of marriage to Shengnü, those independent and ambitious women, is the normality that will shelter them from being marginal and problematic. However, their deep desire for intimacy, emotional bounds, and unconditional love has to be suspended.

In conclusion, Shengnü are both the consequence and embodiment of the changing

gender dynamic in China. On one hand, they were enlightened by the market economy and Western ideology to pursue career and equal marriage. On the other hand, they are stuck in the gap between ideology and reality when the new gender dynamic in China still place more importance on women's domestic roles.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SHENGNÜ

#### The Genealogy of “Good Wife Wise Mother”

One significant reason that Shengnü are disadvantaged in the marriage market is they do not appear *xianqiliangmu* (good wife, wise mother), which has been modeled in this age with some new features. As a traditional Chinese term with long history, it seems the post-Mao age incurs a revival of this term which was embedded in traditional Chinese society and eliminated in Maoist age. I argue the cultural connotations of “good wife, wise mother” actually bear different characteristics in different social systems of different times.

In the feudal Chinese society, a good wife, wise mother only exists as a sex symbol without subject consciousness. The main gender norms and family ethics for women were *sancongside* (three obedience and four virtues). Wang (2000:5-8) argues “It requested women to unconditionally obey and follow their husbands. Deprived of career, women were restricted to domestic roles. It indicates women’s full devotion to their husbands and children.”

During the Republican era since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese struck by the modern world found the feudal gender dynamic was not healthy for the nation. Sakamoto (2004:340-68) concludes:

Women were emphasized as the mother of the nation, as mothers for strengthening the race and nation, as strategy to raise the status of women along with the women’s suffrage movement. Women’s liberation and the ideal of a new social utopia and communes become strategic in arguments against the patriarchal ideology in the Confucian ideology to create intelligent healthy and independent national subjects.

Along with that, the themes of romantic love and new home were raised. Model

homes were idealized as a monogamous couple with few children based on a loving marriage (Cheng and Zhang 2005:35). In this model, a “good wife, wise mother” was obligated to improve herself for the sake of her children and for the whole nation. Motherhood was significant for women’s identity, in other words, as Sakamoto (2004:351) claims: “Unless women made a contribution to reproduction as mothers, their attempts at self-assertion would be groundless.”

In the socialist age, Premier Zhou claimed the term “good wife, wise mother” was a kind of feudal and patriarchal ideology enslaving women in family (Cheng and Zhang 2005:37). As good citizens and comrades, women were conducted by CPC to step out of family, to obtain the right to participate in public labor, and to win their liberation. Wang (2000:5-8) indicates “This socialist women’s emancipation did render some social roles and space to women, but it did not transfer women’s domestic duty to men. Ideal women in Maoist age were dedicative and loyal citizens to the nation, Party and Chairmen Mao, and part of this dedication should be fulfilled in reproduction for the nation’s productivity.” Since that age, Chinese women were supposed to be in duty bound to both the nation and family.

Nowadays in post-Mao age, the market economy inspired more women into career, especially urban young women. Career women, rather than housewives are the majority (Gong 2009:478-80). Then in post-Mao China, some new features are added to the term “good wife wise mother.” First, a good wife, wise mother in the new age is supposed to be a better manager of her job and family than before. Xue and Li (2001:11-3) states “She is able to maintain a happy and peaceful home with her education and knowledge. With more qualities and techniques, a good wife wise mother in new age will maintain her family with

high quality.” This aspect echoes with the thought of the Republican era which advocates better mothers, better nation. Second, “good wife, wise mother” serves as a summoning of “back to family.” Li (1993:14) and Li (2006:12) argue this ideological weapon unfairly forces women back to family by assuming they universally belong in the domestic arena. As a revival of gender discrimination, it is also a strategy to alleviate the competition and redundancy in the job market whenever the economy needs.

Then in post-Mao era, the gender ideology still gives more credit to women’s achievements in family as wives and mothers. It does not go directly against women’s social development, but eventually regresses to the traditional gendered labor division “men outside women inside.” Therefore, a “good wife, wise mother” plus a job have been idealized and propagandized in public culture. However, Shengnü desire a career rather than a job. Shengnü topic in media, in this sense, functions as a regulation, to conduct Shengnü in reality to be the ideal women. Like Shengnü’s parents, media discourse rarely opposes their hard pursuits in career, but strongly insist on the necessity of marriage. Many people around Shengnü along with the media discourse always quote a traditional proverb “All the people of suitable age should get married” (*Nandadanghun, Nǚdadangjia*) to lecture Shengnü. Shengnü are marked out by the media discourse and are blamed for their violation of the necessity of marriage.

Butler (Mansfield 2002:140) reminds us, “Failing to perform gender in the right way can meet with social isolation and mockery, violence.” Media discourse firstly concluded that Shengnü failed in the marriage market because of failing to have the appropriate femininity, which is being a career women and good wife, wise mother at the same time. Then media

discourse, following Foucault's theory, serves as disciplinary regimes. It represents the will of social norms which refine possibilities of sex, gender, and sexuality to be coherent or natural (Mansfield 2002:58-9). Those regulative discourses attempt to correct the routine of these abnormal women, back to mainstream notions. The media discourse offers analysis, instructions and advices to push Shengnü into marriage. Shengnü do not only challenge the imperative of marriage, ideal femininity of this epoch, but the standard frame of being women which is determined by, and for the good of the male-dominating society.

### **Iron Girls, Strong Women and Shengnü**

Shengnü are problematized primarily because they violate the necessity of marriage. Although they are certainly not the first group of single women being censured. As the troubling rim of the new gender dynamic, Shengnü phenomenon resonates with serial historical precedents such as Iron Girls and Strong Women. They are all women displaying excessive masculinity but treated differently in public culture. Based on Shengnü and similar precedents, I contend, Shengnü phenomenon is not only socially constructed by changing ideology of gender and marriage, but also intertwined with certain economic, political and social mechanisms.

Iron Girls (*tieguniang*) were icons of masculine women in Maoist era. The Iron Girl Movement in Maoist era was a national campaign in which women were organized and encouraged to enter traditional male occupations. Women worked in heavy industries such as drilling, steelmaking and bridge-building. Maoist gender agenda attempted to reach gender equality by encouraging women do everything men do, including heavy labors and violent political conflicts. Being part of the gender strategy in Maoist era, Iron Girl Movement

attempted to desexualize women by masculinizing them to achieve emancipation and gender equality. Eventually, Iron Girl diminished as soon as Maoist age ended. It received a lot of critiques from men and social scholars because it caused a lot of women physical injury and devoured of femininity (Jiang 2000:135-151). Jin (2006:324) states, “Iron Girl Movement distorted gender equality by taking the male standard as the norm, and such a misinterpretation constitutes a misleading form of women’s emancipation.”

Moreover, the hidden purpose of this campaign had been revealed. It was less related to women’s emancipation but more about the economy. Iron Girls were manufactured by the economic complexity. At that time, the extremely low productivity of the newly founded PRC could not fulfill the Maoist economic-political agenda, which prioritized heavy industries and infrastructure to consolidate the nation. As Jiang (2000:135-151) states, “Iron Girls were actually constructed to serve as a reserve labor force and to compensate for the labor shortage caused by the outflow of men’s labor, not for the purpose of creating gender equality.”

Instead of political campaigns, mobilized Chinese women are mobilized by the market mechanism in the post-Mao era. Strong Women (*nǚqiāngren*) appeared in 1990s. They were successful women who achieved a lot in business or politics. They acted like men in a strong and tough way. Even worse than Shengnǚ, Strong Women were almost a taboo in the marriage market. Men ran away immediately because nobody was willing to take his wife as the leader or superior in family. Strong Women lived in awe but outside marriage. Or imaginations about their marriages characterized their husbands as cowardly slaves (Zhu 1997:39-43; Zhou 1997:15-18).

The latest example of excessive masculinity is Shengnü. They seem to be better treated than Strong Women. The media representation is more merciful to Shengnü than to Strong Women. Strong Women were modeled as a tough and masculine figure. Shengnü in both the media representation and reality are quite women with beautiful dresses and high heels. Shengnü's excessive masculinity lies in their excellence in careers rather than their appearance, and establishing a marriage for them is not as impossible as for Strong Women.

Based on these three cases of excessive masculinity of women, I argue that gender norms of certain historical period are interwoven with specific economic, political and social situations. Barlow (2004:3-43) states, "Chinese femininity is profoundly interwoven with political, economic, and social realities. Various idealized types of women were carved out and staged front. They have to accomplish socio-historical missions." The integrative social complexity owns the right to narrate and regulate appropriate ways of being women in China.

Ever-lasting gender norms such as "All the people of suitable age should get married" (*Nandadanghun, Nǚdadangjia*) always function, but different political-social situations shape the exact format and extent of regulative discourse. The newly founded PRC needed masculinized women to construct heavy industries and infrastructure, so the political agenda called Iron Girls to finish the historical mission to solidify the base of PRC. Sheltered by explicit political campaign, Iron Girls were idealized as good daughters of the country even though devoid of femininity (Jin 2006:326). They had not been accused or mocked in public.

In post-Mao era, Chinese economy shifted its focus from heavy industries to manufacturing and service industry where female laborers are highly demanded. Chinese women were allocated by the market mechanism, to gather in labor-intensive industries,

service trades, and small and medium-sized enterprises (Lin 2008:125-67). Female manual workers were praised as honorable laborers (Li 2005:75-90). Strong Women came out as a threatening and unpredictable surprise. No one expected women to succeed in high-end professions such as big enterprises or politics monopolized by men. Their masculinity was so prominent and offensive because they were closely linked to power. Therefore, Strong Women had to be dehumanized as superwomen or working robots which only live in reverence.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, sayings of Strong Women faded away by virtue of the upgrading industrial structure, which breeds high-tech and high-intellectual industries (Lin 2008:189-241). More and more well-educated women from the one-child generation engage in intellectual industries and white-collar occupations. Successful women in middle class are not as threatening or challenging as Strong Women were. After all, Shengnü are middle class and clustering in normal white-collar professions. They are not as powerful as Strong Women. Therefore, media discourse treats them differently. While Strong Women were imagined as tough and unapproachable, media discourse mainly persuade Shengnü back to family or restating marriage is also important.

Cao and Hu (2007:1558) state, “The deployment of the gender equality discourse of ‘men and women are the same’ was a strategy aimed at stimulating women to contribute more.” Indeed, China’s rocketing economy heavily relies on human resources (Lin 2008:23-78; Rawski 2011:33-78). Women are transformed to packages of various capital which should sustain both the market and domestic arenas. The market stimulated women to contribute more. They have to keep a balance with both kinds of demands. Otherwise,

mocking titles such as Shengnü will be attached to them, and this time, the political agenda is not on those abnormal women's side.

I argue that Shengnü cannot stay away from the regulative discourse like Iron Girls because they were not sheltered by political agenda. They are totally exposed to the lingering patriarchy and conventional gender norms like Strong Women were, but criticism that Shengnü receive is milder than Strong Women did. The upgrading economy and improving gender equality in the market make successful career women more and more common and acceptable.

In addition, this socioeconomic situation in post-Mao era also changed the dynamics of masculinity/femininity. The post-Maoist age with market economy shifts the core of economic growth from physical labor to non-manual work. Masculinity is more related to success, wealth and competence than physical appearance such as muscle or strength (Zhen et al 2005:47-9). The abnormality or excessive masculinity also changed with that. When masculinity was more related with physical appearance, the abnormality of women was also linked to their appearance, dressing and manner, such as for Iron Girls and Strong Women. When masculinity is more about competence and success in career, the excessive abnormality no longer means masculine appearance but high achievements in career, such as for Shengnü.

### **Shengnü and the Current Trend of Development in China**

As I present in Introduction, the post-Mao era with market economy has brought tremendous developments to Chinese society. From planned economy to market economy, the current development mode of China released a huge range of power to the market with its inherent blemish such as backwardness and blindness. Chinese individuals who used to be

directly governed and controlled by the government are now primarily embedded with market mechanism (Zhou 2005:11-59). Even the market economy in China has always been in macro control by the government; Chinese government also blindly pursued economic growth till 2006 (Qin 2009:19-108). I argue, in addition to Shengnü's single status, their similar routine of life is also determined by this particular socioeconomic situation in China.

During the Maoist age, for a long time, the economic development was second to the political conflict. People's contributions to the construction of industry and infrastructure of China titled with collectivism or communism as necessary devotion. And the routine of individuals were highly determined by the government and political need (Li and Xiao 2008:86-95). Especially the basic necessities of life were rigidly planned and allocated according to *hukou* a household registration system which effectively chained people in their homeland and made migration on personal intention fatal and impossible (Davis 1993:28-56).

In post-Mao era, when economic growth became the national pursuit despite its simplex and utilitarian essence since 1980's, China has been using rigid indexes such as GDP, urban population and ratio of industry to measure its own level of economic growth. Local governments and corporations simply adore GDP and other superficial figures. There was once a trend that the nation eagerly pushed economic growth in expense of everything (He 1998:45-98, Qin 2009:19-108).

Besides the overemphasis of economic growth, there is another defect of the development trend: disequilibrium. He (1998:74-122) criticizes, "China has adapted an imbalance strategy. It first developed coastal areas, regions along the Yangtze River, capitals

of provinces, and the government only gave privileges to certain industries. The market economy in macro-control of the government has transferred all resources, including human resources, to several areas, industries and regimes.”

Li and Kingsley (2011:157-9) echoed this point, “the rapid economic growth in the past ten years increases regional disparity in China. Every province has indicated that large differences exist in the process of industrial transition.” After the market replaced the planned supply, several metropolises developed in advance caused the hugest migration in the world. Almost 0.3 billion migrants in China are moving from rural to urban areas or from small cities to metropolises. Big cities which are mostly developed, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou along with a few coastal provinces, experienced population explosions because migrating people thought these places were ahead of everything else. (Gu et al, 2008:117-85).

Besides this national development trend, the government also tried to improve its citizens to be more capable practitioners of the market economy. To boost individual competitiveness and fitness in the market economy, Woronov (2009:586-9) found in education, “The government encourages creativity, initiative and competition which are coherent with market logic.” Young Chinese as emulative and aspirant individuals voluntarily inspire themselves to eagerly pursue maximum “economic growth” in individual level: personal wealth.

As a part of national development trend, the development trend of Chinese individuals has the same defects with the national one: the unbalanced approach. It distributes all resources to certain regions and further increases disequilibrium. When the national development mode prioritizes economic growth, young Chinese pour in the most profitable

fields to maximize their personal wealth. According to a national job preference studies by Wang (2010:347-438), “Global 500 Companies, state banks and general headquarters of national institutions which only hold branches in metropolises are considered as broad and promising stages for young people to be promoted, recognized and valued.”

The development mode for every young Chinese can be summarized as: holding important occupations in significant companies in central and best-developed regions; and having personal influences or achievements in decent and profiting industries such as finance, international trades, banking, counseling and media (Wang 2010:158-274; Zhu 2009:4).

The mainstream mode erases diversity of life plans and ignores personal interests, but it firmly and effectively determines what successful life is. It defines how one ought to be realized and to where one makes a fortune quickest. It addresses Chinese individuals to squeeze into several developed metropolises, professions and enterprises.

The current development mode does not only instruct people how to act but also how to think. Economic growth is not only the primary goal and long-term process for China, but also the most fundamental variable to judge, measure and criticize people and regions. Gradually, the development mode has evolved to values based on regional disparity of economy. For example, rural areas are obviously less developed than urban areas, so everything relevant to rural areas is low-end and rustic. Metropolises are definitely more modern and noble so are their local people (Sun 2009:617-42). People speak Cantonese and Shanghainess with a sense of superiority while people with northern accents (except Beijing) will possibly be looked down upon (Chen 2003:21-3). Economy and levels of it turn out to be the core index. This hierarchy based on economy not only accepts inequality but also

reinforces it by building up ideological narratives. It sets up a systematic standard to assess professions, residences, literacy, dressing, even accents (Sigley 2009:537-66; Yan 2003:493-523; Tamara 2009:523-31).

In review of their important life choices, my interviewees gave answers no more than “everybody says it is good and I think so too” when it came to choosing schools, majors, jobs, and residences. They have perfectly internalized what have been described to be a smooth way to a well-off life and middle-class status. Therefore, they made every step of their lives according to the mainstream routine. They are stuck in the development trend which jeopardizes upward social mobility. This makes keeping current status very demanding. They cannot afford big changes such as marriage because it probably renders an alteration to their residence, occupations or lifestyles. For example, Dong, a 28-year-old reporter in Beijing said.

Actually, people in metropolises are more and more tolerant to postponed marriages. Nobody is sincerely willing to get involved into others’ personal issues here. We live in indifferent and strange metropolises. It’s easier to get married in my hometown with assistance from my family, but I dare not to leave Beijing. It’s an honor to me and my parents that I have a good career in the capital. Because no matter how terrible your life in metropolises really is, people back in your hometown still think it’s better to stay in Beijing. The capital must be a better location for everything. I’ve experienced all the toughness as a woman alone in Beijing, but only if for marriage, I’m not going back. Even if I went back, I wouldn’t get used to the bland and slow life there. I think I would be defeated by the sense of being a loser.

Like Dong, my interviewees were generally born in small cities and migrated to metropolises after they graduated from college. They have already settled down in metropolises. Their careers have thrived there, and their housing problems have been generally solved. Although every interviewee complained that their current jobs are tiring and stressful, it seemed implausible for them to go back. They dare not interrupt their promising

careers. They dare not confront possible shames when they return: be considered as loser who cannot maintain decent middle-class life, and lost a bright future.

I finally questioned them whether they desire a comfortable home rather than fight for a career. Xie, a junior bank manager in Wuhan answered, “absolutely, but just cannot help thinking and acting in a current routine without overwhelming external force.” She started to doubt if she has been educated in a wrong way to be rational and realistic:

I sometimes wish I hadn't been so good when I was in school; I didn't get into a famous university; I didn't have ambitions and dreams for a career. I wish I were just like average women relying on family, and my husband and child were my entire world, but all the education, knowledge, desires I've got made me just live a bland life. My authentic dream was to be a comic author, which was seriously criticized by my mother as “if you ended up like that why you studied 24/7 in high school to get into a famous university? Why did you even bother majoring in finance?” Then here I am, working in a bank, and everyone is envious. Though it's very stressful and boring, I have to hang on this job to live up to others' expectations.

Like Xie, most Shengnü live up to the expectations of their parents. They also contribute to the market economy. Contemporary China has summoned all Chinese participating in the race of getting rich. The market offered women more social space to realize their desires and ambitions in their career, but following the market mechanism which has inherent blemishes such as blindness and spontaneity, individuals' desires and ambitions are easy to be channeled in an identical routine. This then makes crowdedness. As Yan (2003: 498) argues, “Chinese therefore are subjected to, make sense of, and reflect on a range of mainstream discourses circulating in public culture about development, self-worth, quality, individual and collective longings and struggles.” All of these ideological formations intensify the inequality and disequilibrium. It ironically inhibits, rather than facilitates upward social mobility that everyone desires (Anagnost 2004:189-208; Sun 2009:617-42).

Althusser (Mansfield 2000:53) states, “People in societies do not develop according to its own wants, talents and desires, but exists for the system that needs it. The pervasive public reality calls it into a certain kind of being by social apparatus. The internal desires and demands are one type of being we become as we fit into the needs of the larger political or economic imperatives.” Encapsulated in the current development trend, I argue Shengnü are socially constructed to conform to the overwhelming development trend. Even if it catastrophically ignores gender differences and personal interests, Shengnü are willing to try their best to stay in the crowded and competitive companies, industries and residence, because they cherish these as main achievements and believe these are their best choices.

Moreover, the current development mode for Chinese individuals does not only erase diversity, but is also based on a male-centric paradigm. It measures value and success of people in a masculine way as wealth and social status become the most crucial variables. In this framework, domestic labors such as housework, child-rearing are not valued. Achievements in family and reproduction are not well commended or re-estimated, and are continually excluded or omitted from the main theme of personal achievements. Shengnü emerged when both women and men, blueprint their lives in one format, in response to distinct social requests.

In conclusion, I argue the dilemma of Shengnü is constituted by defects of the current development trend, such as the deleterious lack of diversity and the disregard of differences in gender, class, region and individual. As the development mode has drawn up the common routine, Shengnü are socially goaded to march forward in the mainstream but crowded way.

Shengnü comply with the dominant development trend which educates them to make achievements according to a male-centric standard. They simply put marriage on the opposite side of their achievements. In order to maintain what they have got and achieve more in the current routine, Shengnü have to stay single.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE EMBODIMENT OF SOCIAL ANXIETY

#### The Middle Classness of Shengnü

Shengnü are accused by the media discourse primarily because they fail to conform to conventional gender norms. However, being single or not womanly enough are not their only troubles. In contrast with female migrant workers (*dagongmei*), I argue that Shengnü appear prominent and offensive also because of their class. Their social status and single status reinforce each other so that Shengnü strongly suggest a threatening abnormal group of people.

As a matter of fact, Shengnü are not the only group who experience difficulties in establishing marriage in urban China. The remarkable gap between rural and urban areas in China has mobilized a massive population into cities. Various families, courtships and marriages have been interrupted by this national migration (Yan 2008: 265-288). Millions of young rural women who move to large cities for better pay encounter a lot of barriers in establishing marriage (Pan 2006: 11-54).

Female migrant workers come from rural areas, and cluster in factories, production lines, or serve as waitresses or cleaners. Their salaries in cities, though better than what they could gain in villages, are still too inferior to provide affluent lives and urban social welfare. As migrants, they live far away from their homes (Flemming 2007:125-32). They are not fully incorporated into urban society yet. They frequently change jobs, but they do not tend to go back. Convinced by the strong contrast between urban and rural areas, they believe they would be better off in cities (Gaetano 2008:637-45). In Chinese literature about female

migrant workers, they are considered as victims because their marriages are hindered or jeopardized by the rural-urban duality, which exploits their labors and bodies (Pan 2006:78-95).

In respect of marriages, they suffer from instability and poverty if they marry male rural-to-urban workers. The couples maintain low-paying and temporary jobs and move from one place to another. If female migrant workers marry urban residents, they have to bear discrimination. They become housewives and have a low status in the families they marry into (Flemming 2007:128-32). Gaetano (2008:640-5) points out, “female migrant workers who enter freely chosen love marriages may experience more control over their post-marital household and family. Those who marry up, continue to experience discrimination on the basis of gender and rural origin.”

In this condition, female migrant workers do not expect too much in marriage. Fleming (2007:128-32) states, “Marriages happen to them mostly between rural-to-urban migrants rather than rural women and urban men. They look favorably on those with savings or some marketable skill or technical ability.” Correspondingly, this relatively simple standard makes female migrant workers marry earlier and easier than Shengnü.

Compared with female migrant workers, Shengnü can attribute their single status for to being picky. Female migrant workers are victims of the current economic mechanism while Shengnü’s problems originated from their own aspirations of their lives. According to the media discourse, migrant female workers do hard labor. They send back most of their incomes to aid their families in remote villages. Shengnü enjoy affluent single lives with no family burdens because their urban parents have enough put away. Female migrant workers

dream about romantic love and stable marriages but are confined by their social status (Pan 2006:113-76). Shengnü gaze around to choose among good candidates but are never satisfied (Zhou 2010:B8).

The media representation marks out Shengnü's middle classness as their superiority. Compared to disadvantaged groups such as diligent, plain and selfless female migrant workers, Shengnü are characterized as proud, selfish and epicurean. In summary, Shengnü's middle classness functions as a significant trait bolstering the regulative media discourse towards Shengnü.

Maybe not as exaggerated or sarcastic as the media presents, the consciousness of class was explicitly expressed by Shengnü. This can be proved by the location they chose to have interviews. McDonalds' may be fast-food restaurants in America but revalued by Chinese as a hallmark of fashion, middle class, and recreation culture (Davis 2000:216-273). They stick to middle class styles and tastes, as I have demonstrated their preferences in foreign and high-end brands in Chapter 2. My interviewees also stressed their class verbally. Take, for example, following sayings: "My income may be a little below middle class level but I love my life this way" or "I do love middle class style. I'm glad that I have choices, and I can afford a middle class life as a single woman when my married friends suffer declines in their quality of life."

It is fair to claim Shengnü do exhibit middle classness as a crucial constitution of their identity and lifestyle, which is exclusive to average people. I argue Shengnü's middle classness is socially constructed by the political agenda and some popular newspapers and magazines which anticipates a blooming Chinese middle class, and this middle classness

causes Shengnü's disadvantaged position in the public eye.

### *Unlovable Chinese Middle Class*

As I addressd in the Literature Review, Chinese academia and political agenda prefer using occupation, income and education as an integrative system to define middle class. But rigid variables such as jobs or incomes are inconvenient for well-off Chinese to display their middle classness. In addition, the Chinese middle class as a social stratum lacks the autonomous progress to mature. Middle-income citizens emerged first, and then they were sorted out as the Chinese middle class by an impatient political agenda and academy which tried to form a middle class in advance (Zou 2010:127). In this context, the Chinese middle class suffered and its anticipatory nature had to explore itself as a cultural category as much as a political and economic one (Feng 2005:99-102).

A lot of middle-class media appeared to guide the Chinese middle class. There are financial magazines like *Finance*, *New Finance*, and *21<sup>st</sup> Century Economic News*. And there are newsletters such as *New Weekly*, *Chinese News Weekly*, and *Sanlian Life Weekly*. They reshaped elites, professional, white-collar, and intellectual people with Chinese characteristics. Middle class media basically outlined the Chinese middle class life and forged the middle class in details. By delivering instructions of being middle class, the middleclass media subjectively designates values and privileges to certain brands, consumption habits, and lifestyles(Cui and Song 2009:38-41).

The Chinese middle class were constructed to heavily rely on media configuration and symbolic signs to behave their identity (He 2009:15-109). They learn to play golf and do Yoga; they like to use iPhone and Mac; they travel to Maldives and Lijiang. Even if they do

not really like these, the Chinese middle class practices these to show their high tastes (Wei 2005:84-90). Middle classness is more and more conveyed in brands, luxuries, and labels (Lei and He 2007:19-21). According to my interviewees, Shengnü are also loyal readers of these middle class magazines, even producers of them. Like other middle class, they forge their middle class life strictly according to the instructions of middle class media.

Due to the commercial nature of those middle class newspapers and magazines, the line between reportage and advertising has become very blurred. As Anagnost (2008:508) argues, “The text reads as a seductive solicitation to the reader to identify him or herself as middle class and to realize this identity through choice of consumption. To perform middle class according to media’s instructions becomes a way of fixing one’s location in the grid of newly possible social position.”

More importantly, Chinese middle class’ identity has to fit into the political agenda. They should be ideal citizens who stimulate market growth through high consumption without challenging the sociopolitical orders. Wang (2009:54) indicates,

Within political construction, Chinese middle class differentiate from Western type by their indifference to democracy and politics, indolence in revolution and irresponsibility to the entire welfare of society. Instead of acting as a mediator between the poor and the rich, Chinese middle class developed to a social stratum only concerning its own interests.

The Chinese middle class, based on media and political construction, cares more about personal interest and self-defense, and few hints indicate the burgeoning Chinese middle class will bring democracy to Chinese society. Rather as a mediator and stabilizer for different classes in Chinese society, they are more likely to be guarded and privileged insiders of vested interests (Wei 2007:148-261).

In summary, the Chinese middle class has been socially constructed by the political

agenda along with middle class newspapers and magazines to be aggressive consumers and passive citizens. It stirs resentment from average citizens who are excluded from sharing the benefits of the reform. Social stratification leads to the extreme disparity between rich and poor, which has reached 0.45 in Gini Index, beyond the international cordon (Shi 2003:22-5). This class disparity, as an impassable chasm, frustrates Chinese populace and engenders hostility to all well-off people (Sun 2007:38-42). When new welfare system and redistribution mechanism have not been formed, the deep desire for better social welfare and more equality has only to be channeled as *choufuxinli* (resentment of the rich) (Xue 2009:11-58). The Chinese middle class appears like the embodiment of unequal wealth distribution, rather than a stabilizer for Chinese society. Therefore, a gender topic such as Shengnü easily turns to be the outlet of the deep-down resentment.

### *The Most Vulnerable Middle Class*

Among the Chinese middle class who are unpopular in average citizens, Shengnü as single women are unfortunately stuck in the worst position. I argue that Shengnü' is problematized for being middle class in a wrong way. They do not match the ideal portrait of the Chinese middle class in both political agenda and public culture. As a violation or exception of the exemplary model of the middle class, they are the most vulnerable group in middle class to be attacked.

In the official agenda, the government expects citizens governing themselves in family, community, and region, particularly in the elementary unit such as harmonious family (People Press 2006:1-40). The nation-sweeping socialist ideology campaign of "Harmonious Society, Harmonious Family" was launched since 2006. It aims to reconstruct socialist

ideology of well-off families, stable and fulfilling responsibilities with family value so as to create a society of order and peace. The political agenda also expects the middle class to play the most significant role in stabilizing Chinese society which is experiencing rapid social stratification and polarization. Therefore, especially during this historical period, middle class families are the cornerstone for harmonious society and stable social orders (Li 2008:23-56; Ren 2010:106-18).

Within this framework, harmonious family, harmonious community, moving towards a harmonious society is the legal chain of governance, which operates on collectivity, instead of individuality (Li 2008:325-404). In the political agenda and official discourse about middle class, the well-off, happy and harmonious middle class life only exists in the format of family.

Within middle class families, women are expected and encouraged to run a harmonious family by playing common roles such as a wife and mother. For the middle class women, their right of enjoying affluent lives only gets endorsed in family, and in conventional female roles. The official narrative of middle class is pivoted with units, leaving no space for single middle class women.

The political propaganda is not the only source of this construction of the middle class ideal. Commercial language and public culture also propose the middle class as a promising market. They use “middle class” as an abstract label to characterize a transnational experience and lifestyle as a “successful person,” which is usually portrayed in advertisements as a married middle-aged businessman. Huang (2011:89-152) demonstrates, “he wears designer labels, drives a fancy car, socializes in bars, and attends concerts. He

enjoys a practical existence of comfortable life, the prestige power of his wealth, and a cultivated appreciation.”

Moreover, this illustration of upper or middle class lifestyle is mainly masculine or male-centric. Women only exist as a wife and mother. Ma illustrates (2009:17-85), “in advertisements, she waves the successful man goodbye in the morning, or stops cooking and welcomes the husband back from work.” The middle-class family is idealized as a site where the quality of life is concretized through consuming high-quality commodities, including feminine qualities and romantic fantasies. Women perform the role of *Xianqiliangmu* (good wife, wise mother). They are fashioned into hostesses who are appeased and fulfilled in this affluent middle class domestic setting.

A transnational middle-class culture and an indigenous “Harmonious society, Harmonious family” campaign take effects together. They reshape middle class women to be the administrators of domestic consumptions and romanticized feminine virtues. On the contrary, Shengnü, as a stereotypical “she” instead of “he” wears designer labels, drives a fancy car, socializes in bars and nightclubs, and attends concerts. Shengnü’s well-off lives are not incorporated into units. Their affluent, materialistic lives are not compensated by their devotions as a wife or mother. These make them repulsively conspicuous in sharp social stratification, and vulnerable in the public culture.

As female, migrant, and individual middle class, they are empowered by their social status but not anchored in marriage or family. Therefore, Shengnü imply threats and instability, which make them prominent and accusable.

### **Integrative Embodiments of Social Anxieties**

In the case of media discourse of Shengnü, their representation of Shengnü always contains exaggerations or overgeneralizations. For example, Shengnü have sufficient income, so they are definitely fans of luxury and embodiments of consumerism. They appreciate liberal life styles, so they probably engage in immoral sex and relationships. They are desperate to seek a spouse, so they have huge potential to steal others' husbands as the third party.

All these implications are related to other disorders that exist in contemporary China but wrapped up in one term Shengnü without strong evidence. I argue, the media discourse of Shengnü does not only reflect Shengnü phenomenon itself, but also implies other social phenomena and people's anxieties of them.

In addition to social stratification, the market economy has also brought tremendous changes in the praxis of marriage, relationships and sex. Love life and sexuality have been affected by various cultures and ideologies which used to be foreign in China. This transitional ideology inevitably leads to immorality and chaos (Farrer 2002:16-98). The rocketing increase of divorce, premarital cohabitation, trial marriage, flash marriage, and premarital sex among young people shake Chinese (Pan 2009:37-108). As Chinese are still learning to handle these changes, the populace have taken a deep aversion to some unethical behaviors and lifestyles (Xiang and Liu 2011:15-67).

In the market, not every woman can realize their pursuits of personal wealth via intellectual capital as Shengnü. Some women exchange their bodies for benefits (Xiang and Liu 2011:9-45). *Ernai* are concubines for rich married men, prostitute themselves for a better material life, and they are very common in developed areas (Wu 2001:10-2). *Xiaosan*, the

third party, target successful men and expect to replace their aging housewives by virtue of youth and beauty. They widely undermine Chinese families (Jia 2011:4-7).

Even within legal marriages, a part of Chinese women take marriage as a social ladder and reciprocity business. The husband is an economic mean to improve life quality. Future mother-in-laws request their future son-in-laws to provide housing as their daughters' private property. Otherwise, they will force a break up. In the context of soaring housing price, the statements like "housing abducts love and marriage" and "high housing price destroys Chinese's happiness" are widely diffused and accepted. Those tricky problems at the blurring boundary of morality have been covered and discussed in media, and then these triggered severe condemnation from the society to women with materialism (Xiang and Liu 2011:139-207).

Durkheim (1997) introduced the word *anomie* to describe the breakdown of social norms and values, which arises from the lack of a social ethic. Materialism, money worship, and commercialization of gender qualities, effect and frustrate Chinese people. The collapsing morality, translates people's anxieties only into outrage, malison and envy. These sexual immoralities are not a new social phenomenon, but post-Mao era is experiencing a reconstruction of sexual ethics. These phenomena are not judged as immoralities in consensus any more but put in debates or discussion. Market economy is blamed for increasing the tolerance to sexually immoral people, especially women (Xiang and Liu 2011:67-108).

Obviously, there is a one-sided moral judgment in all immoralities mentioned above. In every case, women play the degenerate, evil and money worshipping roles. Women are marked

out to be responsible for all these immoralities. No matter *Ernai*, or *Xiaosan*, it is women that avariciously and shamelessly transform their human capitals--sexual or affective, into benefits. Only women are blamed for being immoral even though all these phenomenon cannot be possible without men.

Barlow (2004:3-45) and Evans (2002:335-60) state, woman is constructed as the key agent of social order and the fulcrum of sexual morality. I argue the vacuous term “Shengnü,” in media discourse, is carved out from various social phenomena as a flexible receptacle. It gradually filled up with various implications, because the media is a business about attention, the escalating interpretation of Shengnü abused some of their characteristics to make a catchy theme. Shengnü discourse eventually involved many other elements, which are incompatible with the reality of Shengnün but reflect the macro reality of Chinese society. A gender topic as historical, put as alurm of all other issues, staged up front and be networking with other social phenomenon as an integrative illustration of social transformations in contemporary China and wraps up various anxieties about them.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have analyzed why Shengnü appeared and why Shengnü discourse emerged in popular newspapers and magazines. I argue Shengnü, as a gendered category, is socially constructed by intersecting socioeconomic complexity and transforming gender ideology in contemporary China.

First, I argue that Shengnü are both the embodiment and by-product of the changing ideology of gender, marriage and family. Empowered by the market economy, Chinese women gained financial independence and high education. They started to question the necessity, the nature and format of marriage.

Their existence also suggests different demands of two genders, when establishing marriage started involving the market logic. Then they indicate the gap between the ideal of the post-Mao era and the ideal of Chinese women themselves, at least some of them, because those career driven women are never satisfied at just being a “good wife, wise mother” plus a job. The gender dynamic and ideal femininity are highly determined by the socioeconomic situation and political agenda. The current Chinese society still practices the traditional labor division based on gender which values women’s domestic roles more. Meanwhile, it also inspires and requests women’s contributions to the economy as employees and consumers.

Not only their single status, as essential parts of the organism of the development trend of post-Mao China, Shengnü’s whole routine of life is also socially constructed. They accomplish their homogenous life plans step by step according to the identical blueprint.

Nevertheless, the enthusiasm of economic growth in an unbalanced mode fatally mobilized excessive population into several locations, occupations and industries. It jams upward social mobility and creates more disequilibrium. Then in the fierce competition, to keep consistent with the development trend, Shengnü are struggling to perpetuate their status, which unfortunately includes, being single.

Then, Shengnü are criticized in media discourse primarily because they fail to conform to the ideal femininity of this era. They are problematized in media discourse which integrates various perspectives of the society, but particular format and extent of regulative discourse are also combined with socioeconomic complexity. Due to the market economy demands women's labor, Chinese society tends to accept competent career women more and more, but the family domain also demands women's contribution too. Then Shengnü still exhibit excessive masculinity with their excellence and ambition in career. Also indicate a new gender dynamic in reform age.

In response to Shengnü's disfavored position in media discourse, I argue this is also due to their middle classness. In response to the rapid and sharp social transformation, the government has called for a growth of middle class to stabilize the society, and they tend to show off their status materialistically. In this context, Shengnü are not favored in the media discourse for being the middle class. Worse yet, the middle class are idealized in the format of a harmonious family to enhance social stability when husbands and wives assume their respective roles and work together to fulfill responsibilities. Shengnü, as the single middle class, fail to conform to the political agenda because the harmony that is advocated by the government is implemented in units rather than individuals. As middle class women, their

right to enjoy well-off life is much less secured than men's. Not legitimized in middle-class family, Shengnü are vulnerably exposed to criticism from popular newspapers and magazines.

In addition, Shengnü as a vulnerable target, get attached to various negative features in post-Mao China. Collapsing Chinese ethics have not been immediately replaced by healthy and conclusive market morals. The chaos in ideology creates anxieties and confusion among Chinese. Middle-class Shengnü appear repulsive to the average people. Citizens' discontents accumulated within the defective social welfare and redistribution system. In sexual morality, Shengnü unfortunately become the embodiments of negative elements such as materialism and hedonism. And as a dramatic gender topic, Shengnü tend to be the outlet for these collective sentiments.

I conclude that both Shengnü and the problematization of them in the media discourse are rooted in the interacting political, economic and social situations. The Shengnü phenomenon manifests various transformations in contemporary China, especially in gender and class dynamics. The media discourse of Shengnü embodies the populace's anxieties about these transformations.

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