Surviving in between Neoliberalism and "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics": Chinese Women in Negotiation with the Nation and Public Culture

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Abstract

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Surviving in between Neoliberalism and "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics": Chinese Women in Negotiation with the Nation and Public Culture

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People's Republic of China under President Xi Jinping's administration has demonstrated an intense agenda of nation-building, observable through the country's ardent participation in the global economy on the one hand, and domestic propagation of national and cultural pride on the other. While new ideologies such as "Core Socialist Values" and "Chinese Dream" are prevailing in almost every aspect of Chinese people's daily lives, women are largely overlooked as part of the "citizens" in the official discourses even though they undertake more pressure than their male counterparts due to China's enduring patriarchal culture and gender norms. Moreover, the mass media in China, known as the "mouthpiece" of the Communist party-state, play a crucial role in promoting both the authorities' guiding ideologies and sustaining the stereotypes of women in the name of preserving "Chineseness." With this observation and realization, this dissertation regards China, a country that implements "Socialism with Chinese characteristics," as in a "postsocialist" stage, and delves into the mass media's representations of women in the political, social, and cultural aspects to find out women's specific positionality in today's China.

Through case studies ranging from the media coverage of China's "first lady" and the general working-class women, to the representations of the unmarried female PhDs

and women with heightened economic power, this dissertation tries to be as inclusive as possible to address the heterogeneity of Chinese women while probing two questions: first, what is the manifestation and interplay between Chinese women's heightened agency in a postsocialist China and the mass media's hegemonic representations of them? Second, what is the relationship between Chinese women and the Communist party-state's construction of nationalism? It argues that although today's Chinese women have attained a certain degree of empowerment due to the country's development, the media and public culture have also revealed that women are continuously constrained by a regime that has a long tradition of patriarchy and gender inequalities. Thus, Chinese women are experiencing a conundrum with a partial and contradictory "postsocialist empowerment" while endeavoring to create their unconventional femininity.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to myself,

and to all women of China who deserve better.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Preface

When I was a child, one question I had while watching *Xin Wen Lian Bo* (新闻联播)—a news simulcast aired nation-wide at 7 pm every night—was why the anchors always added the word *nv* (female) after reading the name of a female politician during the National People's Congress season. At that time, I thought it was because female delegates were rare, and thus it was normal to emphasize their uniqueness by informing the public about their sex. When I got to middle school and my family bought a car, we started to pay more attention to traffic news, and it was during that time another question struck me: why was *nv siji* (female driver) a term that was always mentioned in the news about traffic accidents, while if a male driver caused an accident, his sex was never emphasized? Back then, I thought maybe women would easily get nervous when driving, so it was unsurprising that they would cause more accidents.

When I left China and became a student at a women's college in the United States at the age of 18, one day I discovered that *nv boshi* (female PhD) had suddenly become a popular term on Chinese media. These female PhDs were also associated with another term, *sheng nv* (leftover women), meaning women who were over the age of 27 and unmarried. This time, I began to question the prefix "female," which the Chinese media loved to highlight when covering women in the news. Why single out "females" when both women and men can be delegates at the National Congress? Why pick on female drivers when both women and men can cause traffic accidents? Why humiliate female PhDs when they are making impressive academic achievements? In short, it seemed clear

that the media's emphasis on female identity and gender roles when it was not actually necessary was not "normal" or "unsurprising"; instead, it was, and still is, problematic.

Having conducted a great deal of research on China's political system and media policy, I suddenly realized one day that I had come to an age when I would also be considered a "leftover woman" and a soon-to-be "female PhD," according to Chinese media and culture. It was at this point that I started to contemplate the question of how the Chinese state and the culture that I belong to have been determining what to praise and what to ignore about women. As I began to connect the dots, another question came to my mind: where are Chinese women situated in contemporary China's all-out construction of nationalism?

Background and Rationale

Today, as the world's second largest economy, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is actively exhibiting its economic, political, and cultural power to the world while also absorbing certain progressive and liberal ideas and culture. In this process, Chinese women have experienced unprecedented upgrades in their quality of life and personal agency. In popular media, Chinese women seem to be much more independent, confident, and powerful than, say, half a century ago, as their presence becomes mainstream and their appearance and temperament are not so different from women in the developed world. They have also become active consumers who can contribute to China's burgeoning GDP.

However, Chinese media's representations of women are still far from being fair and just as compared to men. Due to enduring Confucian teachings and patriarchal

culture, as a whole, women remain subordinate to men, both in private and in public. The mass media work to maintain and even intensify these inequalities by portraying women as objects being judged by men and constraining women within stereotypical gender roles. Moreover, the media constantly humiliates women who fail to fulfill traditional virtues or who do not fit gender norms. And when the media show women's achievements, they tend to depict these women as national assets bringing honor to the country, instead of individuals who had successfully achieved personal accomplishments. This dissertation is thus rooted in the context of contemporary China, which will also be referred to in this dissertation as "postsocialist" China, characterized by the Communist party-state's ideological leadership over a time period concurrent with the world's neoliberal transformation. It examines both the improvements and persistent problems in the media's representations of Chinese women in order to analyze women's positionality in China's current construction of nationalism, or a new "Chineseness."

The title of this dissertation actually draws on keywords from the current Chinese paramount leader Xi Jinping's political ideology, known as "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想). Although "socialism with Chinese characteristics" has been the basis of China's official ideology since Deng Xiaoping's proposal of the "Reform and Opening Up" policy in the late 1970s, Xi's "New Era" shows postsocialist China's communication and

negotiation with the neoliberal world,[1] involving vigorous appeals outward and fervent maintenance of Communist power inward.

To further implement Xi Jinping Thought, the current Chinese party-state has been propagating new ideologies, particularly the "Core Socialist Values" and "Chinese Dream," calling on all Chinese people to follow certain nationalistic and virtuous mottos in order to become positive, optimistic, and loyal citizens. However, while the slogans under these ideologies are intended to address the entire population, they actually obscure the realities of gendered inequalities. For example, compared to men, Chinese women, who are considered to be "holding up half of the sky,"[2] bear an additional layer of patriarchal pressure that constrains them in gendered ways as a key element in nation-building. Ideologies about Chinese nationalism often place heavy emphasis on social stability and harmony, and thus consider small family units as the building blocks of the larger social and state prosperity. As a result, women, who traditionally and culturally are still considered to belong to the domestic sphere, undertake more responsibilities in terms of keeping the family units in harmony so that they can contribute to the larger party-state's stability. At the same time, the state media, which function as the mouthpiece of the party-state authorities, continue to propagate and disseminate these ideologies,

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[1] The official discourse in China usually denies its integration with neoliberalism, condemning it for infiltrating Communist ideologies and thus causing a potential threat to China's development (Chen, 2017). However, this dissertation regards China as a crucial participant in the neoliberal world order because of its undeniable economic and political participation in it.

[2] A famous saying by Mao Zedong from the 1950s: "妇女能顶半边天"

creating a public culture that often sustains patriarchal repression along with the authoritarian call to nationalism.

The term "public culture" is used in this dissertation instead of "culture" (though they may be used interchangeably in the following passages) for two reasons. First, this dissertation proposes that "public culture" contains both the traditional culture that has influenced Chinese society for centuries (such as Confucianism) and the newly developed culture from postsocialist China's integration with the neoliberal world order (such as "leftover women" discourses). Moreover, as these two kinds of culture merge in Chinese people's daily lives and interactions with the media and public discourses, they create a pervasive and influential new culture that engages the public while also presenting people with contradictions, and sometimes, the need for negotiation.

Second, this dissertation aims to address the contextual significance of various social negotiations. As explained by Hariman (2016):

> The concept of public culture refers most broadly to the dynamic negotiation of beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding collective association through media and other social practices that are defined by norms of open access and voluntary response… The term "public" emphasizes relatively unrestricted communication across civil society regarding governance and other matters affecting the general welfare. The term "culture" emphasizes that public opinion depends on contextual factors that emerge through multiple media and embodied responsiveness. (p. 1)

Thus, the use of "public culture" in this dissertation also specifies the definition of "culture" in the era of postsocialism and neoliberalism, both involving a high degree of information dissemination via mass media.

Overview of the "Chinese Dream"

When talking about Xi Jinping's political agenda, it is imperative to mention the "Chinese Dream" (中国梦). American historian James Truslow Adams (1933) discussed the idea of the "American Dream," which referred to "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (p. 404). While the meaning and implementation of the "American Dream" are heavily contested today due to struggle of a plural and stratified U.S. society, on the other side of the world, China—a country that supposedly possesses an opposite and competing ideology to the capitalist superpower—has proposed a similar concept known as the "Chinese Dream," which signals the authorities' determination and ambition to pursue a new world order and leadership.

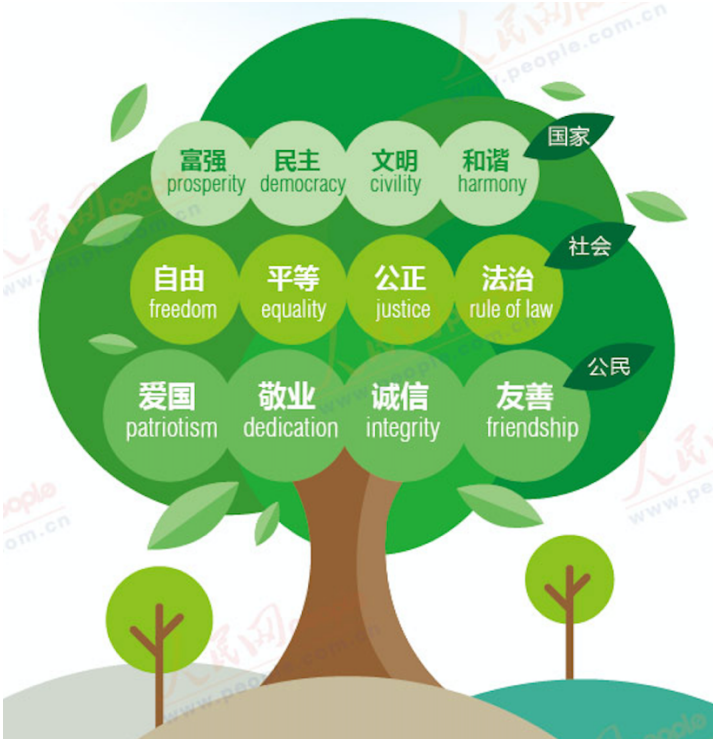
In the official propaganda, the "Chinese Dream" always accompanies another concept, called "Core Socialist Values" (社会主义核心价值观). In fact, "Core Socialist Values" came before the "Chinese Dream" as President Xi's predecessor Hu Jintao first raised the former at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China[3]. Since there are 12 words with 24 Chinese characters in "Core Socialist Values," the public also

[3] The "Communist Party of China" can be seen abbreviated as CPC or CCP (Chinese Communist Party) in this dissertation, based on different literature's styles of usage.

calls it “24 characters” (二十四个字). The 12 values address three aspects: 1) The Communist party-state’s goals of construction (prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony); 2) the defining traits of Chinese society (freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law); 3) the party-state’s expectations for its citizens (patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship) (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The 24 words of Core Socialist Values. (2013). Retrieved May 2, 2018, from http://en.people.cn/90785/8494839.html



After the 18th National Congress and the establishment of the "Core Socialist Values," Xi officially took the position of the President of the PRC and immediately crafted the "Chinese Dream" on top of the "Core Socialist Values" during a visit to a nationalist exhibition featuring China's development from the Opium War to the present day, titled "The Road of Rejuvenation" (复兴之路). At the event, Xi told his fellow attendees, "The rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the beginning of modern times." This was the inception of the "Chinese Dream" ("About 'Chinese Dream,'" 2017), and the keywords "rejuvenation" and "dream" have begun to represent Xi's core spirit and agenda. Moreover, at the 12th National People's Representative Meeting in 2013, Xi emphasized that the "Chinese Dream" is a collective dream of the Chinese people and should be achieved through three steps. First, it must follow the Chinese path, i.e., the socialist path with Chinese characteristics; second, it must propagate the Chinese spirit, which is the nationalist spirit with patriotism as the core; third, it must unite Chinese strength, which is the power of the great unity of 1.3 billion people of different ethnicities ("To achieve Chinese Dream," 2013). To Xi, the "Chinese Dream" is not just a "dream," but an attainable goal that must triumph. On many occasions, Xi has confidently expressed that the "Chinese Dream" is set to become true by 2049, which is the centennial of the People's Republic of China ("Chinese Dream," n.d.).

Since then, the "Core Socialist Values" and "Chinese Dream" have been combined and propagated extensively by the Chinese state media. The "24 characters" and the "Chinese Dream" slogans have been featured on public billboards, bus stations,

news broadcasts, television series, textbooks, and even the outer walls of city construction sites and in public restrooms. As they have penetrated almost every aspect of Chinese citizens' daily lives, "achieving the Chinese Dream" has been shaped as an approachable future that the whole society is excitedly aspiring to.

The true consolidation and canonization of Xi's ruling ideas occurred during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party, held in October 2017. It was at this Congress that the new ideology, titled "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," abbreviated as "Xi Jinping Thought," was added to the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party. The amended Constitution stated:

> The Congress urges Party organizations at all levels and all Party members to, under the firm leadership of the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core, hold high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics, follow the guidance of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the Theory of Three Represents[4], the Scientific Outlook on Development[5], and Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, and more purposefully study, observe, apply, and uphold the Party Constitution. ("Resolution of the 19th," 2017)

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[4] The "Theory of Three Represents" was proposed by former President Jiang Zeming in 2000, which refers to what the CPC stands for: 1) It represents the development trends of advanced productive forces. 2) It represents the orientations of an advanced culture. 3) It represents the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people of China ("What is 'Three Represents, '" n.d.).

[5] The "Scientific Outlook on Development" was proposed by former President Hu Jintao in 2003 and advocates for comprehensive, coordinated, and sustainable development ("Scientific outlook," 2012).

About five months later, “Xi Jinping Thought” was also added to the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China during the 13th National People’s Congress. Thus, the updated guiding ideology of China contains five waves of the PRC’s paramount leaders’ ruling ideas. Xi’s newest addition encompasses the “Core Socialist Values” (first proposed by Hu Jintao but popularized by Xi) and the “Chinese Dream,” while also expanding on them to emphasize the idea of a “New Era” (新时期), thus stressing the novelty and significance of his leadership. With the establishment of his comprehensive ideological agenda in the party-state’s Constitution, the state media also quickly followed up and integrated these keywords and ideas in all forms of propaganda. As a result, official discourses tend to mix these ideas and make “Xi Jinping Thought” a canonical concept that covers the goals of achieving the “Chinese Dream” and following the “Core Socialist Values.” This dissertation regards “Xi Jinping Thought” as an overarching ideology that is conceptually represented by the “Chinese Dream.”

Overview of China’s Mass Media Regulation System

This overview of China’s mass media regulation system introduces the party-level and state-level mechanisms that jointly oversee China’s entire media scene. In the course of this dissertation, “mass media” contains both the “state media,” i.e., media outlets that are directly supervised by the party-state administrative organs, and “new media,” which mainly refers to China’s largest and most influential listed media and technology companies such as Sina, NetEase, and Tencent. They are not directly in the governmental structure, but nonetheless maintain Party branch offices and follow the party-state’s ideological rules.

At the beginning of the PRC's foundation, media in China—be it television, radio, or newspapers—were extremely limited and all state-run. As a result, they were utterly propaganda tools with a top-down, hierarchical method of dissemination. However, after Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening Up" policy fostered a series of reformations in the media industry. According to Yu (2010), the acceptance of diverse opinions, begun in 1981, "[represented] China's mass communication walking out of 'political textbooks" (para. 2). Indeed, as Scotton and Hachten (2010) once noted, "These traditional media expanded after China's leader Deng Xiaoping told party members that making money was acceptable… even desirable" (p. 1). Thus, Deng's groundbreaking policy witnessed a great deal of power decentralization, industrialization, and some level of privatization in the market, which also stimulated the mass media to abandon the style of the "cult of personality" from the Maoist years and to endeavor to be more open, both in its structural organization and content creation.

To some scholars, post-Mao China's regulation of the media was discernably freer and friendlier than before. Guan et al. (2017) observed that, "the introduction of commercialization has substantially and fundamentally reshaped the state-media relationship in China by weakening Party control on the one hand and cultivating media autonomy on the other" (p. 235). They justified their opinion by observing the censorship system in China, which they believed could create gaps and loopholes that are harder to supervise when information flows from the party-state propaganda department to regional-level media (p. 236). As a result, media outlets, especially those located farther from Beijing, have gradually developed alternative voices and enjoyed more freedom.

Similarly, Wu (2017) had a quite positive attitude towards the post-Mao media scene by saying that the bottom-up, step-by-step reform in a more liberalized market has pushed China from a "power-regulated society" to a "rights-regulated society." Although Wu recognized that the reform "still maintained the Communist Party in order not to destabilize social order," he believed that at the same time, the focus was on making improvements in privatization (p. 98). Shirk (2011) even observed that China's embrace of market economy had caused a loosening of propaganda which "depoliticized the public" and cultivated people's yearning for "trustworthy sources of information" (p. 8).

However, other scholars hesitated to call Chinese media in the post-Mao era really autonomous and liberal, as they believed the power of the Communist party-state authorities was still pervasive and prone to intervening in media content. According to Zhao (1998), although there were increasing Party and Non-Party media outlets and publications covering different aspects of society since the economic reform, "Party organs still dominated the press by their size, frequency of publication, and number of employees" (p. 18). For example, four outlets were "at the very top of the Chinese news hierarchy" and were "agenda setters," namely, the Xinhua News Agency, *People's Daily,* Central People's Radio (CPR), and China Central Television (CCTV) (p. 18). These four outlets are still the most prominent "Party media" today.

Moreover, some scholars argued that the openness of the market economy actually made the ruling power more vigilant in regulating media content. Brady (2002) pointed out that propaganda continued to play "a central role in the repackaging of the CCP" in the 90s (p. 564). As compared to the Maoist years, Communist propaganda only

"modernized" itself to better serve a regime that was still trying to cultivate public consent to Communist rule. Zhao (1998) explicated that, coming from a Leninist influence, "the Party proclaims itself to be the vanguard of the proletariat representing the interests of the people… The media serve as the mouthpiece of the Party and, by definition, serve as the mouthpiece of the people, too" (p. 19). This relationship thus revealed the unchanged model of the state media being the propaganda tool, or at least being the megaphone, of the authorities.

China's mass media have always been part of the overall political system. Although the authorities' level of regulation may fluctuate during different historical and political periods, their supervision and intervention have never ceased. In the current Xi Jinping administration, the media regulation system has been intensified with greater power centralization. The paragraphs below introduce the major changes in media regulation since Xi took power, and discuss how the current authorities monitor the overall mass media scene in China.

To understand the structure of China's media regulation, it is important to first review the structure of the party-state. According to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China:

> The People's Republic of China is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants. The socialist system is the basic system of the People's Republic of China. *The leadership of the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of*

socialism with Chinese characteristics [emphasis added]. Disruption of the socialist system by any organization or individual is prohibited. (Article 1)

According to the Constitution, the CPC functions as the ideological leadership for the State Council (i.e. state), which follows and practices "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Technically, there are separate organs for media regulation under the CPC and the State Council respectively. For example, on the Party's side, the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee (formerly known of the Propaganda Department) is defined as "a comprehensive functional department in charge of regulating ideology-related works" ("Publicity Department," n.d.). The department is on the same level as the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the CPC, General Office of the CPC Central Committee, Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee, etc. In addition, there are ten institutions directly under the CPC Central Committee, including media outlets such as the *People's Daily* and *Qiushi Magazine*.

On the side of the State Council, there used to be a number of ministries and offices regulating media before March 2018. For example, the Ministry of Information Industry (MII) and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) (merged from the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television and the General Administration of Press and Publication in 2013) were both in charge of regulating media-related works. In addition, Xinhua News Agency—the official state-run press agency—was and still is a ministry-level institution under the State Council. Although they officially belong to the government side, the Constitution still emphasized the ideological leadership of the CPC.

However, the Xi administration, begun in 2013, has been quite blunt in demanding both the Party and the state side work collaboratively under the same CPC leadership. In February 2016, Xi paid a visit to China Central Television (CCTV), China's most prominent public television network under the State Council, and told the employees that they "must pledge absolute loyalty to the Communist Party" (Zeng, 2016). He also famously uttered "Dang Mei Xing Dang" (党媒姓党), which literally meant "the Party Media should have the last name 'Party.'"). This was an occasion when the paramount leader of China directly acknowledged the intertwined relationship between the Party and the state in the field of media, which also reflected the Party's increasing intervention and ambition in ensuring its centralized control of mass media.

As a result, in March 2018, the Xi administration made another startling move by conducting a series of mergers and a reshuffling of media-related organs within the party-state system. First, China Central Television (CCTV), China National Radio (CNR), and China Radio International (CRI) merged into a new broadcaster called China Media Group (also known as "Voice of China"), which would be supervised by the Publicity Department of the CPC. Second, what was previously the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) of the State Council was renamed the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), containing the China Media Group, Xinhua News Agency, *People's Daily*, China News Service, and *China Today*. Third, the Publicity Department of the CPC also took direct leadership of the National Film Bureau and General Administration of Press and Publication. Finally, the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, Cyberspace Administration of China, and the Cyber

Affairs Leading Group came directly under the Publicity Department of the CPC as well, and began to collaboratively work on Internet censorship. To summarize, all the media-related organs are now under the grand administration of the Publicity Department of the CPC.

These crucial changes on the highest level of the party-state system demonstrated an unprecedented centralization and consolidation of China's authoritarian power. By fully merging the responsibilities of the Party and the state organs, as well as accentuating the ultimate ideological leadership of the Communist Party, the CPC's Publicity Department has become a compound powerhouse that monitors news, publications, press, films, and Internet content, i.e. the entire mass media landscape in China.

When one lays out the relationship between the Party and the state, as well as reviewing the current party-state structure of mass media regulation, it is clear that the highest power organs of China have constructed an interrelated system overseeing the state media and new media's practice and content. Moreover, there has always been the expectation for local level media to carry out and convey the ruling ideologies based on China's hierarchical political system. Thus, today's Chinese mass media have actually become stricter in preserving the hegemonic power of the party-state authorities under President Xi's regime. In the current postsocialist context, although China has a prosperous economy and a much more open market due to its reform and integration with global neoliberalism, its polity and political configuration still function to ensure the Communist ideological core.

Statement of the Problem

The research questions for this dissertation are derived from a simple yet irrefutable observation after examining China's current ideologies and the media regulation system: as the "Chinese Dream" addresses the collective power of the citizens and the "Core Socialist Values" detail what the citizens should do, there has been no clarification of the heterogeneity of the "citizens." Moreover, while the current Chinese party-state utilizes mass media to create a nationalistic public culture and stabilize its hegemonic power over society, women are still subject to unequal treatment and biased media representations. In this case, where are women positioned socially and politically in China's all-out construction of nationalism? Besides, what exactly do media do—if they indeed have the goal—to address and recognize women's contributions to postsocialist China, which is eager to prove to the world its power and ideological advancement? To answer these questions, this dissertation takes a critical approach that is rooted in the historical development of the relationship between the Chinese Communist party-state and the female population, to examine and theorize the characteristics of the evolving concept of femininity under China's unique political, social, and cultural contexts. In this vein, case studies are conducted on prominent and representational examples that demonstrate the contested and negotiated realities faced by Chinese women. These analyses thus provide critiques of the enduring hegemonic and patriarchal repression of women's self-empowerment and realization in contemporary China.

The research goals of this dissertation are thus two-fold: 1) to unveil the interplay and negotiation between contemporary Chinese women's heightened agency and the

hegemonic media representations of their identities; and 2) to examine the relationship between women of a postsocialist China and the Communist party-state's construction of nationalism. The analyses treat the position and situational realities of Chinese women today as closely associated with the party-state's agenda of constructing nationalism. Therefore, the overarching theme of this dissertation is that, through an unconventional development of Chinese femininity under the Chinese Communist party-state regime, and within the current era of a postsocialist China, women have attained a degree of heightened agency and power to reconstruct their identities. However, at the same time, they are still constrained within a fundamentally authoritative regime that tries to seek a leading role in the current world order while exerting hegemonic patriarchal power on women domestically. Thus, this dissertation considers this conundrum a partial and contradictory "postsocialist empowerment" for Chinese women.

Significance of the Study

When I started to write this dissertation in October 2018, China was entangled with the United States in a trade war, sending billions of dollars to assist African countries to fulfill its "One Belt, One Road" initiative, and reshuffling party-state organs to further centralize its power and control over mass media. Now, at the beginning of 2020, China is at the center of the COVID-19 epidemic. Besides urgently seeking cures for the disease, which has caused nearly 3,000 deaths and over 70 thousand affected patients by the end of February, the Chinese authorities have also used state media to reduce social anxiety and upheavals. At the same time, China is receiving international criticism for its lack of transparency and respect for freedom of speech.

What baffled me in 2018 as well as in 2020, however, is that despite such conspicuous social and political conflicts, which have a direct impact on Chinese citizens' daily lives, Chinese society has generally managed to maintain an equilibrium. Apparently, the hegemonic power of the Communist party-state still holds firm, and the public culture is able to keep the population consenting to the ruling power.

Meanwhile, Chinese women have entered a stage where their identities and social statuses have experienced a "Reform and Opening Up" together with the nation (demonstrated by their increased economic power, educational level, etc.). However, they have also been subject to gendered discourses associated with new ideological constructions of the nation, meaning that their personal choices are often constrained by state policies, and they are depicted problematically in the media. Since this dissertation focuses on Chinese women's relationship with the party-state and public culture and recognizes that the Chinese mass media, administered by the party-state authorities, are a critical social institution that disseminate and propagate hegemonic power, this research is significant for the following reasons.

First, while studies of contemporary China's political power, ideologies, and civil society are ubiquitous, there is a lack of recognition of the fact that women have not been adequately represented as among the "citizens." In this regard, this dissertation centers on Chinese women and concentrates on their representations, partial empowerment, and negotiation with the postsocialist state and their shifting statuses in between neoliberalism and socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Second, this dissertation avoids essentializing women as a homogeneous group by clearly identifying different female populations through various case studies, ranging from the media's portrayal of elite women to general working-class women, from women with higher education to women with different economic statuses. By studying "Chinese women," this dissertation is attentive to their diverse backgrounds and realities, thus providing contextual readings of their relationship with the party-state and its nation-building agenda.

Third, this dissertation selectively applies relevant critical theory and feminist theory originating in the West to the contemporary Chinese context, explaining their theoretical validity by providing historical references and in-depth case analyses with an acknowledgement of China's local specificities. As a result, this dissertation opens up further research opportunities to explore the voices of Chinese women. More specifically, as this dissertation mainly uses the methodological approach of critical discourse analysis, its emphasis is on media's textual and visual discourses and their revelation of the larger hegemonic power and social wrongs. As such, the analysis leaves open additional avenues to identify women's own voices through methods such as in-depth interviews and ethnography.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To provide the theoretical foundation for analyzing the Chinese party-state's impact on the media, public culture, and women, this literature review examines existing scholarly works that have addressed China's ideological development and its historical treatment of women. It also looks at the definition of nation, nation-state, and the hegemonic construction of nationalism shared by many global nation-states, as well as referring to some transnational feminist scholarship to examine the application and significance of these concepts and theories to the current Chinese context.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first one defines "nation," "nation-state," and "nationalism," and briefly outlines the development of Chinese nationalism. The second part examines literature about women in Third World countries and their relationship with the nation, which could be applicable to the political and social settings for women in modern and contemporary China. The third part introduces China in the current "postsocialist" era with a neoliberalist backdrop, and looks especially at studies on the coexistence of consumerism and commodity feminism. This literature review thus contextualizes contemporary China and Chinese media practice, since the Chinese party-state's leadership has actively employed the media to advance its cultural and political goals. In addition, discussing previous analyses of Chinese media's coverage about women establishes the distinct character of this content, and this difference from much analysis of Western media is also a key thread in this dissertation. As a result, this chapter provides a deeper perspective on Chinese women's current position in the party-state, as

well as the factors underlying their negotiation with the dictates of society and public culture.

Nation-State and Nationalism in China

Before examining women and nation, it is important to address the meaning of "nation," "state," "nation-state," and "nationalism," as they will repeatedly appear in this dissertation. Anderson (1983) provided some "tentative suggestions"—as he put it—to define the nuances of nation, nationality, and nationalism. He claimed that, "My point of departure is that nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind" (p. 4). He regarded "nation" as "an imagined political community" (p. 6), which is not an already existent entity but an invention coming from people's shared consciousness of their cultural artefacts and encounters, thus producing an invisible but definite border that differentiates them from outsiders. Anderson further stated that the shared cultural roots, imagined linkage, and media communication (print capitalism) were crucial factors that generate people's imagined nationalism.

Similarly, Gellner (1997) defined "nationalism" as "a political principle which maintains that similarity of culture is the basic social bond" (p. 3). He tried to equate "nation" with "culture," and saw "state" as an "institutional leadership" (p. 6). He emphasized that, "The existence of a centralised state is an important part of the background of the nationalist vision of the world. But the state itself is not universally present" (p. 5). He indicated that not every collective society could naturally be called a "nation-state" because there could be nations without a state or states without nations. In

a later study, Gellner (2006) further explained that the "state" is the agency that must act as a force to keep a society in order. This agency is "clearly identified, and well centralized, and disciplined," and "nationalism emerges only in milieu in which the existence of the state is already very much taken for granted" (p. 4). To him, nationalism is a sentiment that can hold "nation" and "state" together.

Lewis (2000) observed nationalism as a consequence of imperialism, since it emerged as a resistance against capitalism by the oppressed. However, he also mentioned that "nationalisms of the oppressor" exist as powerful authorities trying to justify their imperialism. Here, one can see a dialectical relationship between the goals of practicing nationalism by the oppressed versus the oppressor: when used by different subjects, the meaning and purposes of "nationalism" change, either to confirm or to reform the status quo.

Tang and Darr (2012) summarized three theories of nationalism from Western scholarship. The first one was the "functionalist theory" of nationalism. They referred to Gellner and pointed out that "the drive to modernize society into the ideal of the nation-state ultimately results in the creation of the nation" (p. 2). In other words, functionalists saw nationalism as a tool to construct the nation. The second theory was from a culturalist perspective based mainly on the "deep historical roots in ancestry, culture, shared history, and so forth" (p. 2). This view referred to the cultural roots that could help identify the uniqueness of a nation. The third interpretation of nationalism was from a constructivist perspective, which stated that "nationalism is a product of elite manipulation of mass publics" (p. 2). According to Tang and Darr, this view was

primarily based on Benedict Anderson's observation that the printing press was crucial for disseminating the elites' ideas to the public, and thus helping the authorities construct and manipulate public opinion in order to stabilize a shared national identity.

Tang and Darr also pointed out that nationalism is a relatively young idea for China, as it was imported from the West in the 19th century (p. 1). Before that, there was hardly a sense of "nation-ness" in China because different ethnic groups occupying the enormous territory had constantly been in conflict, striving for dominion. Consequently, China was ruled by different kingdoms or dynasties for thousands of years with undefined borders. Thus, Western incursion became a trigger for the birth of Chinese "nationalism," because it was since then that diverse segments of the population realized the existence of external enemies.

Zhao (2004) studied the construction of the Chinese nation-state from a historical perspective and also pointed out that the concept of "nation-state" was energized by the urgency to deal with both internal conflicts and external intrusions. In the late 19th century, as Western invaders brought in liberal thoughts, the well-educated class in China became leaders to initiate movements to abandon the feudal system. Elites like Sun Yat-Sen, Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao introduced the idea of "nation-state" to unite China and fight against foreign invaders. As the homeland sovereign was in crisis, building a collective "nation-state" became the best way to downplay inner class conflicts and focus on combating foreign powers, as the latter had completely different cultures.

However, constructing a nation-state also brought challenges and problems to the authorities. If a state is the highest organizational power in a given society, there must be

negotiations and compromises on the part of the nation to accentuate the power of the state. The first challenge for China's early construction as a nation-state was "ethnic nationalism." Under the Nationalist rule of Sun Yat-Sen, the dominant Han nation persistently sought to maintain its leadership by initiating ethnic nationalism, or in Zhao's words, a "racist nationalism" that was xenophobic (Zhao, 2004, p. 22). However, leaders of the Republic of China soon realized that many borderlands were occupied by minority ethnic groups, and thus a total assimilation to the Han nation was impossible. Thus, the constitutions started to define China as a "multiethnic political community," which remains the case today (p. 22).

When the Communist Party took over the country in 1949, the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC) was under the so-called "national communism," which, according to Zhao, was a fusion of Communism and nationalism. The young PRC was also facing the challenge of redefining the "nation-state" due to the diversity of China's different "nationalities," or groups with different cultural traditions and customs (p. 27). However, the PRC has been criticized for further marginalizing people who are not Han. For example, Gladney (2004) pointed out that the Chinese officials changed the word "nationality" to "ethnicity" in the English translation, which was problematic because semantically, the word *ethnicity* "seemed more appropriate… for groups… who perceived themselves to have a separate collective identity" (p. 37). By moving from "nationality" to "ethnicity," it conveyed the feeling that the Han-dominated authorities tried to downplay the significance of other groups of people who were not them.

In addition to ethnic nationalism, Zhao indicated that the modern, post-Mao Chinese state had shifted to "state-led pragmatic nationalism," especially after several decades of mimicking the Soviet model and implementing the Maoist leftist doctrine, which led to the ten-year turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and then the pro-democracy movements in 1989. According to Zhao, the earlier version of Communist ideology in China "was seen as self-destructive and guilty of miring the Chinese in socioeconomic wretchedness and as having kept China poor and backward. Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought as the official ideology no longer provided convincing arguments of the need for the general public to preserve communist one-party rule" (p. 211). It was under such crisis that "nationalism" was rediscovered as something that could replace the previously leftist ideology. The goal of the state-led nationalism was to appropriately retract the cultural and ethnic roots and relink the current China "with China's non-Communist past" (p. 227). Therefore, China started an extensive patriotic education, which highlighted its ancient history, diverse ethnicities, and Confucian heritage (p. 228).

Gladney also pointed out that Communist China maintained its nationalistic power by promoting stereotypical representations of nations and nationalities through "national consensus, museum, folklores, and more recently, theme parks" (p. 28). To him, these parks showed that the state had deliberately intensified its hegemony and reduced the variety of cultures. Such campaigns and actions promoting nationalism were not only a timely strategy to regain the public's faith in the ruling authorities, but also had a lasting impact on people's spiritual beliefs and public memory. In other words, the

party-state has been trying to blur the boundary between the Party, state, culture, and ethnic groups in order to construct a centralized regime. Its goal is to create a shared notion that love for the nation equals loves the Communist party as well as love for Chinese culture.

Still, the path for Chinese nationalism has never been smooth, but constantly shifting, given China's increasingly complicated and nuanced political, economic, and cultural identities under the current administration, and its contested relationship with the capitalist world order. Consequently, the construction of nationalism under the Communist party-state today is an evolving process filled with inner ideological negotiations and debates, as well as inspirations and temptations from the outside world. The CPC regime seeks to embrace the world while it carefully maintains and stabilizes an ideologically socialist/communist state. Hence, nationalism in China is no longer a political goal of the government alone, but a complex project involving many social institutions working collaboratively to construct a hegemonic one-party state. Nationalism in China is also not just a slogan or a sense of patriotism, but involves many practices—both in public and private domains—geared toward the same goal of consolidating the CPC's state power.

Women in National Imaginaries

While many scholars have examined how the Chinese party-state has focused on reducing ethnic diversity as a form of power centralization, another of the state's consolidation of power is its hegemonic construction of gender, and especially the regulation and treatment of women. In a highly patriarchal society, women are always

employed by the state as symbolic and spiritual wellsprings for its construction of power. Yet, women's actual contributions to the nation and nationalism have long been downplayed by the dominant culture and discourses that tend to devalue and constrain them. This discrepancy of acknowledgment is what this dissertation seeks to unearth and address: even though Chinese women are considered as "holding up half of the sky" in Chinese official discourse to denote their role in nation-building, they encounter visible and invisible pressures and obstacles at the same time.

Yuval-Davis (1997) pointed out that women have a "dual nature" in the construction of nationalism. On the one hand, they are included in the definition and discourse of "nation." On the other hand, they are not given the same rights as their male counterparts. Also, she argued that "women are both denied full citizenship rights and used to symbolically represent the nation-state" (p. 217). Terms such as "motherland" and "mother tongue" demonstrate the spiritual significance and nurturing stereotypes of women, which are essential to building the nation. However, women remain largely symbolic in these constructions and lack actual presence in the state's decision-making at the same time. For example, Yuval-Davis observed that there are always separate legislations to differentiate women from the rest of the citizenship, especially in the private domain, such as restrictions on their reproductive rights (p. 219). Thus, their personal lives also serve the national agenda, and their sacrifices are extolled by the state rather than being prevented or compensated.

In her classic article, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak (1983) examined women's relationship with multiple forms of repression by the nation. Situated in the

Hindu context, Spivak questioned whether women as the subaltern class, suffering from both domestic patriarchy and external disruption, can speak up and hold power. To Spivak, the subaltern is located in the "international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text" (p. 283). From the outside, the British colonizers imposed their presumably more civil and advanced values upon India. Yet domestically, the Hindu tradition became another force that added restrictions on women, such as pressing them to literally sacrifice themselves in marriage as a fulfillment of virtue. Spivak also gave an example of a young woman who hung herself during the nationalist movement as a statement of devotion. The woman deliberately chose the time of her menstruation to sacrifice her life so that people would know that she did not die because of the guilt of personal misconduct. This was an extreme case of a woman's forced compromise to the patriarchy. In fact, this struggle is nothing new for women in the Global South, giving that such women are constantly negotiating between Western forces and long-held domestic traditions. Not having to respond solely to outside value judgments, women are instead dealing with multiple constrictions.

This observation was further elaborated by Narayan (1997), who studied women and nationalism by focusing on Third World countries. She proposed that there was a resemblance between the mother-daughter relationship and women's relationship with their nation:

> Both our mothers and our mother-cultures give us all sorts of contradictory messages, encouraging their daughters to be confident, impudent, and self-

> assertive even as they attempt to instill conformity, decorum, and silence, seemingly oblivious to these contradictions. (p. 8)

In Narayan's argument, the authority of the biological mother is a form of patriarchal power that delegates contradictory requests to the daughter. Moreover, she observed that in places where a nationalist movement was central, women's feminist advocacy would always meet with men's criticism. Since feminism was seen as originating from the West, it became proof of women being "Westernized" and thus abandoning their "traditional" values and virtues. There was thus a notion of equating anti-colonialism with nationalism, which was further practiced by preserving traditional culture and forcing women to go back to their submissive roles. This again demonstrated the presumed association between women and the national spirit in a patriarchal society. Women under such conditions can never really achieve liberation or equality because, at the root of patriarchy, they represent the "tradition," and if they betray traditional values and embrace outside thought, they are un-nationalistic. Despite these injustices, they typically do not have the power and opportunity to defeat such discourses.

As this dissertation examines Chinese women's positionality within nationalist narratives and public discourses, this literature focusing on Third World women's multilayered struggles within their respective nations has provided relevant empirical background and references. Chinese women and their relationship with the nation-state have experienced quite a bumpy journey, given China's political and cultural upheavals; yet, as much literature has demonstrated, from the perspective of China's national

leadership, women's struggles have always been, and continue to be, overshadowed by the political authorities' larger agenda.

The history of modern and contemporary China has also revealed that women have served the private sphere and been the symbolic representation of the nation. However, in addition to such similarities with other developing countries, China's long-lasting influence from Confucianism is still at the root of its powerful patriarchy. For thousands of years, Confucian teaching guided Chinese people's understanding and practice of gender. Kristeva (1977) commented that Confucianism was an "eater of women" (p. 66). She observed that according to the classic Confucian teaching, women were "cloistered in their houses. . . destined only for housework and reproduction" (p. 75). As a result of such a system, a woman must be obedient and subordinate to her husband in order to be considered virtuous. She did not need to study because she was only expected to bring honor to her family by acting timid and having filial piety. In terms of marriage, Gao (2003) stated, "Prejudice against women had existed in China long before Confucianism. However, it was Confucianism that turned the marriage system into bondage of women, treating them as possessions for their husbands" (p. 114). Gao's study also provided a thorough historical review, especially by using literature, anecdotes, slang, and sayings from ancient Chinese dynasties to demonstrate the enduring belief of men as superior and women as inferior (*nan zun nu bei*, 男尊女卑).

The notorious "footbinding" was an extreme case of how social institutions—led by Confucian values—reinforced patriarchal oppression in China's history. Footbinding was a cruel and complicated process that restrained the natural growth of a woman's feet

to the size of 3 inches for her lifetime through binding at a young age. According to Lee and Stefanowska (1998), the ritual started in the Five Dynasties period (A.D. 907-960) and became more popular during the Ming dynasty (A.D. 1368-1644) (p. 12). They pointed out that there was a ceremony on the day of footbinding (p. 14). Thus, the distressing act toward a young woman's body was ritualized and celebrated. It is worth noting that it was often the mother who coaxed her daughter and bound her feet, which was striking, as the patriarchal repression of women could be imposed by women as well. This cultural practice essentially accentuated the indisputable power of the male-dominant society. As Lee and Stefanowska contended, "footbinding coincided with the rise of officially endorsed efforts to control women's domestic and sexual conduct, and it was specific to social class (middle and upper), region (northern China), and ethnicity (Han)" (p. 12). Relating footbinding to Confucianism, Blake (1994) also observed that it "was the muted voice of women in contention with the dominant discourse of Neo-Confucian values and definitions of reality" (p. 678). Again, the point of footbinding was more than physical repression, but a demonstration of the historically ingrained power relationship between genders in Chinese society.

Upon entering the 20th century, when China abandoned the imperial regime, women's fate and status started to be dependent on the new authority's agenda of nation-building. Although feudal repressions of women such as footbinding were lifted, and the May Fourth Movement in 1919 also cultivated waves of criticism against Confucianism by some Chinese intellectuals, women's role and social status did not immediately witness a large-scale, revolutionary change. But it was also during this time that some

Western feminist ideas entered Chinese society. According to Croll (1984/2001), when the confrontation between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party started in the 1920s, the earliest socialist feminism started to emerge, and the core conflict for women was already quite clear back then:

> To many of the feminists in search of a new code of standards, the only solution for women seemed to lie in a combination of traditional ideals befitting wives and mothers and a Western mixture of Confucian rules of conduct and forms of behavior required for the development of modern capitalism. (p. 158)

Nevertheless, the early awakening of a gender equality movement did not end with much achievement. When the Kuomintang (KMT) was in power, a "New Life Movement" in 1934 again promoted women's domestic virtues. Croll observed that "women were encouraged to believe that they had not been oppressed at all" (p. 159).

It was during the early days of Communist rule that Chinese women experienced some empowerment, even though it was, after all, the party authority's agenda to accumulate labor and public support. Mao Zedong had been very vocal about gender equality. He raised the idea that "women can hold up half of the sky" in the 1950s, which soon became a prevalent slogan in official propaganda. However, the seemingly revolutionary treatment of women by the Communist state also turned out to be a form of ideological control. Women's fate was continually linked with the ambition of the state, and women's bodies were especially utilized as tools and weapons to be dedicated to the country's industrial construction. Zhou (2003) pointed out that, in order to gain support from society and increase its prestige before 1949, the Communist Party's strategy was to

allow freedom of marriage and support the women's movement. Zhao further explained that the authorities "viewed Chinese women as a vast reserve of labor" and encouraged them to join the Communist revolution (p. 69). Next, during the "Great Leap Forward" movement in the late 50s, a period when the authorities exhorted the public to "chase and catch up with the United States and Great Britain (*chao ying gan mei*, 超英赶美)," Chinese women were asked to give birth to more children to create new laborers, as well as to join the industrial construction. While working with men might be considered a form of equality and empowerment for women, the actual pressure from the state expanded into women's private sphere.

During the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), some literature on Chinese women showed some variety in their fates, which was perhaps due to the complicated nature of the event itself. Wu (2013) summarized the goals of the Cultural Revolution as "to rectify the CCP, which Mao over-bureaucratized since it took power in 1949. Mao also wanted to revive the revolutionary spirit of the war period in order to maintain his personal charisma and domination within the CCP" (p. 305). While the Cultural Revolution might be a top-down agenda, the actual practice of Mao's ideology was implemented more effectively in a bottom-up fashion, particularly by the "Red Guards," hailed by the later notorious "Gang of Four."[6]

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[6] Gang of Four, or "Si Ren Bang (四人帮)," was a group consisting of four radical political elites—Jiang Qing, Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao, and Yao Wenyuan—who held tremendous power during the Cultural Revolution. The group claimed to implement Mao's ideologies but was, in fact, taking over the CCP power and manipulating the public to overthrow politicians that they did not like. After Mao's death,

Croll (1984/2001) recalled the 1960s as a period that saw the heightened awareness of class and gender struggles, with "the development of two separate movements: one to raise the consciousness of women as members of their sex suffering a particular form of cultural suppression and the other to raise the class consciousness of men and women" (p. 290). She spoke highly of women's education on self-consciousness during this time and mentioned various cultural artifacts, such as plays and operas, that featured women as protagonists. For example, the shows produced during the Cultural Revolution usually "reminded women that lots of them had led bitter lives when political power had been the monopoly of the warlords, the landlords and factory employers" (p. 311). Indeed, by reminding women of the repressive past, the righteousness of the New China under Mao's leadership became more valued.

Wu's (2007) study of female Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution stressed the social influence, power, and even violence exerted by women during that period. Calling it a "female legend," Wu pointed out that since Chinese women benefited tremendously from the establishment of Maoist China and gained almost every right enjoyed by men in education, marriage, property inheritance, etc. (p. 1-2), their social status became the highest in China's thousands of years of history. The cult of personality and idolization of Mao thus became the driving force for many female Red Guards. Wu

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Gang of Four lost power. Jiang and Wang both received a suspended death sentence, while Zhang and Yao were imprisoned for 20 years.

continued, “During the Cultural Revolution, Jiang Qing[7] had a high status, and thus in many operas and movies, women were not only the unquestionable protagonists but also had their names related to water. . . because they tried to please Jiang Qing [“Jiang” means “river” in Chinese]” (p. 3). The metaphor, symbolism, and heroic portrayals of women in these cultural products profoundly influenced an entire generation of female Red Guards.

In Wu’s opinion, women had gained great confidence and high social status during the Cultural Revolution and were respected by men. But unlike Croll, she believed that such empowerment was based on women’s self-sacrifice and repression of their consciousness. “They had to follow the game rules of Cultural Revolution,” argued Wu, “and the cost was to work like men, and annihilate their feminine traits such as softness and tenderness” (p. 6). Though one may argue that Wu also showed a stereotypical reading of femininity, it is undeniable that the patriarchal state was in charge of women’s social and even private conduct. Trying to survive in a society filled with class struggle and lack of trust, women’s “consciousness” was also distorted to cater to the ruling power and ideology. In this case, although women—especially the female Red Guards—had more agency than before, their harmful actions toward other women were encouraged by a patriarchal order, and their sacrifice and ideological distortion beneath their

[7] Jiang Qing was Mao Zedong’s last wife, an actress and a political leader during the Cultural Revolution. She was also a member of the “Gang of Four.”

empowerment were forgotten by those who later praised the era. After all, it was still patriarchal power that manipulated the fates of Chinese women of that era.

After Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping, the new paramount leader, helped China get back on a relatively stable track by proposing the "Reform and Opening Up" policy. Hence, China started to practice the so-called "socialism with Chinese characteristics," which applied a capitalist market system with partial socialist government intervention. The new political ideology saw immediate success; however, since the focus was placed on the economy, gender issues ceased to be a central concern in the official agenda. Lu (2004) mentioned that the Chinese party-state actually called for the "return of femininity" in the 1980s. At the time, China saw Japan as a role model, since Japan's economy experienced an impressive leap in the 50s due to the government's encouragement of women to stay at home and support the family (p. 2). Thus, the mass media in China started to lament that, "Nowadays there are no real women in China!" "Women have been lost in the blue and green sea of Mao's uniform!" "Women work like men and act like men!" (p. 3). Such calls for a return to femininity did not grant women further rights; instead, they heaped more social expectations upon them, since women still had to live up to the state's image of the new, independent, working woman, and at the same time figure out how to maintain femininity, as requested by men. Later, the government's intervention in women's lives extended to their reproductive rights, represented by the "One-Child Policy" initiated in 1979. This policy directly caused the issue of sex-selective abortions in the country. Gupta et al. (2003) conducted a study on Eastern and Southern Asian countries' preference for sons and identified China

in particular as the only country that had "stringent fertility regulation," which led to heightened discrimination against daughters (p. 1).

Thus, Chinese women's relationship with the party-state has shown that when it comes to nationalism, women are only involved conditionally in the overall narrative of the authorities. They belong to the generalized category of "citizens" but do not share the same kind of recognition and benefits as their male counterparts. Women's contributions are generally symbolic and spiritual, but their struggles are real and are the results of both social and personal pressures. On the one hand, they are expected to contribute diligently to nation-building and to fulfill the party-state's demands; on the other hand, they are charged with maintaining traditions, which are considered the spiritual core of the nation and nation-ness. Hence, it is crucial to recognize the existence of such contradictions, both through distinguishing nationalism from simply a retention of "tradition," as well as extracting women from the burdens of representing the private sphere and being the totem of the ruling power's ideologies.

Postsocialist China and Neoliberalism

During the past few decades, China has impressed the world with its economic development. The Reform and Opening Up policy brought in new vibes and liberty to China's market, and China's participation in the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 2001 also made it a desired destination for foreign investments. Yet while China's economy development has skyrocketed, on the cultural front there has been significant upheaval and anxiety, arising from tensions between discourses brought in by globalization and domestic ideologies and traditions. In the era defined by many scholars

as “postsocialist,” these conflicts have become the defining traits of the Communist party-state’s negotiation with the neoliberal world, in which it has embraced many capitalist market strategies while trying to maintain its ideological core.

In today’s China, the concepts of postsocialism and neoliberalism tend to appear simultaneously. This is because they are, indeed, intertwined and complementary. To explain neoliberalism, Harvey (2007) stated that:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (p. 2)

Harvey observed that China’s rise at the end of the ’80s was a key point that, together with the British and the United States’ economic reform under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, signaled the start of a globalized “neoliberal” world order. Also, Deng’s liberalization of China’s economy “was to transform China in two decades from a closed backwater to an open centre of capitalist dynamism with sustained growth rates unparalleled in human history” (p. 1).

In one chapter entitled “Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics,” Harvey argued that the outcome of China’s neoliberalism was “the construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control” (p. 120). This coalesced outcome thus makes China unique. Meanwhile, as many scholars believed that China has entered a “postsocialist” stage after the inception of the Reform and Opening Up policy, Zhang

(2008) prompted that it was “Chinese postmodernism” that needed to be examined first (p. 136). More specifically, it was postmodernism that made the country a postsocialist society:

> Chinese postmodernism as a social discourse can therefore be considered to be a revolt against the modernist and modernization ideology of the New Era which, posing itself as the ‘new enlightenment’ from Maoism as a form of Chinese feudalism, sealed the legitimacy of Deng’s China in the discourse of modernity. (p. 136-137)

To Zhang, the modern era for China more precisely refers to the post-Mao 1980s, which was also after Deng became the paramount leader and started to reform the market. With the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest as a watershed, the 1990s saw China moving into postsocialism: besides continuing the expansion and liberation of the market, China’s ideological restructuring after 1989 has also entered a new phase. Zhang critiqued the traditional way of seeing Chinese postmodernism as “reductionist choices between socialism and capitalism, despotism and liberal democracy, state command and free market, ‘official’ and ‘unofficial,’ popular culture and elitism, right and wrong” (p. 158). Instead, he suggested one see the country’s changes as intertwined with the local context.

Meanwhile, Davis and Wang (2008) stressed the CPC’s ultimate power in fast-growing postsocialist China, noting that “the communist one-party system that engineered both the socialist and the post-socialist revolutions retains its political monopolies” (p. 4). Similarly, Luo and Sun (2015) stated, “With a market economy replacing the decades of a centrally planned socialist economy, the transition to a post-

socialist China, however, does not index the disintegration of communist power" (p. 241).

Observing the last three decades, China has proved that "socialism with Chinese characteristics" or "postsocialism" is a feasible form of polity that can validate the efficiency of the Communist leadership. The country has shown a prosperous GDP and expanding global influences, navigated through the challenges from anti-Communist events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the incident at Tiananmen Square, and experienced minimal impact from several major international financial crises.

In terms of the postsocialist mentality in public culture and society, according to Rofel (2008), China has changed from cultivating "consciousness" during the socialist revolutionary years to a situation where "postsocialist power operates on the site of 'desire'" (p. 6). Rofel believed the end of the Cultural Revolution signaled an end to Maoist socialism, and Deng built a China that was constantly in the mode of "desiring." This sentiment of "desire" reflected the transition to a market economy in China, which also fostered a vibrant consumer culture. However, like other scholars, Rofel argued that economic reform did not mean that it was "in opposition to the state," because the state still intervened at times, which was also what made China an unusual neoliberal practitioner (p. 10). While the state's direct order and control of marketization and privatization have decreased, its system of governance has remained, which results in more and more "mixtures of local government ownership and private management" (p. 10).

Rofel also argued that "the construction of this inner self [desire] occurs through public allegories. . . If human nature has changed in China, this transformation takes place in the remaking of the public spaces and stories through which human nature discovers itself" (p. 6). Here, Rofel stressed culture's defining role for the public and society's self-realization, as it is through public culture that people can look inward and self-reflect. Since "desire" was essentially cultivated by the postsocialist system, it is worth examining how cultural discourses construct, reform, and reflect the postsocialist state's characteristics in a neoliberal era. In other words, in China's case, cultural phenomena and discourses should reveal the authorities' manifestation and consolidation of power.

This goes back to the classic theorization of "hegemony" by Gramsci (1996 [1947]), who proposed the idea of "cultural hegemony" and defined the meaning of "state" and "civil society" during his imprisonment under the Mussolini regime in the 1930s. According to Gramsci, a state is a combination of "political society" and "civil society." The former belongs to the public domain and includes the army, police, the entire bureaucracy, etc., and the latter belongs to the private domain, encompassing education, family, culture, etc. It is within the civil society that certain culture is above others, thus forming a cultural leadership which he called "hegemony." Gramsci also noticed that for the authorities to maintain hegemony, they need to gain consent from the civil society. Thus, the power-holders expect to cultivate a society wherein people are willing to be ruled by the dominant culture. To achieve this goal, the authorities exercise power, not only through coercive units such as the army and police, but also in

educational ways. As Gramsci noted, “The State does have and request consent, but it also ‘educates’ this consent, by means of the political and syndical associations” (p. 259).

Althusser (1970/2014) expanded on Gramsci’s observation of the state’s manipulation of power. He proposed that the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) coexisted in a given society, but with one more influential than the other. RSA was “a single, centralized corps” including the government, administration, army, police, prisons, etc., and the ISA contained “scholastic, religious, familial, political, associative, cultural, the news and information apparatus” and constituted “a distinct system by all or part of the State Ideology” (p. 92). He stressed that a state could not function by using only one of these methods; instead, it should exert both repressive and ideological control, with one being more predominant than the other. Both Gramsci and Althusser recognized the coexistence and complementary relation of a given state’s repressive and ideological power; but more importantly, they underlined that it was hegemony, or a culturally dominant power, that could sustain the state’s long-lasting dominance over society. As Fairclough (2013) well summarized:

> It is the hegemonic control of the dominant class over the institutions of civil society (education, work, family, leisure, etc.) within the “outer defenses” of the repressive state apparatus that makes revolutionary transformation of modern capitalist societies so difficult, and imposes upon the revolutionary party the long-term ideological and hegemonic struggles of a “war of position”, rather than direct confrontation with the state in a “war of maneuver.” (p. 128)

In today's China, coercive control from the state has given way to ideological propaganda and guidance. The party-state is using ideological institutions to implant its ruling ideas in the masses, such as through education and mass communication. In this case, media has become one of the most effective institutions affecting people's daily absorption of information and of the dominant ideologies. More recently, social media has also started to play a key role in disseminating and maintaining the country's hegemony.

Chinese Women in the Era of Postsocialism

Since this dissertation examines media representations of women in a postsocialist China and how women negotiate a complex mix of China's public culture and political agendas, it is important to look at existing studies pertaining to Chinese women's daily encounters, struggles, and negotiations within a hegemonic society supervised by the Communist party-state. In a postsocialist China, even though many women have realized their agency due to their absorption of progressive neoliberal ideologies, many scholars have also identified problematic aspects accompanying the positive changes and thus considered both the advantages and downsides brought to China by neoliberal development. Thus, the following literature review contains three specific aspects faced by Chinese women: the patriarchal pressure to maintain traditional values, the dominant culture's intervention in their trajectories towards marriage, and the state's supervision of their statuses as both nationalistic citizens and empowered consumers.

Postsocialist China versus Traditional Values

Defining China as "neoliberal" does not only refer to its market and economic integration with the world, but also refers to its culture, which has become more receptive

and adaptive to Western influences. Meanwhile, calling China a "postsocialist" country does not mean that it has completely abandoned the authoritarian regime, since it has entered a stage where centralized power is disseminated in more sophisticated ways. The following section looks at the theme of "women" under these two dominant conditions in China.

Although neoliberalism has brought economic breakthroughs, as many scholars have already pointed out, it also expanded the economic gap between urban and rural areas and between the urban-dwelling middle class and the increasing number of migrant workers. Harvey (2007) observed that the surging consumer culture was only emerging in large cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, "forming at an astonishing rate to create exaggerated versions, even to the point of parody, of New York, London, or Paris" (p. 147). In addition, there are also "gender consequences," as he stated that "amassing wealth arises out of the super-exploitation of labour power, particularly of young women migrants from rural areas" (p. 148).

Chang's (2008) ethnographic study focused on many young women from rural China who left for big cities as migrant workers. They gave up their education to earn money at an early age to support their families, and especially to pay for their brothers' schooling, since sons are more favored and privileged in rural China. This gendered treatment of women is one of the results of neoliberalism's impact in China. For one thing, the global distribution of resources under neoliberalism has already caused exploitation of labor in developing countries; for another, women in these positions are particularly vulnerable and powerless as they are oppressed, not only by systematic

exploitation, but also traditional family duties and expectations for women only. When the focus of the entire society is on the economy, women who have already been suffering from multiple social and hierarchical constraints experience more deprivation of their basic rights and of access to equal opportunities.

Meanwhile, Rofel (2008) discussed neoliberalism's cultural impact on China in a cosmopolitan context. She observed that the essential trait of neoliberal China is rising desire in people's reconstruction of gender and sexuality. She also linked such desire with cosmopolitanism by saying that, "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is, after all, a cosmopolitan ideology that "normalizes new forms of inequality, new ways to value human activity, and new ways of 'worlding' China, of placing China in a reimagined world (p. 111-112). This indicates that the developmental issues in urban China are mostly coming from society's booming desires, especially the burgeoning consumerist culture and people's growing awareness of freedom, agency, and self-actualization.

Some scholars also stated that many women in postsocialist China demonstrate unprecedented confidence because of their liberation from previous repressive ideologies. This is particularly revealed through mass media's appreciation of women's physical appearance and promotion of a generic and universal standard of beauty. From a historical perspective, postsocialist China, born in the '80s, had just been freed from Mao's authority and survived the chaotic Cultural Revolution; thus, the embrace of personal freedom and choice, though not to a significant degree, was powerful and striking enough for the public to be excited about. It was thus during the '80s that Chinese media, including China Central Television (CCTV), had a quite bold and critical

attitude towards the government, which contributed to the rise of the pro-democracy movement in 1989 (Zhao, 2004, p. 135). The more open-minded appreciation of women's bodies and beauty thus became another example of abandoning the pedantic past.

Evans (1997) noted that in the '80s and '90s, "robust steel workers, cotton-pickers, and sports-women, their eyes shining with political zeal, have been supplanted by slender, beautiful urban women dressed in the latest fashions" (p. 138). Brownell (1998) also asserted that the reform era signaled China's shift from "Communist nationalism to consumerist nationalism" (p. 37). Her research showed an intense clash between tradition and liberation by focusing on many "sportswomen-turned-fashion-models" in China in the '80s and '90s. These women's radical change from being national heroes to fashion icons was also a showcase of the systematic change of the state and society's attitude towards female beauty. Moreover, Brownell's interviews with these women revealed their shared feeling that it was "liberating" to display their physical beauty in a new way (p. 37).

Chen (2016) examined popular fashion magazines, which China adopted from Western women's glossy magazines, and pinpointed that as print media, they were "no longer politicized Party tools of the socialist era and instead [were] market driven and highly popular among women from all walks of life" (p. 2831). According to Chen, neoliberalism has redefined the previous Chinese concept of femininity by replacing the almost genderless, "iron women" stereotypes from the Mao and post-Mao era with a

Western-oriented style that focuses on women's physicality and position in the private sphere.

As a result, a unique problem rose: one could not directly apply Western feminist analysis to similar cases in China, because the return to femininity—seen from a Chinese context—was not necessarily a backward and discriminatory move against women, but was revolutionary and empowering. It actually demonstrated the achievement of overturning the repressive authoritarian regime. As Chen also explained,

> This "natural" femininity as gendered difference is also inextricably linked with a postsocialist desire to undo a perceived socialist wrong of 'unnatural' distortion and repression, a desire to reinstitute a 'natural' human nature that would relaunch China into a globalized modernity of shared universal values. (p. 2835-2836)

However, this "universal value" misrepresents Western feminist ideologies, which argue that this kind of "natural femininity" should not be universal, and that there is no such thing as "natural" femininity at all. Nevertheless, since the "return to femininity" was seen as a positive change in the eyes of many Chinese women, this example has certainly indicated the complexity of studying media's representation of women in postsocialist China. It also means that, due to the uniqueness of postsocialism, it is crucial to consider this specific context when analyzing controversial social issues in China, since the cases are unlikely to be thoroughly deciphered by preexisting non-Chinese knowledge and examples.

Postsocialist China versus "Leftover Women"

Postsocialist China, poised between embracing global capitalism and maintaining a socialist ideological core, has created a contradictory situation for women. More specifically, the country portrays itself as aggressively absorbing the pluralistic ideas and trends brought by neoliberalism; however, when it comes to women and their potential empowerment, China chooses to maintain "traditions" and "virtues."

This phenomenon is particularly shown in Chinese society's discrimination against the so-called "leftover women (*sheng nv*, 剩女)," a term coined by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2007, which describes women who are above the age of 27 and unmarried. In the neoliberal context, many urban Chinese women become more independent and choose to postpone marriage in order to focus on other things they find more important in life. Nonetheless, these women who deliberately choose to be unmarried have become a "problem" in the public discourses and culture, as media continuously promote the idea that they are unwanted, selfish, or having other issues. Thus, these women's awakened subjectivity and agency are not only unappreciated by society, but also considered as challenging the patriarchal norm of marriage. As a country that keeps the goal of "maintaining stability (*wei wen*, 维稳)" at the forefront of its domestic agenda, a traditional, heterosexual family structure with a couple getting married at a child-bearing age is the foundation of social stability. The nation-wide discrimination, both in the media and in everyday discourses, has thus demonstrated the

enduring patriarchal repression of Chinese women's choices, even at a time when they have demonstrated the positive results of neoliberalism.

Although it would make sense that China under the materialist Communist ideology should abandon these outdated Confucian creeds, the current Xi administration actually promotes it as a way of easing class tensions and harmonizing the relationship between the authorities and the public. As a result, Confucianism is no longer considered a destructive doctrine, but a source of cultural pride that can unite and represent China as a virtuous and reputable nation. As Cai (2016) observed, there has been a heightened revival of Confucianism, or "popular Confucianism," which includes campaigns resuming Confucian teaching, TV programs featuring an analysis of the *Lunyu* ("Analects"), and even the establishment of a dozen government-sponsored "Confucius Institutes" around the world, all seeking to make Confucianism represent "Chinese-ness" and Chinese culture. In addition, President Xi has also been very proactive about connecting Confucianism with the Communist Party. During an event commemorating Confucius in 2014, he commented, "The Chinese Communist Party has always been great successors and promotors of traditional culture. We are absorbing the nourishment from Confucius to Sun Yat-Sen" ("How to understand," 2014).

Indeed, the core value of Confucian philosophy is to achieve stability and harmony on all levels, both publicly and privately. This is in line with the CCP's "Socialist Core Values" as well. Thus, it is hard not to suspect a connection between the widespread restoration of Confucianism and society's prevailing resentment towards unmarried women, since they challenge the balance and stability of the nation's

established patriarchal culture and order. This strategy of stressing the importance of maintaining tradition and using it to imply nationality, exerted by the authorities and state media on unmarried women, is not unlike Narayan's (1997) earlier observation that many Third-World countries equate feminism with Westernization, and thus deem noncompliant women anti-nationalist.

Previous literature on "leftover women" has examined the term and the social phenomenon from different perspectives. Some writers directly interviewed "leftover women," some examined the media's role in affecting these women, some mentioned the paternal system's repressive power in the construction of this discourse, and some looked at alternative media and grassroots activities that advocated for these unfairly treated women. To (2015) studied unmarried, high-status, urban-dwelling women in China. Through ethnographic research and in-depth interviews illuminating the reasons behind these women's desire to remain single, she concluded that "leftover women" were not unwilling to get married but were fettered by many external reasons. Some of them chose work over marriage, while others found men to be too demanding, selfish, and chauvinistic. Moreover, quite a lot of women blamed their parents for being too pushy or never satisfied with the boyfriends they dated. In the end, it was always the pressure from their families that stopped them from devoting themselves to a romantic relationship.

Fincher's (2014) analysis of "leftover women" was mainly from historical and economic perspectives. She pointed out that "marriage promotion for social stability" and the Chinese government's "population planning goals" were factors behind the emergence of the term "leftover women" (p. 28). In addition, the tradition of male

privilege rooted in society has given men many resources and rights, especially the ownership of real estate, that put them in a superior position in marriage. Fincher argued that the socialist system in general has caused "a combination of factors" that affected women's marriage choices, such as "skyrocketing home prices, a resurgence of traditional gender norms, legal setbacks to married women's property rights, declining labor force participation among women, and the media campaign against 'leftover' women" (p. 7).

Another common angle has been to examine the mass media's dissemination of the idea of "leftover women" and the construction and intensification of public discourses about it. After the state legitimized the term, the Chinese media soon picked up and popularized "leftover women" by repeating and naturalizing it in programs and shows. Luo and Sun (2015) used a Chinese dating show, *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* (Are You the One), to analyze the "renegotiation of class and gender identities within China's neoliberal consumerist discourse" (p. 240). They posited that popular dating shows, which allowed single women and men to be exposed under the spotlight and openly talking about their ideal spouses, reflected the influence of neoliberal values in China which elevate marketization, privatization, and consumerism, yet at the same time "intermingle with the lingering socialist ideals of collectivity and the common goal of prosperity" (p. 241). As a result, women have to reconstruct their postsocialist femininity.

In this show, a group of women were presented in high fashion and beautiful make-up, and generally had high social statuses and stable incomes; however, they were

trying to “marry up” or find a man that had more social and economic capital than they did themselves. Luo and Sun sharply criticized the fact that even though the format of the show aimed to let women be in charge by asking men some bold questions, women never had the power to be with the one they love: “they can only decide whether or not a male participant is to stay. . . The rules, however, enable a potential suitor to make the final decision to leave the stage with one woman of his choice” (p. 248). They concluded that commercial media directly aided in “reconfiguring gender mandate and social hierarchy” and to “maintain socio-political power in the transition to a capitalist market economy” (p. 240).

Similarly, scholars have performed textual and discourse analyses of women’s representation in Chinese national galas on television, and observed that, “leftover women,” together with women who were less attractive according to the “male gaze,” were considered jokes and failures, while women who conformed to the male-dominant aesthetics would be idolized on these TV shows. Moreover, it was culturally and morally acceptable for the entertainment shows to make fun of “leftover women.” According to Liu and Dahling (2016), the 2015 Spring Festival Gala (SFG) broadcast on CCTV “came under fire from numerous quarters for its misogynistic treatment and toxic portrayal of Chinese women, notably comparing masculine women (*nvhanzi*) with ‘goddesses’ (*nvshen*), maligning fat women, and depreciating the value of left-over/left-behind women (*shengnv*) and twice-married women” (p. 2). Chuang (2015) also recalled that a sketch “mocked re-married women as ‘second-hand goods,’ ‘married-off daughters are like poured away water.’” The patriarchal culture that objectifies women and ignores

their agency is thus propagated in the form of funny skits circulated throughout China. As a popular national spectacle, SFG, which has been running for more than three decades, has almost made it a norm to boost the patriarchy and demean women as a celebration of Chinese traditional culture.

Postsocialist China versus Commodity Feminism

Finally, the entanglement of neoliberalism, market economy, consumerism, and women has made another Western-originated concept—commodity feminism—applicable to the contemporary Chinese context, i.e., a postsocialist society under heavy influence from neoliberalism.

Commodity feminism came into being concurrently with the birth of third-wave feminism. As Goldman et al. (1991) observed, "Women's magazines attempt to redefine feminism through commodities, interpreting the everyday relations women encounter and negotiate into a series of 'attitudes' which they can then 'wear.'" Therefore, such commodified feminism may "modify patriarchal hegemony, but bow to capitalist hegemony" (p. 336). In addition, Banet-Weiser (2004) pointed out that commodity feminism showed an ideological contradiction, in that women both had some freedom and agency in contemporary society, and were subjected to the "commercial merchandising of these claims" (p. 124). These observations about commodity feminism thus identify the multilayered and complicated struggles particular to women in capitalist consumer culture, as women both seem empowered to make buying decisions, and at the same time, are confined by an enduring patriarchal system.

Meanwhile, neoliberalism and third-wave feminism are also interrelated. Evans (2015) stated that "any critical analysis of third wave feminism is contingent upon a concomitant reading of intersectionality and the neoliberal context" (p. 39). Indeed, when third-wave feminism emerged in the early 1990s, it was when neoliberal ideologies and political forces led by the United States and United Kingdom had begun strengthening globally. As the world became more connected due to capital and labor flows, some feminist scholars also began to propose feminist analyses with more transnational and globally contextualized perspectives, paying attention to the stratification and disparity between the developed and developing world, and challenging previously Western-dominated feminist discourses.

Mohanty (1984) differentiated "Women" from "women" by defining the uppercased one as "a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses," and the lowercased one as the "real, material subjects of their collective histories" (p. 334), thus indicating the oftentimes Orientalized and downplayed female struggles outside the Western context. Having worked on the "decolonization of feminist scholarship and theory," Mohanty (2013) saw the top-down and Eurocentric perspectives of feminism as "marginaliz[ing] communities of women in the global South and North" and suggested focusing on "historical and cultural specificity in understanding their complex agency as situated subjects" (p. 967). Similarly, Fernandes (2013) claimed that third-wave feminism invented in the United States with an awareness of intersectionality and transnationalism was still too general and institutionalized (p. 168). Thus, she proposed abandoning the Western "wave model of

feminism" and "break[ing] with a U.S.-centric model of history" (p. 172), as well as considering "the political and intellectual significance of historical memory" in a specific context, as the "the transformative power of memory provides us with a deeper possibility for producing a richer and more transformative narrative that can capture the complexities of feminist intellectual and social history" (p. 175).

Their suggestions of applying both a situational and a historical perspective to examine cases outside the First World hegemony is particularly pertinent to the study of China in this dissertation. China is located outside the West, yet connected to transnational cultures, discourses, and division of labor due to neoliberalism, and has therefore developed a unique postsocialist market that requires more situational reading and examination. Thus, when studying Chinese women in this unprecedented era and their negotiations with both the market and the state, it is crucial to recognize the mixed character of China's current market and consumerist culture, which are partly open to external forces yet also significantly restricted.

Rofel (2008) saw consumption in postsocialist China as comprising a "cosmopolitan identity," and young heterosexual female consumers as being "pulled into negotiating the meaning of Chineseness" (p. 112). This dissertation argues that Chinese women's roles in an increasingly materialized culture is worth further examination because the country's surging economy in the last two to three decades and its deep integration with the world have required women to quickly adapt to both a vibrant consumerist culture and progressive ideologies from the developed world. In this process, the Chinese authorities and consumerist culture also provide women with similar realities

to those that have been seen in commodity feminism. More specifically, while having more freedom and agency to become empowered consumers, Chinese women are also consuming within a conditioned political environment that exploits their subjectivity on the one hand and forces them to preserve Chineseness on the other.

Due to neoliberalism and globalization, today's Chinese society shares many similarities with Western consumerist culture. Thus, being capable of consuming goods has become an important indicator of a person's power and ability in such a competitive society filled with opportunism. For Chinese women, society's adulation of consumption, of a unified pattern of beauty, and of money, together with the heightened and exciting promotion of such ideologies through mass media, has given them an explicit message of what a successful woman should look like and look forward to. Thus, many women have inevitably become susceptible to such postsocialist and consumerist allures.

However, China is also different from the West on many levels, so scholars should not directly apply Western theories to the Chinese context. It has already been mentioned that, when examining the history of Chinese women's struggle to gain equality and power, it is striking that for a long time, "a return to femininity" was considered liberating and empowering, which was also supported by women themselves (see Brownell, 1998). To some extent, the repressors of Chinese women and Western women are opposites. For the latter, sexualizing women and downplaying their social significance is a capitalist patriarchal way of protecting male dominance; yet for the former, depriving women of feminine expression, eliminating the "self" to construct a

conformed socialist nation-state, was for a long time the basic strategy for the Maoist regime to maintain authoritarian power.

Therefore, it is perhaps understandable that, from the perspective of Chinese women who have been through the revolutionary years, as well as those who continue to struggle and make their way through the modern patriarchal world, being able to enjoy the consumerist culture and having the opportunity to experience traditional femininity feels like a relief and liberation. Commodity feminism, in this case, taps into such feelings in women living in a cosmopolitan urban setting. Nevertheless, from a critical perspective, what women continue to face is the Communist party-state's power, which penetrates into various market and cultural practices that constrain how women should behave and serve the nation.

This dissertation thus applies commodity feminism critiques to China because the current Chinese consumerist culture shares many neoliberal traits with the Western capitalist model. Many corporations and advertisements in China attempt to commercialize women's newly gained agency and empowerment to serve their oftentimes patriarchal and capitalist agenda. However, in postsocialist China, the party-state's interventionist tradition and public culture are intertwined with neoliberal market influences, and thus requires carefully contextualized reading of individual cases when it comes to Chinese women's positionalities. This approach will allow the dissertation to decipher the nuances and specifics of contemporary Chinese women's experiences and choices.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to understand Chinese women's struggles and negotiation with the postsocialist regime and public culture, it is productive to apply an interdisciplinary methodology that takes into account the historical, social, and cultural contexts of China, and how various institutional and personal factors are intertwined in shaping Chinese women's lived experiences. Also, since this dissertation examines the oftentimes problematic representations of women on different media platforms, a method that can address the multimodality of media texts should be employed. As a result, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used as the overarching methodology for three analytical chapters discussing specific case studies in order to identify common threads in the issues and struggles encountered by Chinese women today.

CDA functioned as an "overarching" method in this dissertation because it is a theoretically informed method that facilitates a critical reading and synthesis of social problems with an awareness of how power and ideologies function. Because of a certain abstractness, CDA can sometimes be seen as lacking detailed instructions for coding and dissecting data. Given that some cases examined in the analytical chapters contained various forms of data—some were visual signs, some were heavily textual, and some were a combination of both—Social Semiotic Analysis (SSA) was occasionally used to better investigate the visual and even auditory aspects of the data. However, all codes generated from the analyses were eventually examined using CDA to extract their deeper ideological significance, since CDA critically and effectively tackles the discursive and

social practices surrounding particular issues and pinpoints the structural power relationship embedded in them.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is heavily rooted in critical and cultural theory, which directly traces back to the Marxist theorization of power. This foundation thus fits the goal of this dissertation, which examines the Chinese party-state's power and hegemonic supervision of the society and especially women. In addition, conducting specific case studies also requires thorough analyses of language, since language—no matter textual or visual—constructs discourses and has the power to convey ideologies and influence people's perceptions. As Richardson (2007) stated, language or discourse has five fundamental assumptions: 1) language is social, 2) language use enacts identity, 3) language use is always active, 4) language use has power, and 5) language use is political (p. 10-11). These traits of language usage indicate that one can never take any text for granted because it might have been carefully designed to represent or conceal the particular agendas and ideologies of those who created it. The awareness of language, discourse, and power thus makes CDA a suitable method for this dissertation.

Wodak and Meyer (2009) pointed out that "CDA as a school or paradigm is characterized by a number of principles… all approaches are problem-oriented… Moreover, CDA is characterized by the common interests in de-mystifying ideologies

and power through the systematic and *retroductable*[8] investigation of semiotic data (written, spoken or visual)" (p. 3). They also observed that "CDA researchers are interested in the way discourse (re)produces social domination, that is, the power abuse of one group over others, and how dominated groups may discursively resist such abuse" (p. 9). Their explanation of CDA underscores the dialectical relationship between texts and practices. While texts can describe, explain, generate, and regenerate practices, practices can also shape and reproduce texts.

In addition, Wodak and Meyer also laid out the "common ground" of CDA, which is "discourse, critique, power and ideology" (p. 4). More specifically, CDA views language and texts as social practice; it also inherits the Frankfurt School's idea that critical theory is "oriented towards critiquing and changing society, in contrast to traditional theory oriented solely to understanding or explaining it" (p. 6). This means that CDA as a research method not only aims to address the social problems, but also has a goal of solving them and even enlightening the uninformed population.

Meanwhile, to trace "power and ideology" in Marxist theory, it is important to note that Marxism was initially a critique of Western capitalism, which pertains to class differences that formed the dynamic of domination and exploitation. When discussing "ruling class and ruling ideas," Marx and Engels (2010 [1976]) observed that the ruling class, which owned materials, was also in control of the processes of intellectual and

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[8] The word "retroductable" here is translated from German "nachvollziehbar." It means that analyses "should be transparent so that any reader can trace and understand the detailed in-depth textual analysis" (Kendall, 2007).

mental production. They also highlighted such division of labor as "one of the chief forces of history up till now" (p. 59). More specifically, domination entailed the property-owning bourgeoisie class imposing power over the proletarian class that had no ownership of resources or property. The bourgeoisie class thus took advantage of the proletariats by forcing the latter to produce goods and earning profits from them. The bourgeoisie class also had access to violence in order to uphold its power and maintain the exploitative relationship and social structure. As Fairclough (2013) once stressed, "Critical linguistics and CDA have both been shaped by Marxism, especially twentieth century 'western Marxism'" (p. 305), indicating that CDA has always been grounded in the position that a given society is not immune to an exploitative power structure or unequal power relationships.

While "ideology" in Marxist definitions could be understood as the ruling ideas of the ruling class, Wodak and Meyer (2009) noted that it was the "everyday" function of ideology that interests most CDA scholars (p. 8). This "everydayness" of ideology, or the daily practice of ideology in the larger social context, echoed Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which focused on the power-driven naturalization of the status quo through the sophisticated construction of institutional and cultural leadership.

Fairclough, one of the founding scholars of CDA, also highlighted Gramsci's idea of "hegemony" in his elaboration of the method. According to Fairclough (2013), "hegemonic struggle and practice take the form of discursive practice" (p. 128). He examined hegemony and Gramsci's definition of the "state" and "civil society" in detail and pointed out that, for Gramsci:

> [T]he political power of the dominant class in such societies was based upon a combination of "domination"—state power in the narrow sense, control over the forces of repression and the capacity to use coercion against other social groups—and "intellectual and moral leadership" or "hegemony." (p. 128)

To Fairclough, Gramsci's theory has laid a perfect foundation for examining discourses, as "hegemonic struggle and practice take the form of discursive practice, reproduction and negotiation of power relations" (p. 130). In other words, dominant power over civil society is exerted and disseminated through discourses, and, thus, social institutions that are in charge of popularizing and disseminating the discourses are helping to maintain and consolidate the dominant power. Therefore, CDA is also an examination of discourses in relation to the larger context, such as the social system.

In addition, Fairclough (2013) pointed out "three properties" of CDA: relational, dialectical, and transdisciplinary (p. 3). CDA is relational because it should be about the discourse and its relation to society. It is dialectical because it examines power and discourse as a contradictory pair that nevertheless cannot be separated from each other. And it is transdisciplinary because CDA requires a comprehensive vision to survey and examine a broad range of social institutions and their relations with each other. Fairclough also explained the "critical" aspect of CDA, noting, "Critical social research aims to contribute to addressing the social 'wrongs' of the day… by analysing their sources and causes, resistance to them, and possibilities of overcoming them" (p. 231). To him, the existence of "social wrongs" was central to a Marxist approach for understanding power and society.

Some CDA scholars were inspired by Foucauldian analysis of discourse and power. In *Discipline and Punish* (1995[1977]), Foucault outlined the evolution of authority's power from being sovereign to disciplinary, and from a top-down, repressive, and centralized model to a dispersive one manipulated by different social institutions. Foucault (1980) also stated, "There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association" (p. 93). Here, he saw discourse as a place to produce as well as maintain power. Jäger and Maier (2009) thus argued that "Foucauldian CDA here clearly differs from orthodox Marxist positions, which stipulate that social existence determines consciousness… Foucault understands this relationship rather the other way around and emphasizes the materiality of discourse" (p. 36). Though not aligning with the Marxist notion of power, both Foucauldian and Marxist definitions have been adapted by CDA scholars, as Wodak and Meyer concluded, "The defining features of CDA are its concern with power as a central condition in social life, and its efforts to develop a theory of language that incorporates this as a major premise" (p. 10).

Moreover, as Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) argued, CDA is also well-suited for examining the postmodern context, since "Postmodernist theory has fixed upon the consequential economic and cultural centrality of signs detached from specific material locations and circulating across boundaries of space and time" (p. 3). Their recognition of CDA's application to the study of neoliberalism and its impact on the global economy suggest the method's adaptability to the contemporary Chinese context as well. As Zhang (2008) noted, if the 1980s signaled the modernist "New Era" of China due to Deng

Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening Up," then the decade following it demonstrated China's own postmodernism, which:

> [W]itnessed not the end of modernization and developmentalist ideology but rather their permeation and radicalization under the postsocialist and "postmodern" circumstances of globalization, commodification, individual freedom, private ownership and rights, social mobility, moral and value plurality, and cultural diversity (p. 2).

As an important participant in today's global neoliberal transformation, China's interaction with the world has already demonstrated a complicated situation in which successful economic integration with the world comes with controversial cultural and domestic negotiations. In this case, it becomes especially crucial to apply a perspective offered by CDA, which not only recognizes the surface-level textual representations but also delves into the discursive and social relations that together construct and maintain a relatively stable and competitive society.

Three-Dimensional Model of CDA

Fairclough (2013) initially formulated CDA as "four stages," which were all centered around the "social wrongs": 1) focus on a social wrong in its semiotic aspect, 2) identify obstacles to addressing the social wrong, 3) consider whether the social order "needs" the social wrong, and 4) identify possible ways past the obstacles (p. 235). Besides stressing the importance of locating and focusing on the social wrongs, these stages also require subjectivity of the researcher, expecting the researcher to make an educated decision to identify and pass judgments on the significance of the cases. Hence,

what makes CDA unique from many other research methods is its deliberate inclusion of the researcher's subjectivity, which echoes what Wodak and Meyer observed about how the interpretation of power "raises the question of how CDA researchers understand power and what moral standards allow them to differentiate between power use and abuse" (p. 9).

A more specific and widely used model for conducting CDA is the "three-dimensional model" developed by Fairclough, which was also the main framework for this dissertation's analytical chapters. Fairclough (2013) suggested that one should approach discourse by analyzing the text, discourse practice, and social practice (p. 95). In his view, the first dimension is simply a "form-and-meaning analysis" which assesses the forms, dialogic organization, grammar, vocabulary, as well as their "interwoven meanings" in the given texts (p. 94). Richardson (2007) further explained that the textual analysis within CDA "examines the representations, identities and social relations, as well as cohesion and coherence of texts" (p. 38), meaning that it explores both the subjects being shown and the relation among them.

For the second dimension, Fairclough suggested examining the production and interpretation of the texts, known as "discourse practice." Richardson also pointed out that this practice involved "the processes involved in the production and consumption of texts" and was "always socially constructed" (p. 75). Therefore, examining the "discourse practice" requires the researcher to not only look at the process of how a text or discourse is constructed but to also take into consideration its subsequent influences and social reactions.

Finally, the third dimension requires the researcher to explore the "social organisation—the context of situation, the institutional context, and the wider societal context or 'context of culture' (Malinowski 1923, Halliday and Hasan 1985)" (p. 95). This means that CDA eventually brings the entire discourses surrounding the social wrongs into a systematic and ideological realm. After the problems have been identified and dissected, the researcher must take a personal stance, inspect the key findings, and synthesize them based on the acknowledgement that power exists in the social structure. This final step is also where the researcher determines the political and moral grounds of the discourses, pinpointing where the power lies and how it affects society or reproduces and strengthens the ruling ideas. As Jäger and Maier (2009) stated, "The critical discourse analyst needs to be clear about the fact that her critique is not situated outside discourse—as this would contradict the fundamental assumptions of discourse analysis. The analyst can—and has to—take a stand" (p. 36).

Social Semiotic Analysis (SSA)

In several cases in the analytical chapters, the data corpuses were collected from websites and advertisements, thus containing not only textual but also visual and even sound elements. These multiple modes of media usually complemented each other on the same platform or in the same context in order to construct a complex and coherent discourse. Therefore, the analysis also needs to consider the multimodality of these cases. Consequently, Social Semiotic Analysis (SSA) is also used as an addition to CDA in this dissertation.

Indeed, semiotics is never fully outside the scope of CDA. When Fairclough (2013) differentiated "interdisciplinary" from "transdisciplinary" as he became inclined to use the latter to define the trait of CDA, he stated,

> Transdisciplinary implies that the theoretical development… of CDA and the disciplines/theories it is in dialogue with is informed through that dialogue, a matter of working with (though not at all simply appropriating) the 'logic' and categories of the other in developing one's own theory and methodology. (p. 231)

In this process, semiotics, or what he preferred to call "semiosis," was part of the dialogue in social change and social practices. As a study of signs, semiotics analyzes visual texts and regards them as driven by power as well. Moreover, as Fairclough also noted, "Languages (as well as other semiotic systems) are a particular type of social structure" (p. 2).

The cases in this dissertation cover many media platforms and modes; thus, they are already quite transdisciplinary. Therefore, a semiotic methodology, in conjunction with the analysis of linguistic texts, can help decipher and unpack the cases more comprehensively. As a division of semiotic analysis, SSA is closely related to CDA in terms of its critical standpoint and the way it regards visuals as texts and discourses. It also situates visual data in specific social and cultural contexts to examine how power is infiltrated and disseminated through signs.

Ferdinand de Saussure claimed that a sign was a combination of "signifier" and "signified," and argued that there was no necessary relationship between them since the fixation of the meaning of any given sign "depends upon the difference between that

particular sign and many others" (Rose, 2016, p. 113). However, later scholars questioned Saussure's idea of "arbitrariness" between the signifier and signified by arguing that, in order for a signifier to generate a specific meaning for the signified, it is important to consider socially and culturally constructed rules and conventions. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) thus contended that, instead of seeing the relation between signifier and signified as arbitrary, it was actually motivated and shaped by social constructs and the sign-makers' interests of meaning-making. They further explained that "signs are motivated conjunctions of meaning (signified) and form (signifier) in which the meanings of sign-makers lead to apt, plausible, motivated expressions, in any medium which is to hand" (p. 11).

Throughout Kress and van Leeuwen's study of visual design, they always addressed the "social base" of communication and how meanings produced by speakers, writers, printmakers, etc. were socially constructed. They also claimed that the "motivated signs" had "arisen out of the interest of social groups who interact within the structures of power that define social life, and also interact across the systems produced by various groups within a society" (p. 159). Later, van Leeuwen (2005) pointed out the key trait in social semiotics:

> [I]n social semiotics the focus changed from the 'sign' to the way people use semiotic 'resources' both to produce communicative artefacts and events and to interpret them—which is also a form of semiotic production—in the context of specific social situations and practices." (p. xi)

Scholars of social semiotic theory generally rejected the idea of sheer arbitrariness and argued that there were always some power or social interests behind the seemingly arbitrary relations between the signified and the signifier. Taking into account these arguments and the fact that signs are socially constructed and always require an examination of the social constructs and relations, SSA is intended to attain the same goal as CDA, in also examining discourses as situated within a systematic structure maintained by an exploitative power.

Case Study

The Rationale for Case Study

In each of the three analytical chapters, one or more case studies are conducted to analyze women's representations by the mass media in current postsocialist China. As a dissertation that addresses a vast group of underrepresented or misrepresented women and their roles in nation-building, case study is especially helpful because it observes the most illustrative cases and reflects on the larger groups based on shared patterns and practices. Feagin et al. (1991) once defined "case study" as "an in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon." More importantly, case study "is usually seen as an instance of a broader phenomenon, as part of a larger set of parallel instances" (p. 2).

In the field of media studies, there has been a large amount of research on gender and representation, which has identified various stereotypes, conventions, and modes of repression In one major research strand that takes a quantitative approach, the sexualization, objectification, and trivialization of women in various forms of media has

been well established (see Dines & Humez, 2014; Cortese, 1999). This dissertation is not to replicate such established findings about women in the media, and therefore does not apply a quantitative approach to a large number of relevant Chinese media texts. Instead, the researcher focuses on several less discussed and more illustrative cases that can reveal the power structures and ideological foundations underpinning the unfair treatment of Chinese women, as well as women's positionality within the Chinese government's nation-building projects. For these research goals, quantitative data do not readily provide the kind of data to demonstrate the systematic and power-laden practices of the authorities. Thus, case studies are used since they enable more in-depth, focused, and critical analysis that goes beyond the surface.

However, since the cases are selected by the researcher, case study can also be subject to the accusation of being biased. The following passages thus explain the methodological rationale for using case studies, particularly for this dissertation. The first trait of case studies in this research is that the specific procedures of analyzing the cases generally follow the standard ones in qualitative research, which include thorough reading, coding, categorizing, and synthesizing. The more detailed practices and codes will be further explained in each analytical chapter of this dissertation.

Second, as Flyvbjerg pointed out, "in the study of human affairs, there appears to exist only context-dependent knowledge, which thus presently rules out the possibility of epistemic theoretical construction" (p. 4). In this dissertation, context is a fundamental premise of analysis since the whole study is not only situated in postsocialist China with its incorporation of neoliberal trends, but also looks at particular groups of women who

have been misrepresented or underrepresented in this unique historical and social moment. Thus, these case studies with their keen attunement to contexts could also ensure the validity of this research in general.

Third, since this dissertation applies CDA to examine each case, it also draws on the rationale in CDA scholarship about the rigor of this method. As aforementioned, a key distinction of CDA from other qualitative research methods is its validation of the author's subjectivity. Compared to other methods, CDA lacks detailed and instructive procedures and relies more on the deductive references to critical theory and ideologies. Thus, this requires more agency and subjectivity from the researcher to produce informed analysis and synthesis of the data. As Flyvbjerg also stated, "the paradigmatic case transcends any sort of rule-based criteria" (p. 16). This gives credibility to the author, who has been meticulously engaged in the entire research process and is responsible for their specific generalization or theorization coming out of the observation of their chosen social wrongs.

Furthermore, case studies usually require intense observations and in-depth analysis of limited data. Hence, the researcher is actively and diligently immersed in the context of the cases, and oftentimes discover new information that can overturn previous biases. In fact, during the course of this dissertation, such experience occurred more than once. For example, the researcher had a presumption, based on existing literature of "leftover women," that parents were generally the main causes of pressure for their daughters' anxiety of single status (as demonstrated by interviews conducted by To, 2015). However, after examining news articles featuring unmarried female PhDs and

their parents, it turned out that some mothers understood and supported their daughters' alternative choices. This new finding after conducting CDA on more data indicated that it is important to consider the demographics of "leftover women's" parents as well. Moreover, this example also demonstrated that the research process involving CDA in case studies can function as a way of triangulation that uncovers a researcher's pre-existing assumptions.

When testing the "external validity, transferability, and fittingness" of qualitative research, especially the controversy around case studies, Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) proposed some criteria, such as "the sampling is theoretically diverse enough to encourage broader applicability when relevant," "the findings include enough 'thick description' for readers to assess the potential transferability and appropriateness for their own settings," and "the report suggests settings where the findings could fruitfully be tested further" (p. 314). Based on these criteria, what makes the case studies valid in this dissertation is, first of all, the wide range of examples chosen by the researcher. As already mentioned, the cases in this dissertation cover political, cultural, social, and economic representations of women, and were strictly situated in the postsocialist China. Altogether, they present a comprehensive picture of Chinese women in negotiation with the enduring patriarchal state in the current environment. Second, these criteria indicated that the validity and reliability are not only determined by the researcher, but also by the readers, who have the potential to test the practicability and transferability of the analysis to other contexts or occasions. In this case, this dissertation has applied western critical theory and feminist theory to the Chinese context, and therefore, some of the cases

examined as well as the methods used could be informative and more broadly significant to readers interested in other contexts and social phenomena.

Selection of Cases

In the three analytical chapters, the cases were deliberately selected by the researcher to present a comprehensive picture of women who have suffered problematic treatment in a postsocialist neoliberal China. More specifically, by selecting the most salient examples of media representations of women in the political, cultural, social, and economic realms, the researcher aims to use these cases to reflect the broader social wrongs against women prevalent in contemporary China. Although the cases in the three chapters each has distinctive characteristics, what connects them is the fact that they are all relevant and ongoing cases reflecting the current Chinese public culture, which, as previously proposed, is a combination of traditional gendered culture and a postsocialist culture highly influenced by neoliberalism. Moreover, in applying a macrolevel lens to examine the cases together, the analyses also reveal the intertwined relationship between public culture and the party-state's agenda of nation-building, since the dominant ideologies of the Chinese authorities are frequently propagated and disseminated through public cultural practices.

Chapter 4 examines the political representations of Chinese women by focusing on the "orthodox" state media's portrayals, presenting two cases. The first case looks at the "First Lady" of China, and the second one explores how women of the general public were depicted by the All-China Women's Federation's website. These two examples are selected because the former exemplifies media representations of an elite and privileged

woman who is directly a nationalist symbol, while the second case provides a more general portrayal of the entire working-class women as represented by a state-led organization. While it could be argued that another prominent Chinese woman, such as an actress or sportswoman, could also be considered a representative of female elites, the reason for choosing the First Lady Peng Liyuan here is that, for an analysis focusing on the political representation of women, Peng's position is irreplaceable and unique within the current Chinese political environment. In contrast, when the media cover other celebrities, the content of reportage is likely to be more profession-based than ideology-focused. In other words, a Chinese actress in Hollywood, for example, is mostly recognized for her acting or films, rather than her symbolic role for nation-building. However, in the case of the first lady, her existence already bears political and symbolic significance. Similarly, the second case looks at women represented by ACWF, not only because the organization's mission is to represent all women of China, but also because it is associated with the party-state power that, again, embeds political ideologies within its practices, and thus is ideal for this chapter's focus on the political representation of Chinese women. Analyzing these two cases illuminates the differences between the official media's attitudes concerning two kinds of women living in the same ideological context.

Chapter 5 analyzes unmarried female PhDs in China who are also labeled as "leftover women"—a humiliating appellation, or rather, a "social wrong," that reveals the party-state's construction of nationalism at the expense of women's heightened agency. This chapter contains a single case study of a batch of news articles that reflected the

cultural causes of and impacts on this particular group of women's social positionality. The reason this chapter focuses on "unmarried female PhDs" instead of other women who may also be considered "leftover women" in China (i.e. above the age of 27 and unmarried) is because a lot of existing scholarship has already studied the general concept and practice of "leftover women" (see Fincher, 2014; To, 2015; Luo, W. & Sun, Z., 2015), yet seldom have they addressed "nv boshi" or "female PhD," whose academic achievements are largely neglected by media and popular culture but are personally being stigmatized for their age and marital status. Since female PhDs are already a relatively small and unique group of women with unusually high educational status, examining the causes of humiliation and their media representations in China highlights and fills in the gap in attention to this group.

Chapter 6 stresses the neoliberal condition for Chinese women's empowerment by using commercial advertisements to pinpoint the tension between consumerism and female agency. Thus, this chapter with case studies of three advertisements addresses Chinese women's social and economic representations in the media. The first half of the chapter analyzes two purportedly "feminist" advertisements,[9] one made by a multinational brand Olay for the Chinese market, and the other by a domestic cosmetics brand Chando. Imported from the West, feminist advertisements or "femvertising" in the Chinese market mirror similar instances in Western consumerist culture in using

[9] In the sense that companies incorporate empowering feminist messages and/or advocacy for women in their ads. Examples include Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" and Always' "Always Like a Girl."

uplifting, pro-woman messages to hail women's consumption of the product as a means of self-empowerment. These two ads were chosen out of other ones that might also feature Chinese women as the protagonists because Olay and Chando are among the most recognizable skincare brands in China, and their Western consumerist connection or references also demonstrated China's neoliberal endeavors involving the supposedly empowered women. Moreover, both of the ads have been widely circulated and discussed on the Chinese Internet, providing an ample amount of discourses to analyze and apply to similar cases.

The second half of the chapter discusses an ad for a smartphone game titled "Love and Producer." Similar to the previous "femvertising," "Love and Producer" also has a foreign, capitalist origin as it was adapted from Japan's "*otome* games.[10]" Thus, it shows China's growing practice of capital and market-driven neoliberalism that comprises limited elements of female empowerment. However, although the game was revolutionary for Chinese women by inviting them to develop romantic relationships with virtual boyfriends through real-life monetary expenses, the game company released a highly sexist ad that offended many women. As a result, some of them initiated online criticism and protests of the game, demonstrating another layer of female empowerment unique to postsocialist China, and this phenomenon thus serves to highlight the local

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[10] *Otome* games, or "women's games," create stories and narratives for single female players, making them the protagonist in the story and thus to experience an oftentimes romantic relationship with one or multiple people of the opposite sex.

adaptation and potential problems of a foreign trend. Furthermore, this case study not only underscores the problems with the ad, but also sheds light on other female-centered, new media products that are quickly following "Love and Producer's" suit, yet can still be both empowering and degrading women due to problematically patriarchal reference points. The three ads in this chapter together trace a clear neoliberal path of a Western idea's transformation and adaptation to China's local context, and they all illustrate depictions of stereotypical gender roles represented in postsocialist narratives that seem to recognize and encourage women's power and agency.

In sum, the selected cases in all three analytical chapters are current and urgent, and directly reflecting the outcomes of postsocialist China's integration with the global neoliberalism on the female population. The political representations of the "First Lady" and the state-honored middle-class and grassroots women, the cultural reality and pressure faced by unmarried female PhDs, and the economic gains and exploitations experienced by women in a burgeoning commercial society, all closely revolve around the traits of neoliberalism's adaptation in China, while also being distinctive and powerful examples of how Chinese women are misrepresented and underrepresented in general.

Chapter 4: The Chinese Party-State's Representation of Women

Introduction

In order to examine Chinese women's relationship with the party-state and their roles in the construction of nationalism, this chapter conducts two case studies to discover how Chinese media, under the supervision of the communist party-state, promote concepts of "Chinese women" that better preserve the authorities' dominant ideologies. The first case examines the media's representation of Peng Liyuan, the current "first lady" of China, as she is not only an exceptional case of the elite Chinese woman but also functions to symbolize the more comprehensive ideological construct of China. The second case departs from the angle of elitism and turns to mass society and everyday women by studying how the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) represents women who are supposedly from all walks of life. This case thus provides a broader observation and analysis of how Chinese women are generally being envisioned by the party-state and dominant discourses in current political and cultural contexts. Together, these two cases shed light on Chinese women's relationship with the nation, and the party-state's strategic rendering of their identities in the construction and consolidation of its hegemonic power.

The "First Lady" Represented by Chinese State Media

Peng Liyuan, wife of China's current President Xi Jinping, has usually been referred to as the "first lady of China" by the media since the start of Xi's tenure in 2013. Before that, Peng had already been a well-known folk and opera singer in China; thus, her transition from being "popular" to "political" has generated much attention. This case

study looks at major Chinese state media's coverage of her first overseas trip with President Xi in 2013, and another trip with him to the United States in 2015, to examine two questions. First, how did Chinese state media portray Peng Liyuan, a unique and elite woman representing the "mother of the nation"? Second, how did Peng's representations in the state media reveal the Chinese authorities' agenda of raising national pride and international influence for its nation-building? Starting with an introduction to the "first lady" in China's public memory, this case study synthesizes three prominent themes from 47 articles gathered from state media outlets and examines their implications for China's nation-building.

Background of China's "First Lady"

Before Peng appeared in public as the first lady of China, the term *"first lady* (or *di yi fu ren* in Chinese) was rarely used by Chinese media to describe the wife of the paramount leader. Throughout history, the wife of the ruler in China generally appeared insignificant or unnoticed by the public. For example, during imperial times, the emperor's consorts and concubines were to stay in the harem, or *hou gong*, which literally means "palace in the back." In more recent history, although the wife of the national leader would sometimes attend public events, she mostly stayed low-profile and was not accorded much attention by the media or in other public discourse. In Communist China's history, the only relatively visible "first lady" was Wang Guangmei, who was the wife of Liu Shaoqi, president of China from 1959 to 1968. However, although she was remembered as "beautiful, articulate, and sophisticated," and accompanied Liu to many foreign trips, she later faded away in history due to her

"persecution and imprisonment during the period of the Cultural Revolution" (Tian and Deng, 2018, p. 11).

The underrepresentation of China's "first ladies" is associated with the lasting influence of Confucianism, which entails a strict power hierarchy and gendered duties for men and women, and considers it a virtue for women to be subordinate to men. However, one exception in Communist China's history was Jiang Qing, the fourth wife of Mao Zedong. Rather than being known as an obedient and submissive supporter of Mao, she had a reputation as a powerful and aggressive woman who was also the leader of the "Gang of Four" during the Cultural Revolution. Jiang once held tremendous power to influence public discourse through manipulating the country's youth, control over the mass media, and persecuting those she and her fellow Gang of Four members believed were challenging the Maoist regime. After the Cultural Revolution, she faced trial and was convicted, and eventually committed suicide in 1991. Because of her assertive and formidable character in China's history, the public generally had a negative impression of her and considered her a deviation from the traditional wives of the national leaders.

Under the influence of globalization and neoliberalism, in recent decades Chinese people have become much more familiar with representations of Western countries, including Western portrayals of first ladies. In Western media coverage, the role of the first lady is more recognizable than that of her Chinese counterpart. Winfield (1997) once summarized the following five areas of Western media's coverage of first ladies:

> Three [of these five areas] concern roles of an ideal, traditional upper-middle-class American woman in a supportive, nurturing female capacity: an escort with

> her husband; a protocol role for leading fashionable, ceremonial and social events; and a noblesse oblige role with charitable works. Two other news areas concern presidential political power and, as such, receive the most critical responses: a policy-making role of helping to formulate, develop, and influence issues and a power role of having political influence and a following. (p. 241)

Rather than being underrepresented or muted, first ladies in the West tend to have more exposure in the media. Although the emphasis may still lie in their feminine appearance instead of their political role, they nonetheless enjoy ample respect and a public spotlight. Such popular images of Western first ladies have provided a model that has helped defined the conventional characteristics of the position for China in recent years. Thus, when Xi Jinping became the new President of China, Chinese people seemed more excited to observe his wife, since she shared many traits with the Western first ladies whose images they had frequently been exposed to, but hardly witnessed for first ladies in their own country. Consequently, many Chinese media seized the opportunity to report about Peng with unprecedented enthusiasm. Thus, the term "first lady" was adopted by Chinese media, not only to denote Peng's new role, but also to communicate national excitement. Moreover, the state media's focus on the "first lady" indicated the party-state's intention to use this unique opportunity to create a more appealing environment for the Chinese people to engage with political coverage, and to make the national leaders more approachable to the rest of the world.

There are many characteristics of Peng that have made her different from her predecessors. Besides being the most famous folk and opera singer in China, who also

became the wife of the President, Peng occupies many other roles on her own. Professionally, she is the president of People's Liberation Army Academy of Art, a member of the National Women's Federation Executive Committee, a visiting professor at the China Conservatory of Music, and an adjunct professor at Peking University and Shanghai Normal University ("Peng Liyuan," n.d.). She also performs charity work and serves in many international organizations. For example, she is the Goodwill Ambassador for HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis at the World Health Organization and the special envoy for the Advancement of Girls' and Women's Education at UNESCO. All these roles made her a household name in China even before becoming the "first lady."

On March 22, 2013, Xi Jinping—the newly elected General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, President of the People's Republic of China, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission of China—began his first foreign diplomatic trip to Russia, Tanzania, South Africa, and Republic of the Congo. Peng accompanied him during this nine-day journey. While the trip was significant for being the international debut of the new President of China, the media devoted much coverage to Peng. Although Xi's political status signaled the termination of Peng's career as a singer, she quickly became a different kind of national idol with her existing popularity and new-found public favor. Even today, Chinese people still have a vivid memory of the trip, during which the media flooded the public with photos of Xi and Peng wearing matching clothes and holding hands. Their harmonious image as the "first couple" has since then been highly promoted and popularized.

Two years later, during Xi and Peng's trip to the United States, Peng again received much media attention because she made several public appearances by herself during the trip. As the UNESCO Special Envoy for the Advancement of Girls and Women's Education, Peng delivered two speeches at the Global Education First Initiative event at the United Nations. This event excited the Chinese media and public because Peng not only represented China and Chinese women at the UN, but also spoke fluent English in front of the world, which was something that no other Chinese "first lady" had done before.

In an era when more and more first ladies in Western countries have been shaped into stars by the mass media (see Combs, 2013; Handau & Simien, 2019), Peng's rise as China's "first lady" has provided an unprecedented spectacle for people to experience an unconventional female leader whose disposition and temperament are comparable to her Western counterparts. As someone who has already been famous in public, Peng possesses high popularity, social status, and potentially the political power to represent and reflect the advantages of the Chinese party-state.

Materials for Study

This study uses Baidu News' "advanced search" to collect news articles for analysis. By searching keywords "Peng Liyuan" and "state/diplomatic visit (国事访问)" in 2013, and "Peng Liyuan," "state/diplomatic visit," "United States," and "United Nations" in 2015, the author collected 47 articles from renowned state media outlets such as people.com.cn, Youth.cn, China.org.cn, *China Daily*, etc., that had covered Peng's presence during the two trips mentioned above. The following analysis thus examines

these textual data to synthesize the most prominent themes in the media's coverage of her international appearances, and then interprets the framing strategies to see how the media's portrayals of her have conveyed China's nationalistic agenda and fostered public discourses to support and consolidate the power of the state.

Three Themes of Media Framing of the First Lady

"Liyuan Style"—The National Fashion Icon. One of the most popular angles from which Chinese media reported about Peng's foreign presence was to focus on her fashionable outfits. As mentioned previously, Chinese people's enthusiasm for Peng is primarily engendered by her visual competitiveness with her Western counterparts. Thus, by highlighting Peng's fashion style and visual attractiveness, these articles sought to fit her into global "first ladies" discourses. The media even invented the term "Liyuan Style," which riffed off the worldwide hit song title "Gangnam Style," to add a popular cultural reference in their coverage and attract more readers.

To emphasize Peng's image as a national fashion icon, some articles let the fashion industry comment directly on the "Liyuan Style" in order to validate the glamor of her appearances on the international stage. For instance, people.cn invited Su Hongyue, a senior editor at the fashion magazine *Bazaar* (China) to thoroughly discuss five of Peng's outfits during her first foreign trip. Su praised Peng for incorporating Chinese traditional colors and elements, wearing the trendiest style of high heels, and matching her clothes with her husband's suits (Deng, 2013). Another article on ACWF's website proudly mentioned Peng being selected by *Vanity Fair* magazine as the best-dressed first lady of the year, and then pointed out the highlights of her coordinated

outfits during her foreign trips ("Learning from Peng," 2013). Similarly, some articles focused on her jackets, handbags, and even her cosmetics to further praise her for combining Chinese style with Western vibes. And it came as no surprise that these articles all bombarded the readers with big, eye-catching photos of Peng, who always looked like an elegant and elite woman representing Chinese women and China.

In addition, it was common to see Chinese media comparing Peng's style with that of the first ladies in the West, who have long been portrayed in conventional and highly gendered ways. For example, an article published on china.com.cn quoted a Chinese scholar who commented:

> Actually, Chinese people had many expectations of China's 'first lady'… In today's globalized world, first ladies of other countries are always under the spotlight and discussed by many, such as Michelle Obama of the United States and Carla Bruni of France. As [China's] first lady came to the world stage, she opened up people's expectations for the 'first family.'" ("First lady's first show," 2013, para. 27)

This article also quoted a Chinese student in Moscow who proudly said that "Peng Liyuan's public image is full of positive energy… Her abundant foreign experience, elegant temperament, and charitable heart all make her meet the standards of the first lady of a big country" (para. 23). Thus, by positioning Peng's fashion in the standard of the Western "big countries," the media demonstrated Chinese people's satisfaction and pride with Peng's visual representation.

In fact, Chinese media's dependence on the Western styles of reportage also functioned as a strategy to raise the public's confidence about the country's global impact. An article published on people.com.cn directly quoted compliments received by Peng from foreign media outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post,* and NBC in the United States, *Die Welt* in Germany, *Deccan Herald* in India, and *Zaobao Sunday* in Singapore (Gong, 2013). Another article on the same website featured a professor from the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom, who praised Peng for making Chinese politicians more appealing (Ke, 2016, para. 1). The article then quoted *Zaobao Sunday's* article, which extolled Peng for using her charm to become China's new diplomatic "business card" (para. 2). By directly citing these foreign tributes to Peng, the Chinese media sought to inspire the public with the message that since she was even favored by other countries, Chinese people should be even more proud of and confident about China's global influence. However, it is worth noting that even though Chinese state media offered foreign coverage of Peng, these news sites were initially inaccessible by the general Chinese public due to the nationwide Internet censorship. Therefore, even as the state media showed the Chinese people such positive words from abroad, it filtered the information to make sure it was in line with the ideologies of the party-state.

Thus, while "Liyuan Style" has become a catchphrase in Chinese media to stir the public's interest in the first lady, the President of China, and presumably the daily political news, it has also functioned to reassure the Chinese people of China's global power and influence. In this case, while being a competitive "first lady" in the global

political realm, Peng has, at the same time, fallen into a hegemonic and gendered discourse that imposes the same kind of fashion and beauty standards on powerful women around the world. Meanwhile, the fact that the Chinese party-state and media warmly welcomed such a visually focused representation of Peng on the international scale also revealed its explicit goal of taking advantage of her gender in order to integrate with the popular discourses of the developed world.

"Harmonious Couple"—The De-politicization of the First Lady. Besides focusing on Peng's fashion, another popular angle of coverage by the Chinese state media was to emphasize her roles as a wife and a mother. In fact, the word for *country* in Chinese, *guo jia,* consists of two characters: *guo*, which means *state*, and *jia*, which means *family*. In an article published on CCTV.com, a professor from the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing explained, "As leaders of the country, Xi Jinping represents 'guo' and Peng represents 'jia'; therefore, Peng makes people feel warmth and comfort" (Shang, 2013, para. 9). Here, Peng was directly associated with the idea of "home" and signified the traits of a home.

In addition, "the wife of the President" in Chinese is also called *Guo Mu*, which literally means "mother of the nation." This indicates that the first lady of China is not only a wife and mother for her own family, but also encompasses the magnanimity to serve the entire population with her motherly love. As a result, Chinese state media tended to focus on Peng's harmonious presence with President Xi and her generous demeanor when meeting with the public, to emphasize her caring and loving mannerisms, which could demonstrate her maternal characteristics. For example, many articles

stressed the scene when the first couple stood outside the plane each time they arrived in a new destination. One article published on china.com.cn noted, “When the two stepped out of the aircraft, Peng Liyuan promptly held Xi Jinping’s arm, walking with him slowly down the stairs. This natural action between the couple captured their loving emotion and moved countless people” (“First lady’s first show,” 2013, para. 3). The word “promptly” here made Peng seem like the one who was more proactive in showing her love for Xi; however, it also suggested that Xi was in a dominant position while Peng was a subordinate figure who needed to attach herself and hold on to her husband. In another article, a Chinese expert of foreign affairs observed, “The couple arm-in-arm stepping down the stairs was an action filled with ease and confidence. Appearing together on the world stage, they made people feel their warmth. And the fact that Xi took his wife with him to international events showed the harmonious relationship between the first couple and established a good image of a ‘Chinese family’” (“Counting Peng,” 2013, para. 5). Moreover, during their trip to the United States in 2015, Yi (2015) observed, “Whether in this trip or previous trips to Russia, South Korea, and India, the scene of Xi Jinping and Peng Liyuan walking out of the plane, or Peng holding Xi’s arm, or their interlocking fingers, were always the most exciting moments for journalists to capture” (para. 9).

The above articles all covered the same scenes and same actions, and praised the same sense of lovingness, confidence, and harmony between the first couple of China. As Widlak et al. (2016) once noted, “The first lady is… a symbol of modern times, where the private becomes the public” (p. 69). In China’s case, the scene of Peng holding Xi’s hand was also a private action gaining public and political significance by the media’s

enthusiastic notice and interpretations. Their presence as a loving couple in the media not only functioned as an appealing showcase of love but also indicated stability and harmony on a larger scale. As mentioned previously, the word *country* in the Chinese language is a combination of the *state* and *family*. Thus, as Peng acted as a submissive companion to Xi, she brought the "family" aspect to Xi's political image, and thus made his power more complete, as he was in charge of both his micro and macro "families."

Furthermore, some articles chose to deliberately deny Peng any political significance or capacity by focusing on her domestic traits. An article on CPC's official news site quoted an Internet user who commented excitedly, "When a country has a respectful and lovable 'first lady,' she would benefit China both domestically and internationally. I anticipate Peng Liyuan using her beautiful voice to add points for China in world diplomacy" (para. 4). Shi (2013) also explained, "Essentially, there are no strict requirements for the first lady's appearance or identity, but it is common sense that she should be adding points to the country's diplomacy and her husband" (para. 3). He even stated that:

> A first lady is just a 'first lady.' Most of the time, she must stay quiet behind her husband. Today, the reasons that international media are interested in China's first lady are because, first, she already had some fame in the world, and second, they are actually more interested in China's new generation of leadership. (Para. 7)

The state media that focused on Peng's femininity and her demeanor when with Xi usually suggested that she was there mainly to enrich and enhance Xi and China's public image, as well as soften the potentially aggressive and intense diplomatic atmosphere by

adding a feminine touch to the current situation. As a result, it was the President of China and the party-state that would benefit the most from Peng's favorable presence on the global stage.

This de-politicization of the first lady continued during the first couple's trip to the United States in 2015. One article on chinanews.com explicitly compared Peng with Michelle Obama and commented on their relationship from the perspective of "women's friendship." Noting that both women "have numerous 'fans' and are the role models for 'first lady diplomacy,'" the article reported on their activities together, such as going to the zoo to see pandas and Peng teaching Obama to write Chinese calligraphy. Moreover, the article quoted a professor from Fudan University who stated, "When the first ladies meet, they definitely do not talk about politics, economic strategies, or other sensitive issues. They will mostly have friendly greetings, and depending on the atmosphere, they may also talk about similar interests, such as education, health, art, and environment" ("China and America's first ladies," 2015, para. 5). The article also praised the two first ladies' fashion tastes, high educational backgrounds, positive social images, and broad social influence (para. 6, 7).

Finally, to highlight Peng's motherly features, some state media outlets paid attention to how she interacted with young people during her international visits, as this was a salient indication of her maternal traits. Peng also adopted this media trope to enhance her approachability. For instance, when visiting a boarding school for orphans in Moscow, she said to the children, "I represent hundreds of thousands of mothers in China, coming to see you" ("Xi Jinping visits Russian," 2013, para. 9).

"Soft Power"—The Politicization of the First Lady. Although many articles by the Chinese state media chose to minimize Peng's political role and focus on her femininity to accentuate her husband's patriarchal power, some did use the term "soft power" to describe her contribution to China's diplomacy. "Soft power" was first proposed by American political scientist Joseph S. Nye (2005), who explained it as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" and as "[arising] from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies" (p. x). Though he only used the term when analyzing United States' global leadership in an era of neoliberalism, this concept has frequently been adopted by Chinese media and political scholars when talking about how the first lady uses the same kind of attractive power to help build China's overall strength.

Li (2013) stated that the reason people had to discuss the significance of China's first lady going on a diplomatic trip was because she was an "important component of China's global image, and a soft power to China's flexible diplomacy" (para. 3). Li also explained that people nowadays tended to assess a party or a government by looking at the "first lady," or even the "first family," and this was a good sign indicating a more transparent political system (para. 4). Similarly, Tang and Feng (2015) discussed the weight of "first lady diplomacy" by commenting on Peng's partnership with Xi and participation in the UN events in 2015:

> People often think 'diplomacy' is a cold and abstract realm. But 'first lady diplomacy' is a power of compassion and warmth. This is because first ladies always care about the topics of social issues, minorities, education, charity,

> women, children, and the environment. These issues are closely linked to the public's everyday lives. (Para. 6)

Peng's expected roles and duties as the first lady in "first lady diplomacy" thus exhibited Nye's definition of "soft power," since some media associated her appearance with the nation's political agenda. More specifically, as Peng is portrayed as confident, empathetic, and attractive at important international occasions, and as concerned with humanitarian causes, her power and influence were presented in an amicable manner, tending to less powerful populations, subjects, and fields.

Moreover, many media outlets highlighted Peng's cultural upbringing and educational background as the foundation of her soft power. As the first person who received a Master's degree in folk music in Mainland China and who holds a teaching position at several universities, Peng's impressive education was further celebrated by the media when she delivered two presentations in English at the United Nations in 2015: one at the Global Education First Initiative event, and the other at the opening ceremony of the "Every Woman Every Child" global movement meeting, hosted by the then UN chief Ban Ki-moon. An article published on people.cn, entitled "Peng Liyuan delivered two speeches in English at the UN in one day, helping the AIDS orphans," mentioned four times how she used English to deliver the speeches. It also retold Peng's childhood story from her speech, in which her father, a former headmaster of a boarding school, had influenced her to pursue higher education. The divulgence of this story about Peng's upbringing also functioned to explain the fine family background that led to her diligent disposition.

Another article published on China Radio International's website listed five "appraisable points" of Xi and Peng's trip to the United States and ranked Peng's "first lady demeanor" in fourth place, following Xi's diplomatic accomplishment of "helping impoverished countries," "pushing South-South cooperation," and his attendance at a women's summit at the UN [without Peng]. The fourth point in this article was then detailed as follows:

> The wife of President Xi Jinping attended high-level conferences at the UN, delivered two English speeches, and called for the international community's support for women's education and women's and children's health. The Singaporean newspaper *The Straits Times* commented that "Peng's outfits were stylish and perfectly matched her accessories. Her overall demeanor demonstrated 'elegance' and went along well with President Xi. *The Wall Street Journal* complimented Peng's fluent English, sophisticated linguistic skills, and her description of her family in her speeches. (Yi, 2015, para. 5)

This section of the article first stressed Peng's "English speeches," and then referred to foreign media's compliments about her looks, and finally cited another American media outlet, which praised her good command of English and linguistic skills. Given that no other first ladies in the CPC's history had given speeches by themselves in English at the UN, Peng's impressive international appearance and positive reception by the West made her a precious asset for the Chinese state media to stress her soft power and even transform it into China's national power. Overall, through the media's enthusiastic and proud tone and the careful framing which accentuated her superior education and

temperament, Peng became a strong showcase of an elite "first lady" who could add charm to the Chinese President, as well as generate a nationalistic pride for the entire country.

The Significance of Peng's Media Representation

The above analysis has pointed out the Chinese state media's three most salient focuses of Peng Liyuan in their coverage and demystified the common strategies that they used to shape her into the desired "first lady" for the Chinese authorities and the public: first, the state media made her China's fashion icon; second, they highlighted her subordination to President Xi and her femininity in public; third, they ascribed her with "soft power" to assist the nation's political image to the world. The following analysis further explains how these strategies have served the ruling power. By taking into account the larger context of postsocialist China under global neoliberalism, the analysis provides a critical reading of the ideological significance of Peng Liyuan to address the relationship between an elite woman and her nation, as well as between public discourses about her and nationalism.

Peng Representing the Ideal Chinese Women in the "New Era." In the Western consensus, the "first lady" represents the ideal woman in a given culture and demonstrates shared virtues of the general female population. Such expectations of first ladies are mainly situated in a patriarchal background, as the first lady is expected to inhabit a feminine and submissive role to assist her husband, who holds the most power over the state. Combs (2013) asserted that the FLOTUS "oftentimes has overlapping roles that realistically would stress anyone—wife, mother, hostess, advocate, homemaker,

career woman and ideal American woman" (p. 279). Widlak et al. (2016), when studying first ladies in European countries, also observed that they needed to "adapt to the public imaginary" and "[t]his demand to fit to some kind of common imaginary is especially visible in press articles covering foreign state visits, concluding with the reflection on whether the first lady worthily represented women of her country" (p. 78). Thus, Peng's sense of fashion, her demeanor when with President Xi, and her presentation of her education all have demonstrated the image of an ideal Chinese woman who has fulfilled the traditional Confucian virtues. In the meantime, she also satisfies the public's imagination of a successful first lady who can represent the most favorable image of Chinese women to the world.

Besides representing Chinese women's traditional virtues and charms in general, Peng's public image as portrayed by the state media has also reflected the country's latest political ideologies, especially the idea of "New China" proposed by Xi. Although Peng has often been eliminated from political discussions by the media, she has already embodied the party-state's ruling ideas by merely being her unique self. The best evidence was that the state media ardently covered, not only her presence with President Xi, but her "newness" as an unprecedented first lady. In the articles examined in this study, Peng has been described as the "new business card," "new charm," and "new star" of China's diplomacy and politics. In addition, her "newness" was also reflected through her action of bringing a more visual, vocal, and independent image of Chinese women to the world. While previous first ladies of China were hardly observable to the public, not to mention not taking a seat on the international platform, Peng has been actively

showing her feminine appeal and independent personality to impress the world with a progressive spectacle of the "new Chinese women," who have long been unknown and underrepresented to the world. Thus, her "newness," revealed through her personal charm, has been positively correlated with the country's ambition to create a "new era" and to construct a new global leadership.

Finally, as a singer with a military background, Peng has long been a eulogizer of Chinese ideologies and the "China Dream." Known for wearing her military uniform and singing songs with nationalistic themes at prestigious national events, Peng has sung household songs such as "On the Field of Great Prospects," "I Love My Motherland China," "A Ditty of Yimeng Mountains[11]," etc. Almost all of her songs had positive depictions of and implications for the history and development of the Chinese party-state. Therefore, even though she no longer sings in public due to her new status as the first lady, she has already developed into a symbol of nationalism and the CPC. And with her approachable and humble public image, she becomes a spokeswoman for the party-state's ideologies. Moreover, since women are known to inhabit a symbolic role of national honor and collectivity (e.g. see Yuval-Davis, 1997), Peng also carries the burden of inspiring the Chinese public to pursue an uncertain but hopeful future.

Peng Representing China's "Cultural Confidence." Another angle to link Peng with the Chinese authorities' nationalistic agenda was to use her fashion styles as a medium to cultivate Chinese people's "cultural confidence." More specifically, in articles

[11] Yimeng Mountains was a key base area for the Red Army during the revolutionary years.

that stressed Peng's fashion, many also mentioned the sudden popularity of brands worn or used by Peng during her international trips with President Xi. Besides addressing her value as an advertiser, these articles used her influence to promote domestic brands over imported ones, in the nationalist interest. For instance, one article reported that the clothing sector in China's stock market had experienced a massive increase due to Peng's promotion of Chinese brands during her first international trip, and it also praised her "unique charisma," which helped the Chinese public become more confident about domestic brands (Li, 2013, para. 2). The article then discussed Chinese people's current inclination to idolize Western luxury brands and commented sharply that "Chinese elites should be ashamed for not supporting brands that are made in China" (para. 11). Similarly, an article on *China Daily* described the rising popularity of several domestic fashion brands used by Peng and how they were immediately sold out in department stores in Shanghai. Featuring a photo of Peng wearing a black trench coat in Moscow while smiling gracefully, the article also condemned some Chinese people for buying foreign brands and stressed the need to add more "Chinese elements" into local brands ("Li wai clothes," 2013).

Moreover, the state media's increasing advocacy of China's domestic brands was further accentuated by some articles' remarks on Peng being a cultural ambassador who brought Chinese styles to the West. The article that featured an editor from *Bazaar* noted that "Peng is bringing Chinese aesthetics and elements to the rest of the world" (para. 3). Thus, besides cultivating Chinese people's pride in the country's fashion industry, Peng has also extended such confidence by acting as a bridge between China and the West and

introducing Chinese fashions overseas. In another example, Ren (2013) reported that a time-honored skincare brand, Bai Que Ling, became popular in Shanghai after Peng's first foreign trip, because she chose products under this brand as national gifts to the Women and Development Foundation in Tanzania. The article noted, "The traditional Shanghai product with a blue metal box and four magpies on it has been transformed into a delicate gift representing the national image" (para. 1). Here, even though the choice of gifts might be a decision made by the diplomatic officers, the fact that the article credited Peng for this action showed its deliberate emphasis on her being an attentive cultural ambassador who wisely transformed China's national culture and fashion products into a showcase of the nation's soft power.

In fact, President Xi specifically proposed the idea of "cultural confidence" in a study session at the party-state politburo in 2014. Since then, both he and the state media have frequently mentioned "cultural confidence." In the official report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party in 2017, "cultural confidence" was described as a necessary attitude and condition to achieve the "China Dream" (Zhou, 2017). It is hard to say if the proposal of "cultural confidence" was first inspired by the massive positive feedback on Peng's international image and promotion of Chinese products. However, it is undeniable that Peng's social and international influence—as demonstrated by the Chinese state media's outrageous coverage of her—has made her a cultural envoy when entering the international domain on behalf of China. Meanwhile, her commercial value has also generated impressive results in China's economy, which has contributed to society's increasing confidence in domestic brands.

Peng Representing the "In-betweenness" and China's "Selective Labeling."

Analysis of the media discourses about Peng has revealed a finding that draws from postcolonial and third-world feminist perspectives to address a complex condition that has long existed in China. More specifically, although the People's Republic of China does not regard itself as a "postcolonial" state, many of the traits revealed through its expectations and treatments of the first lady could find their origin in a postcolonial mindset. Peng, like many other women in a postcolonial context, has continuously been living in between contested and even contradictory expectations, and undertaking a symbolic role that upholds and serves the authorities' dominant power.

The Chinese state media have offered many seemingly dichotomous expectations for Peng to simultaneously fulfill. A list of these contradictory requirements emerges from an analysis of the articles in this data pool, and can be summarized as follows:

1. Being elegant while simple;
2. Following Western fashion trend while maintaining traditional Chinese beauty;
3. Fitting into the Western standard of "first ladyship" while exemplifying Chinese virtues;
4. Accompanying the President while also being independent;
5. Being strong-headed as a female leader and a role model while adding a soft and less confrontational impression to China's international image;
6. Staying engaged with humanitarian and charitable causes while leaving the real "important decisions" to her husband.

From this list, it is fair to say that Peng is living in the space of "in-betweenness": an essential concept in postcolonial scholarship. Bhabha (1994/2004) talked about the idea of "in-between" in his theorization of postcolonialism by jointly discussing the concept of "colonial mimicry." To him, "colonial mimicry" was "the desire for a reformed recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence" (p. 122). Postsocialist China, which is situated in a neoliberal context, is also practicing something similar to "colonial mimicry" because the regime aims to prove its power and significance by aligning with Western hegemonic culture, but at the same time trying to retain its Communist ideological core. In this case, Peng has unintentionally become a pioneer of this experiment by facing many contradictions arising from within China. To defy the Western stereotypes of China as the oriental "Other," Peng is expected to become the "Occident," i.e., one of the Western "first ladies." However, due to her multilayered status as a cultural and political symbol representing not only Chinese women but also Chinese ideologies, she also has to conduct a "self-Orientalizing" at times to highlight China's unique culture and nationalism and prevent the country from appearing entirely Westernized. Bhabha also addressed a similar situation, where the subject was inadvertently trapped in an ambivalent space that was "neither the One nor the Other, but something else besides" (p. 41). Peng's demonstration of "in-betweenness" thus shows her living in a similar situation, that is, in Bhabha's words, "almost there, but not quite" (p. 122).

The most salient example of Peng being in a dichotomized position can be found in the state media's praise for both her comparability with Western first ladies and her maintenance of Chinese tradition through her fashion. Narayan (1997) observed, "Many feminists from Third-World contexts confront voices that are eager to convert any feminist criticism they make of their culture into a mere symptom of their 'lack of respect for their culture,' rooted in the 'Westernization' that they seem to have caught like a disease" (p. 6). As many equate postcolonialism with Westernization, their lament about women's betrayal of their local culture and tradition was criticized by Narayan, who argued that the feminist consciousness in a Third-World context might have had "its roots much closer to home" (p. 7). She further explained that the accusation of feminists becoming Westernized was not the core problem, but the hegemonic way of keeping the patriarchal power was.

This situation is also applicable to China's current treatment of the first lady. Due to the Communist party-state's goal of building nationalism, it not only needs to demonstrate its integration with the rest of the developed world but also aims to prove its superiority over long-dominant Western hegemonies to its fellow citizens. Therefore, having a first lady who is comparable to her Western counterparts has become a compelling argument for the Chinese people to be proud of the country's international status in a direct, visual way. Meanwhile, by highlighting the traditional elements of Peng's image, the public can find China's uniqueness in her as well. This practice has also exemplified China's larger ideology, which constantly reminds the public of its Communist core or "Chinese characteristics" while embracing a neoliberal model.

Narayan (1997) proposed the term "selective labeling" to explain the split behavior of public culture when it comes to women's positions in particular societies, observing, "Certain artifacts and not others are 'picked out' and labeled 'Western,' and certain changes and perspectives are arbitrarily attributed to 'Westernization' while others are not" (p. 22). As Peng is situated in between two sides, the party-state and state media have demonstrated a clear double standard in terms of validating her Western side. When she appeared on international occasions, she had to cater to the hegemonic aesthetics and manners of the West in order to be considered successful, both domestically and internationally, as well as presenting China in a positive light. Meanwhile, as the Chinese state media kept praising her performance, they were also applying a Westernized lens and regarding it as an affirmative standard instead of something that would erode Chinese ideologies. In this case, the Chinese state media acted this way, not to flatter to the West, but because the result benefited the party-state's global image and cultivated nationalism. Likewise, the public's satisfaction with Peng's Westernized appearance and manners, which the Chinese state media praised by abundantly citing the Western media's compliments of her and her blending with other Western first ladies, became disassociated from the accusation of "Westernization," because this aspect of Peng's Westernization had significantly contributed to China's collective pride. However, in order to sufficiently preserve the "Chinese characteristics" engraved in the CPC's ruling ideas, the state media also tried to emphasize the traditional elements in Peng's fashion and temperament, such as her submissive interaction with Xi

and her choice of special Chinese items in her outfits and national gifts, to imply her continuing compliance with Chinese traditions.

In sum, under China's current sociopolitical contexts, Peng must advocate and promote the "newness" of the contemporary Chinese party-state by abandoning dated stereotypes of Chinese women and continuing to fulfill Confucian gender roles to be a role model for other Chinese women domestically. In other words, as a symbolic figure of Chinese women and Chineseness, she has to live in a situation of "in-betweenness." At the same time, the central dilemma faced by postsocialist China has also been reflected through Peng's practice of her political roles, as well as the media's framing of her influence on the Chinese public.

Women Represented by the All-China Women's Federation

While the previous case examined how Chinese state media portrayed a woman with exceptionally high status and power, it is crucial to recognize that there is a large number of Chinese women who cannot enjoy the same kind of attention even as they constitute half of the population. Hence, this study shifts to the broader representation of "Chinese women" by examining how the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)—a mass organization that includes Chinese women of all ethnic groups and represents women from all walks of life—portrays women on its website. This section observes how more average Chinese women are being represented and contextualized under the Communist party-state's leadership, and what kind of roles they play in the construction of nationalism.

Background of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)

The All-China Women's Federation is officially defined as "a mass organization that unites Chinese women of all ethnic groups and from all walks of life, and strives for their liberation and development. The mission of [the] ACWF is to represent and uphold women's rights and interests, and to promote equality between women and men" ("About," n.d.). The ACWF is also listed by the Chinese government as one of the "main mass organizations," together with 21 others, such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the Communist Youth League of China, and the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce. From existing resources, such as official websites and documents, it is unclear whether these mass organizations are governmental or non-governmental; thus, the ACWF's relation to the party-state is quite ambiguous, at least in the official discourse.

Nevertheless, there is some evidence showing the organization's political associations. First of all, according to Guancha.cn, ACWF has high political status because the Vice President of China supervises all these mass organizations. Also, the leaders of the organizations sit on the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and many other important governmental boards ("Zhong Yang Shou Ci," 2015, para. 13). For example, the current president of ACWF, Shen Yueyue, also serves as the vice-chairwoman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee.

Second, the ACWF's constitution states that "The ACWF regards the Constitution as its basic guidelines, and abides by laws and its own constitution to function independently and autonomously" ("ACWF constitution, 2018, para. 2). This statement indicates that even though the ACWF has its own rules and constitution and can work independent of governmental supervision, the organization's ideological foundation still draws on the highest Constitution of the party-state. Thus, it abides by the country's ultimate ruling ideologies.

Third, according to a study by the Women's Research Institute of ACWF, political researchers of China have presented at least six different interpretations of whether the ACWF is a governmental or a non-governmental organization. Those who believed the former stated that "its [the ACWF's] institutional establishment and operation mode are the same as other governmental organizations," while those who thought otherwise indicated that the ACWF "has titled itself as an NGO on many international occasions" (Ma, 2009, p. 39). The research concluded that, no matter how diverse people's understanding of the ACWF was, one thing should be agreed upon, which was that "China has a unique political system and social structure from the West, and thus [the] ACWF is a unique outcome ever since the country's establishment. It is different from foreign NGOs for women, and its societal roles are always moving and developing" (p. 40). Though this negotiated conclusion still seemed ambiguous, it demonstrated a Chinese adaptation of Marxist dialectical materialism by acknowledging that the situation was eternally fluid and changing based on different historical contexts.

Howell (1996) observed that socialist countries have long been aware of women's subordination (p. 129). Indeed, the ACWF has a long history in conjunction with the Communist Party of China, even before the party became the ruling power. The CPC first established a "women's department" within its Central Committee in 1922. During the revolutionary years, more and more local-level and grassroots women's organizations and committees flourished with the CPC's support. In March 1949, a few months before the declaration of the founding of the People's Republic of China, a "United National Women's Federation" was established in Beijing. After several revisions of its title, the organization was finally named the "All-China Women's Federation" during the 4th National Women's Congress in 1978.

Today, the ACWF has an organizational system with hierarchical structures from national to local and community levels across China. Its official website states that, "Altogether, the ACWF has 933,000 local federations, 73,000 cadres, and 1.25 million group members at all levels" ("About," n.d.). In addition, the ACWF holds a National Women's Congress every five years to re-elect the Executive Committee; the most recent Congress took place in Beijing from October 30 to November 2, 2018.

Materials for Study

In this study, the analysis of the ACWF's representation of women is based on the content of the website designed for the 12th National Women's Congress (NWC) held in 2018. The study focuses specifically on this website because it contains rich semiotic and linguistic data congregated from the most recent and influential women's conference in China. Function-wise, it is not only the official website containing information on the

12th NWC, but also a platform featuring tailored and curated content about women whom the organization believes best exemplify Chinese women today. As a result, the website helps propagate the agenda of the Congress and the ACWF.

To break down the complex structure of data embedded in this website, this case study uses Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) method, known as "multimodal discourse analysis," which focuses on the "semiotic resources of communication" and "the communicative practices in which these resources are used" (p. 111). As new media and the Internet have created varied modes of discourses, this case study examines two forms of data on the NWC website: first, visual texts, which include the banner of the site and the main photos placed on the more visible pages; second, linguistic texts, which include 46 feature articles about female delegates at the NWC.

In fact, when studying a website, visual and linguistic texts are usually intertwined and complementary. As Michelson and Valencia (2016) noted,

> Institutional websites are an important semiotic space not only where information is exchanged, but also where various discourses and ideologies are created and mobilized through multimodal (language, visual elements, layout, etc.) semiotic designs. (p. 236)

Therefore, by examining several different forms of data such as the banner, front-page photos, and text on the NWC website, this study provides a multimodal analysis of the major signs in the overall discourses about "Chinese women" offered by the NWC and the ACWF. It also assesses the significance of these signs in order to decipher the manifestations of China's hegemonic power towards nation-building.

Visual Signs as Political Messages

The Banner. On October 30, 2018, the 12th National Women's Congress (NWC) took place in Beijing. The NWC is the highest power organ of the ACWF and convenes every five years. This year, the theme/slogan of the Congress was "*jinguo xin xiang dang, jian gong xin shi dai* (巾帼心向党，建功新时代)," which can be translated as "women's hearts are inclined toward the CPC, contributing to the new era." An official website co-hosted by ACWF and People.com.cn was designed specifically for the NWC and could be accessed from the ACWF's website.

Figure 2

The Banner of NWC Website. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from http://12th.womenvoice.cn/

The most visible subject matter on the NWC website is the banner, as it expands to cover the entire browser once clicking into the site. One can immediately see a piece of red cloth cutting through the center of the page. As the cloth slightly turns toward the left and eventually fades into the lower-left corner of the image, it directs the viewers' eyes to travel through a lot of information, especially the slogan of this year's NWC, which is written in two lines and overlaid on the red cloth. The words "*jinguo（巾帼）*" and "*xin shi dai（新时代）*" stand out in red to resonate with the overall reddish tone of the background. In addition, upon closer examination, there are 12 collaged photos imprinted in the background of the banner, each containing different people and events that supposedly represent women "of all ethnic groups and from all walks of life." Finally, a logo of the ACWF is placed on the upper-left corner of the banner, with the text on the bottom indicating that it is the official website for the 12th NWC.

The red silk cloth on the banner contains profound implications that echo the theme of the NWC. In ancient China, "*jinguo"* was the name of silk-made headscarves for women, which gradually became a metonym for "women." Because silk accessories were usually for high-class and affluent women, "*jinguo"* was thus associated with women of high esteem and status, including those who were heroic or admirable. As a result, the term "*jinguo yingxiong* (jinguo hero)" was invented in the Chinese language to describe such women. A good representative of the *jingguo yingxiong* would be Hua Mulan, a girl who replaced her father to fight on the battlefield during China's Northern Wei era. In this case, the red cloth on the banner of the NWC website experiences two transformations of meanings. First, the red cloth as a visual sign represents the Chinese

traditional accessory "*jinguo*"; second, based on shared cultural convention, the red cloth also signifies the heroic women of China.

Moreover, since the color red has long represented the Chinese Communist Party and the country's identity as a whole, the usage of red and white in the banner continues this palette to ensure visual coherence and highlight the ideological leadership of the CPC. As Williamson (1978) pointed out, color is the "basis for a connection or connections unstated by the verbal part of the ad" (p. 20). Although the banner here is not an ad, it is a similar visual display of content, and the coherence of the colors and meanings in this context function to connect—in Williamson's words— "an object and a world" (p. 22). Hence, "*jinguo*" is now connected with the broader ideologies of the organization and even the party-state. One could probably read the banner as saying, "The empowered women of China are faithfully under the CPC's leadership."

It is worth noting that the visual signs and the slogan of the 2018 NWC actually work together to further reflect the party-state's ideological intervention in the practices of the ACWF. As the theme of the NWC can be translated into "women's hearts are inclined toward the CPC, contributing to the new era," the inclusion of the term "new era" refers to the "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," which is the updated ideology under the new administration. Therefore, the image of the *jinguo* and the text overlaid on it not only convey women's liberation and empowerment but also literally references the ACWF's implementation of the CPC's ideologies, especially under the Xi Jinping administration.

Also significant are the photos in the background of the banner. Even though these photos have low contrast and saturation so they can accentuate the theme of the NWC, their content is still discernable for analysis. In a left-to-right, top-to-bottom order, the content of the photos can be summarized as follows:

Table 1

Summary of the 13 Photos' Content in the Background of the Banner

1	A group of young adult women and men making a vow to join the Communist Party
2	A female astronaut waving while standing next to the flag of the CPC
3	A group of young female volunteers
4	A woman likely to be a schoolteacher
5	Tu Youyou, the first Chinese Nobel laureate in Physiology or Medicine, receiving her prize in 2015
6	A female train conductor displaying a piece of Chinese paper art
7	Two female engineers discussing a chart
8	Three female tea farmers showing their harvest
9	Three female workers wearing safety helmets in a factory
10	A group of female delegates at the 19th National Congress
11	A group of women and men from different ethnic groups gathering at the National Congress
12	Three smiling female nurses
13	The Chinese women's volleyball team at the Olympic championship award ceremony

The content of these photos directly shows the purposes of the organization that selected them, because many of the signs here are shared knowledge and events familiar to the Chinese people. Williamson (1978) called this shared notion a "referent system," which described the meaning when "the sign in its totality points to something else" (p.

99). Rose (2016) further explained, “Referent systems, like dominant codes, are the knowledge that exist before advertising and that structure not only adverts but many other cultural and social forms” (p. 129). Therefore, signs such as female astronauts, women taking vows, women of different ethnicities, etc., constitute a “referent system” containing empowering and nationalistic messages and ideologies for Chinese people who have seen them on the website.

As the primary mission of the ACWF is to represent all women of China, these photos in the background do cover women of a wide range of ages, ethnicities, and occupations. For example, there are ordinary, everyday women working in mundane positions; there are also a famous female scientist, an astronaut, and some athletes receiving their honors. Hall (1980) studied “institutional structures” and how they could affect the production of codes [meaning the objects people perceive] and people’s reception of codes:

> The production process is not without its “discursive” aspect: it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure. (p. 164)

The choice of photos featured on the banner thus demonstrates a discursive practice, as the subjects in the photos are deliberately selected and curated based on people’s

collective memory or everyday encounters. Together, the images cultivate an ideological referent system known as “Chinese women” to the public.

The most salient sentiment in these photos is happiness, since 11 out of 13 photos (2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13) show women with big smiles on their faces. Among these, photos 4, 6, 7, and 12 represent women of the working and middle class, such as teachers, engineers, train conductors, and nurses. The fact that they all seem happy in their working environments and uniforms implies that they are satisfied with their lives and statuses, which can further indicate China’s successful construction of a stable and prosperous middle class. In addition, photos 8 and 9 show female farmers and workers who belong to the grassroots of society. By presenting the happiness brought about by abundant harvest and produced goods, these two photos also indicate the achievement of China’s first and second sectors.

Furthermore, a sense of pride is discernible in these photos. In photo 1, even though no one is smiling, it is clear that these young people are taking their vows to join the Communist Party proudly. Meanwhile, women presented in photos 10 and 11 also have a smile on their faces because they are the delegates and representatives of women at the National Congress. While these two photos illustrate the pride of women, photos 5 and 13 reveal the honor that women have brought to the country. In photo 5, Tu Youyou, the first Chinese woman to win a Nobel Prize, is surrounded by numerous onlookers and media at the Nobel Prize ceremony. The photo is powerful because she is at the center of attention in an institution that has long been dominated by white men. And in photo 13, the sheer joy on the twelve Chinese female volleyball athletes’ faces is further

transcended by the fact that they are holding the national flag of China. Similar ideas can be seen in photo 2, where the first Chinese female astronaut is standing next to the flag of the CPC. This deliberate visual presentation not only exhibits women's achievement in China's space project but also stresses the CPC's ideological involvement in this industry.

As a result, the selection of photos in this banner not only represents Chinese women with diverse backgrounds but also enables the ACWF—a mass organization under the ideological leadership of the Communist Party—to demonstrate several things: first, its inclusion of all women, and thus its fulfillment of the organization's primary mission; second, its implementation of CPC ideologies, since women in these photos have displayed their contributions to the Communist "new era" in different ways; and third, since the overall tone of these photos is joyous, gratified, and uplifting, these sensational signs serve as ACWF's offering to the party-state authorities. In other words, these positive presentations are the best demonstrations of the party-state's power and ideologies implemented in a lower-level organization run by women and for women.

The Front-Page Photos. Besides the banner, the rest of the content on the NWC website is laid out in a cascading fashion, which means the viewers need to scroll down rather than click into links to read most of the content. There are ten categories altogether on this website, including "Cordial Care [from the leaders]," "Convention Briefing," "We Are at Action," "News Center," "Snippets about Representatives," "Photos from the Convention," "Five Years' Memory," "Media Perspectives," "Message for the Convention," and "Past Convention Reviews." Although there are photos under each

category, this study mainly examines four photos that are particularly prominent on the front page and shows the power dynamics between national authorities and female participants.

When scrolling down from the banner, the first photo one encounters is of a roundtable meeting featuring President Xi and the newly elected board of ACWF leaders. The caption of the photo reads: “Xi Jinping stresses to the new ACWF board of leadership: continuing women’s development by adhering to ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’ and organizing women to walk on the frontlines of the era and make contributions.”

Figure 3

A Roundtable Meeting with President Xi. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from http://12th.womenvoice.cn/

Even without a caption, this photo encompasses many signs indicating deeper meanings. For example, the focal point of the photo is undoubtedly President Xi, as he sits on the main seat of the round table and is the only person who has a full-frontal presentation. The camera angle presents a linear perspective in which Xi is almost at the vanishing point of the picture plane so that the rest of the attendees' positions can converge at him to accentuate his importance. Another sign in this photo is the two flags in the back. The one on the left is the national flag of China, and the one on the right is the flag of the Communist Party of China. The symbolism here is quite self-explanatory, as the flags directly suggests the intertwined relationship between the party-state and the country and President Xi's centrality, since he sits in between them. Moreover, while Xi is sitting up and giving a talk in the center, the rest of the people are either taking notes or staring at him. Their active engagement reflects Xi's power and displays their loyalty to him and his thoughts. However, the topic of "women" is not a central concern in this photo because all the attention lies on the paramount leader.

Another photo that conveys a similar ideology is seen in the second section of the website under the subtitle "Convention Briefing." While this section provides a slideshow of six photos, the one examined here is on the cover. The photo captures the opening ceremony of the NWC. Similar to the previous one, this photo also shows a symmetrical design: the emblem of the ACWF hangs in the center of the background and is surrounded by five huge red flags on each side. However, the real focal point of this photo is undoubtedly President Xi, as he sits in the center of a long table facing the front.

There are six other party-state officials, all of whom are men, including Li Keqiang (the premier of the State Council) and Li Zhanshu (the chairman of the National People's Congress) sitting on his left and right. Behind them sits many female representatives of the ACWF; however, their faces are harder to discern due to the linear perspective and greater distance.

Figure 4

The Opening Ceremony of the 12th NWC. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from http://12th.womenvoice.cn/

The presence of President Xi functions to demonstrate the government's care for the NWC and Chinese women in general. However, there are also an apparent power relationship in this photo, which downplays the position of women. As Xi sits in the

center of the front row, accompanied by an equal number of his male confidants and foiled by a group of women in the back, this composition demonstrates Xi's authority and power, as well as his leading role, even in an all-women organization. Meanwhile, as a congress for women held every five years, having all men and no women sitting in the front row of the opening ceremony also indicates a clear hierarchical relationship between the genders in China's politics.

When analyzing visual representation, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) introduced the concept of "symbolic attributes," which helped distinguish hierarchy within images. According to them, symbolic attributes are objects with one or more of the following characteristics: "(1) They are made salient in the representation in one way or another… (2) They are pointed at by means of a gesture which cannot be interpreted as an action other than the action of 'pointing out the symbolic attribute to the viewer'… (3) They look out of place in the whole. (4) They are conventionally associated with symbolic values" (p. 108). In this case, the two photos examined above have fulfilled some of the characteristics mentioned. For example, the position of Xi is central in both pictures, and the flags decorating the venues, including the national flag and the flag of the CPC, both contain obvious political implications of the party-state. Furthermore, Xi's position in the photos can make him seem "out of place" in the sense that there are neither obstacles to nor distractions from his presence. In a word, he is "not an ordinary part of the setting" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 109), but someone above the setting.

While the male leader(s) are visibly addressed and singled out from the crowd in the main photos on the website's front page, when it comes to the female leader, the

representation tends to apply a different approach. For example, in the same slideshow under “Convention Briefings,” there are two photos of mostly women. According to the captions, the first one shows Shen Yueyue, president of the ACWF, “meeting delegates of the NWC” (Figure 5), and the second one captures Shen “participating in the discussion panel held by the Sichuan delegation” (Figure 6). In these two photos, the camera angles are identical, as they both show Shen standing on the right-hand side of the picture, shaking hands with a delegate from the crowd. Also, the women surrounding them all have excited expressions. They are either looking at Shen or the representative on the opposite side of her.

Figure 5 & 6

Shen Meeting with NWC delegates. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from http://12th.womenvoice.cn/

Since Shen is also the vice-chairwoman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, she becomes a signifier of both the ACWF and the party-state. Thus, her presence at the provincial delegations also represents a dissemination of the

party-state's power and ideologies. However, compared to Figures 3 and 4, in which many politically charged signs are easily discernable, Figures 5 and 6, which only feature women at the NWC, do not exhibit many complex signs, nor do they deliberately show the superiority of the authorities.

Style-wise, the photos in Figures 5 and 6 are not heavily edited or cropped, as the lighting is quite dim, and the composition is not carefully designed or calculated. Also, instead of setting one focal point, these photos both provide two, as they direct people's sight to two women who are shaking hands in the same picture plane. Thus, they try to depict all women in the scene as equal and portray the leader Shen as approachable and friendly. Furthermore, with these women's ecstatic facial expressions, these images show various emotions among the women, which are different from the rigid impression in the photo with Xi. However, the fact that these two photos are not as meticulously edited as the previous ones also reveal the gendered treatment of the convention participants.

For these two photos, it is less appropriate to apply Kress and van Leeuwen's characteristics of "symbolic attributes" to identify hierarchical relationships because the primary subject matter—Shen Yueyue—is not always salient in the picture plane but blends in with the crowd. Even though she and the woman in the pink suit in Figure 6 seem to be more staged than she is in Figure 5, given the more directional lighting and the more colorful composition, Shen's role as the president of the ACWF is still quite hard to determine without a clear caption or context. Also, there is no obvious symbolism associated with the subjects in these photos nor explicit signifiers to highlight Shen's position as superior to others.

These two photos with seemingly more equal representation of women demonstrate a more democratic relationship between the female leader and the general female population, which is something that the Chinese politics and media coverage are lacking. However, it is not hard to discover the stark difference between the visual representations of male leaders and female leaders, as discussed so far. When women become the protagonists of the events, the media's framing immediately becomes less political and focuses more on the friendly atmosphere. As demonstrated by Figures 5 and 6, there is no indication of power or agenda, only Shen's pleasant and relaxed interaction with other female delegates. Hence, without textual assistance, it is challenging to interpret the content of the events.

The Feature Articles. While the above analysis examined the banners and photos on the NWC website, the multimodality of this study also includes texts to present a more comprehensive analysis of the media discourses. Hence, the following part looks at the "Snippets about Representatives" section on the website, where 46 female delegates are featured and introduced textually. According to People.com.cn, there were more than 1,700 participants at the 12th NWC (Yang, 2018, para. 1). Therefore, the 46 women on the website were the elected representatives who, in the eyes of the ACWF, came from "all walks of life" and "represented and upheld women's rights and interests." By analyzing the framing of their feature articles, the study sheds light on the Chinese party-state's expectations of the general female population.

After a close reading of the 46 articles, the occupations of these delegates were first categorized, and then codified into categories in order to discover the website's main focus of representation. As a result, the 46 delegates were grouped as follows:

Table 2

Summary of Occupations of the Female Delegates on NWC Website

Occupation	Number of delegates
Educators/Scientists/Scholars	14
Head of villages/Community leaders	9
Artists	5
Entrepreneurs/Company representatives	6
Judges/Procurators	3
Doctors	3
Factory workers	2
Policewomen/Soldiers	2
Volunteers	2

A "pattern coding" was then conducted, which, as Saldaña (2016) discussed, was a way of "grouping those summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or concepts" (p. 236). Saldaña also stated that pattern coding was one step further from "coding the codes" because it also found relationships between codes (p. 238). This method was suitable for this study because the nine categories above did not contain an

equal number of representatives. In this case, some of the texts had more materials to code than others, resulting in an imbalance of codes and making it ineffective to analyze them separately. But since pattern coding looks at the relationship between codes, one needs to go back to the primary codes and even the data corpus to "collect similarly coded passages" (p. 238). This process can reconnect the scattered codes under the shared context and apply a macro-level perspective to decipher the data's social and political implications. This also reflects the goal of CDA, which attempts to examine the discourses and seek their discursive and social significance.

After synthesizing the codes from each category in relation to the larger picture, some shared patterns of representation have been identified. For example, the delegates who worked in the field of arts tended to experience similar framing with those in academic and scientific areas, and the delegates with strong Party affiliation tended to partake in similar codes with those who worked as volunteers or public servants. Thus, the following three findings are the results illuminating the ideological transcendence reflected by the 46 short feature articles.

Being Virtuous and Vigorous at the Same Time. To analyze "Chinese women" as constructed by the ACWF through the depiction of the key delegates on the NWC website, the first and maybe the most straightforward finding was the expectation of women to be virtuous and vigorous at the same time. This was revealed through the feature articles' emphasis on two seemingly contradictory elements in the delegates: 1) their mundane social status and feminine manners, and 2) their contribution to the country, which usually shows their strength and devotion to construct a better society.

None of the delegates included in this section of the website were previously well-known to the public, and most of them were ordinary people from rural or impoverished areas working in the grassroots of society. In order to emphasize their mundanity and, therefore, the ACWF's close relationship with the general female public, the word "ordinary (*ping fan*, 平凡)" was used as a crucial defining trait of many female delegates. Based on the Confucian tradition, being ordinary and mundane is a virtue for Chinese women, since they are expected to be reserved and submissive. However, the ACWF also tried to empower women by showing the contrast between their ordinariness and their outward contribution to society. As a result, both the virtuous manner and vigorous strength of these women have become crucial traits of their success and achievements. For example, the article about Zhang Suli, a factory fitter, was titled, "Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary." The article explained her background as an ordinary factory worker and then praised her nimble skills in bench work, which had earned her numerous prizes and even state council allowances. Likewise, Li Xiaoxia, a "normal grassroots Party cadre," according to another article, saw herself as an "ordinary and lucky" countrywoman who has received encouragement from many superiors. And with such moral support, she confidently stated, "The countryside is a big stage, and I will continue living my splendid life there." As many delegates included in the website have a rural background, not only did the website emphasize them as "grassroots," but these women also called themselves "ordinary" and "normal" when given a chance to introduce themselves. The continuous contrast and comparison between their relatively low social status and their high passion for work and society accentuated their humility

and perseverance, as well as conformity and vigor. Undeniably, these are the traits that the ACWF is looking for to define the venerable Chinese woman in the "new era."

Another pattern in the ACWF's construction of "Chinese women" followed the conventional strategy of highlighting motherhood and femininity as women's key contribution to society. Thus, some articles gave the impression that Chinese women both possessed traditional feminine virtues and exerted ungendered strength. For example, one article introduced Lumao Cairang, a teacher at a reform school in the Tibetan area: "She is a 'mother' who uses her unique womanly tenderness and love to construct a warm world for the 'angels with broken wings.'" And when introducing a policewoman named Wei Lan, the article called her "police mama," as she had been taking care of children and elders in a mountainous village for many years. Here, "mother" was a linguistic sign that figuratively stressed the motherly actions of these women, such as nurturing children and taking care of elders.

From a dialectical perspective, while the ACWF was trying to demonstrate these delegates' diligent and substantial contributions to society, it inevitably stressed their traditional gender roles at the same time as it tried to contrast these roles with their deeds. This was especially the case with articles that covered educators, scientists, and scholars. For instance, the introduction of an engineer and scientist named Jiang Yan stated, "This seemingly delicate and soft woman leads a group of members to develop the first ethylene compressor with one million tons per annum (MTPA)." Another article, introducing a scientist in the area of agriculture, stated, "A qualified agricultural scientist should be a little rustic to conform to people's expectations. However, . . . when you see

Wei Lingling, you can hardly connect her with agriculture." Besides suggesting the idea that Wei did not look "rustic" enough to be working in the field of agriculture, the article further specified that, "She is fashionable, elegant, having a soft and gentle voice and always smiling gracefully. She does not have a scholar's attitude of indifference or any flavor of 'mud.'" Here, the depiction of the two scientists was based on the stereotypes of what women should be or how a scientist should act. More specifically, according to the ACWF's hegemonic assumption, a woman with a delicate appearance should not invent something like an ethylene compressor, and a woman who looked elegant and clean should not work in the discipline of agriculture. Even though the articles eventually extolled these women's contributions, they had nevertheless drawn on and partially reproduced patriarchal social stereotypes.

Preserving Culture and Building Nationalism. The second finding was observed from the ACWF's portrayal of a group of female delegates who preserved Chinese traditional culture and artifacts. Their contributions to the cultural realm were highlighted as examples of nationalist behavior, an association between women and nationalism that has been observed in previous scholarship. As Yuval-Davis (1997) noted, "Women often come to symbolize the national collectivity, its roots, its spirit, its national project. Moreover, women often symbolize national and collective 'honour'" (p. 219). She discussed how in many cultures, statues and paintings in which women represented the "motherland" or "liberty" also functioned to personify and symbolize the nation, and even signify larger ideological meanings. In China, such a trend also prevails and is highly gender-coded.

For instance, Chinese cultural artifacts such as embroidery and weaving have long been considered virtuous works that a woman should skillfully command. This connection between women's preservation of cultural tradition and nationalism also reflects Narayan's (1997) observation that, in many Third World and postcolonial societies, the local ruling power tends to see "feminism" or the idea of empowering women as examples of "Westernization," which runs counter to nationalism. The logic behind such authoritarian thinking is that preserving tradition should mean rediscovering and maintaining nation-ness. And women, who are vital laborers in the domestic domain, should retain their traditional roles to serve the larger nationalistic agenda. However, this task of keeping specific local culture and tradition can sometimes further repress women to consolidate a patriarchal hegemony.

On the NWC website, many female delegates were featured due to their artistic contribution preserving culture or improving local people's lives. A common strategy was to combine regional or ethnic discourses with traditional culture. For example, an article introducing a weaver named Xiao Yuelian started with the statement, "Weaving is a handicraft art that is suitable for women. With a few needles and a few strings, women can use their delicate hands to create sophisticated artworks." Here, the job of weaving has already been defined as "a woman's job," and a statement like this made by the ACWF only functioned to reinforce the gendered stereotypes in women's professional choices. Next, the article praised Xiao for transforming street stalls into a weaving company with thousands of female employees, as well as making artworks and exporting them to more than 20 countries. In this case, Xiao received a compliment from the state

because she had contributed to local women's economic development, which also conformed to the ACWF's mission to help with women's liberation and development.

However, the drawback of such representation by the ACWF was that it deliberately concealed the systematic social and economic problems these women faced in the first place. For instance, the article mentioned that Xiao was laid off from her previous job before delving into the business of weaving. This background was stated only briefly and was overshadowed by the impressive numbers proving her economic success and the job opportunities that she brought to her community. Nevertheless, the causes of her layoff, as well as the difficulties faced by laid-off female workers, were hardly mentioned.

Similarly, another article introduced Qiaojin Shuangmei, a woman from the Yi ethnic group in Sichuan Province, who had revitalized Yi embroidery in her village. Shuangmei contributed to the ACWF's mission to represent women from "all ethnic groups," and her skills in Yi embroidery also revealed her preservation of cultural heritage. Moreover, the article mentioned that she had developed a market for Yi embroidery to help her community become wealthier, which further made her effort valuable and favored by the authorities, since she was benefiting the larger ethnic minority population. Furthermore, the article also recounted that although Shuangmei became interested in Yi embroidery under her mother's influence and thus pursued a secondary education in fashion, her mother's sudden blindness caused difficulties in their already impoverished home, so Shuangmei decided to give up schooling and stayed at home to take care of her mother. In the article, she explained, "I had to give up my dream

of studying, but I didn't give up my love for Yi embroidery." As a result, she started exploring this artisan skill by herself. The article framed this episode as her most admirable act, since it demonstrated examples of love, filial piety, and perseverance, three key traditional virtues expected from Chinese women.

Nevertheless, while many viewers would no doubt find it moving and empowering to see Shuangmei not giving up her dream in embroidery, what was downplayed were the reasons behind her sacrifice, i.e., her family's poverty and her duty to be a filial daughter. Instead of paying attention to difficulties such as her family's lack of help from the state and the shortage of opportunities to go to school as an ethnic minority woman, the ACWF only discovered and honored her because she made a difference by being a selfless daughter while preserving an ethnic minority's unique culture and becoming economically successful. As Narayan (1997) once stated, "For many of us, women in different parts of the world, our relationships to our mothers resemble our relationships to the motherlands of the cultures in which we were raised" (p. 8). In this case, Shuangmei's sacrifice to assist her mother and family resonated with the Chinese authorities' expectation of women to devote themselves to the country while minimizing their personal needs and advancement.

Finally, another article, which introduced an ethnic minority woman named Ma Huijuan, recognized her achievements in creative writing, introduced her publications, and shared some of her writing themes, which were inspired by her daily tasks, such as farming, shearing, building houses, and matchmaking. However, the article's real emphasis lay in her political consciousness by describing her celebrating the changes that

the government had brought to her village. Ma minimized her achievements in creative writing and said that she was "just a lucky person of the era," and her personal gain could not be compared to "the change of her hometown." She explained that in recent years, because of the improvement of local infrastructure, her fellow villagers started to have opportunities to enrich their cultural lives. Thus, she became a volunteer helping illiterate villagers learn Mandarin and read, which was what made her a role model for other women and a delegate at the NWC.

In this case, what the ACWF promoted was not primarily Ma's creative works and personal achievements, but how she positively viewed the more substantial social changes around her due to the CPC's leadership. As a result, the article also used her own words to transcend her personal works so that her humility and grateful attitude toward the party-state could be further expressed.

To conclude, the above examination of articles featuring women who have preserved tradition and local culture as a way of building nationalism has pointed out the ACWF's strategy of justifying women's relationship with the party-state's hegemonic ideologies. More specifically, when the ACWF recognized the female delegates' personal achievements, it associated them with the agenda of supporting Chinese nationalism rather than giving these women credit for their achievements as individuals. As a result, this strategy kept these women framed within repressive and patriarchal discourses, since the deeds they have been praised for were mostly sustaining the family and society and requiring women to be conventionally selfless. The ACWF also used this framing to help the party-state construct an overall impression that these female role models were

altruistic and essentially serving nationalism. However, these officially promoted discourses have largely ignored these women's struggles against systemic, enduring difficulties faced by many Chinese women more generally, such as poverty, lack of job opportunities, and poor education. Thus, the organization's compliments of these delegates and their relationship with the party-state have hardly helped build a more equal and just society for women in China.

Restructuring the Market and Repaying the Party-state. As mentioned above, under the background of postsocialism and neoliberalism, contemporary Chinese society is caught in between embracing globalization on the one hand and preserving its authoritarian socialist core on the other. As a result, women in contemporary China are dealing with a restructured society which implants party-state ideologies within hegemonic gender roles. Wesoky (2016) observed the ideological dilemma faced by Chinese women thus:

> In cultural and discursive realms as well as those relating to consumerism and daily life, China's 'reform and opening' has manifold consequences. One area in which this has been evident is in Chinese feminism as it has sought to 'connect with the international tracks' (*jiegui*) and also (re)claim its own 'local' or 'indigenous' (*bentu*) identity. (p. 54)

The co-existence of the two tasks faced by Chinese women was also reflected by some of the feature articles on the NWC website about women's achievements. By mentioning their successes—usually in business or industrial projects—these articles not only addressed Chinese women's self-empowerment, which could reflect the ACWF's

mission, but also transformed their personal assets into political or national ones to benefit the party-state's agenda of nation-building in a neoliberal environment.

For example, some articles labeled female delegates' professional breakthroughs, entrepreneurship, or business acumen as "innovative" and "uniquely Chinese" in order to highlight their connection with the nation. Also, to reinforce such associations, some articles imposed the idea of "repayment" on these women's self-assessments, framing them as bearing a debt to their motherland, as it had provided them with the foundation of their success. Thus, these women ended up accrediting their achievements to the party-state as repayment and nationalist practices.

The coverage of Liang Jianying, the chief designer of China's Fuxing (Rejuvenation) high-speed trains, was a good example. Liang used "my train" to refer to the Fuxing trains designed by her and her team. She also expressed pride and confidence in the quality and industrial significance of the project by saying, "We have enough capability, resources, and confidence to tell the world: We can provide customers all over the world with any product they want." Her motivational speech was in line with the Chinese party-state's nationalistic promotion of Fuxing: the first train series that had "total independent intellectual property rights" ("Fuxing," Baidu, n.d.). Thus, Liang's contribution and her nationalistic consciousness made her a national hero.

The idea of devotion and repayment was also revealed in articles featuring female entrepreneurs, as their business endeavors were most directly associated with the outcomes of China's integration with the global economy and neoliberalism. For example, a delegate named Pei Yanli, who invented an art form called "mu hui,"

presented herself as "an ordinary female entrepreneur coming from rural China." Here, the combination of "entrepreneur" and "rural China" has already made her a novel example of China's restructured market economy, since a woman from a rural area could also open a business independently and contribute to the GDP by joining the ever-competitive market. However, instead of praising Pei as a representative of successful businesswomen from rural China, this article was more appreciative of her products because they helped enrich China's transnational political initiative known as the "One Belt, One Road" or "The Belt and Road Initiative[12]." More specifically, as Pei's *mu hui* was chosen as the only art form from Hebei Province to join the "One Belt, One Road" project's art section, her business venture had become a cultural treasure, contributing to China's cultural exportation and ambitious transnational leadership. Moreover, the article ended by mentioning Pei's charitable work, because 40 percent of her employees were people with disabilities. The article regarded Pei's employment strategies as a "win-win" situation for the enterprise and people with disabilities. It also praised her for easing employment pressure in ethnic minority areas and doing a service to society. In this case, official discourses recognized her devotion to society as her repayment to the party-state authorities for providing her with the business opportunities and environment to prosper. Nevertheless, while valuing her contribution to disabled people and ethnic minorities, the

[12] According to the World Bank, the initiative aims to strengthen infrastructure, trade, and investment links between China and some 65 other countries that account collectively for over 30 percent of global GDP, 62 percent of the population, and 75 percent of known energy reserves. The BRI consists primarily of the *Silk Road Economic Belt*, linking China to Central and South Asia and onward to Europe, and the *New Maritime Silk Road*, linking China to the nations of Southeast Asia, the Gulf Countries, North Africa, and on to Europe.

ACWF as a political organization for women failed to address the deeply rooted problems for these particular groups of people, nor did it consider the causes and possible solutions.

Finally, an article featuring a female entrepreneur named Li Fang directly defined her deeds as "a repayment to her motherland and her fellow community members." As a businesswoman from a small town in Henan Province, Li returned home from Shanghai to invest in a business district and helped provide thousands of jobs for the locals. By the time of the 12th NWC, she had invested millions of Yuan into building industrial parks, factories, and logistics centers to help develop the local economy. The NWC website extoled her responsibility to her hometown, her enduring spirit regardless of other people's doubts and opposition, as well as her devotion to charity after becoming a well-off businesswoman. In a word, the article emphasized "returning home" and "repaying the community" in Li's actions, and interpreted her economic success on a larger, ideological level aligned with the party-state's expectations for a successful woman's political consciousness.

Overall, while social and market restructuring under the context of postsocialism and neoliberalism has benefited and empowered many Chinese women, as demonstrated by the delegates featured on NWC's website, it was evident that the ACWF prioritized the nationalistic significance of their work and achievements in order to deem them role models for other women from all walks of life. In other words, these delegates were appreciated by the authorities mainly because they exemplified the advantages of China's politics, economics, ideologies, and global influence. Nevertheless, while these women

had fulfilled the expectations of the party-state, their individual accomplishments and empowerment continued to be downplayed and minimalized by the authorities, including the ACWF, an organization purportedly for advancing women's position. Furthermore, the party-state keeps exploiting narratives about these women's successes, using them as evidence of its successful political record and as indications of its thriving program of nation-building.

Conclusion of the Chapter

This chapter has examined two case studies to exemplify the spectrum of Chinese women's representations under the current postsocialist context, with a particular focus on the authorities' discourses about them. It first examined the Chinese state media's coverage of the "first lady" Peng Liyuan and revealed how an elite, politically prominent woman has been transformed into a symbol of China's image and ideologies. It then shifted to examine how examples of everyday women have been portrayed by referring to the multimodal data on the official website of the 12th National Women's Congress held by the All-China Women's Federation.

When covering the first lady's foreign trips, the state media's framing reflected Peng's inevitable responsibility to maintain traditional virtues on the one hand and showed her modern "soft power" to assist the nation's paramount leader and national image on the other hand. As a result, her presence in public could stimulate a sense of pride in the Chinese public and impress the rest of the world to view China in a new way. The state media, as the mouthpiece of the Chinese government, mainly followed a standard, Western-oriented angle to focus on her fashion style, independent demeanor,

and her well-educated background, as these characteristics could also convey China's positive image to the world. But at the same time, the state media also stressed her submissiveness and femininity, constraining her in the traditional Confucian culture that suppresses women's agency and, thus, maintained the "Chineseness" within her.

In addition, as the Chinese party-state regards the idea of "maintenance of stability (*weiwen*)" a key political agenda (Chen, 2014, p. 692), Peng's roles as the "mother of the nation" and "role model of a Chinese wife" have worked collaboratively and dialectically to keep the hegemonic social order. Peng has helped Xi construct an ideal image of a "family" in public, which then transcended the family to symbolize the stability of the "motherland." In a word, the media's portrayal of the first lady of China was essentially a process of hegemonic nation-building, as Peng has become a unique indication of China's postsocialist ambition and Chineseness through balancing in between tradition and novelty, as well as between China and the rest of the developed world.

Meanwhile, for the All-China Women's Federation's representations of everyday women, the NWC's website as a public platform revealed the organization's assumptions and expectations of Chinese women in general. Deciphering the visual signs and textual coverage of Chinese women demonstrated that while representing the diversity of the female population, the ACWF focused more on highlighting Chinese women's implementation of the party-state ideologies and nation-building agenda, thus also sending a clear political message to other women in China. Instead of appreciating women's empowerment and perseverance in exercising their own agency, the NWC

website—espousing the opinions of the ACWF and even the higher party-state ideologies—regarded their contribution to constructing nationalism as more important and valuable. Thus, Chinese women have become merely contributors to the nation, and the organization's mission in support of women's liberation and empowerment has been largely downplayed.

Moreover, after synthesizing three themes from the feature articles on the website, it could be inferred that, just like the coverage of Peng Liyuan, ideal Chinese women should all be fulfilling certain dualistic roles. For example, they should be timid and submissive to the patriarchy on the one hand while being strong-headed and independent for the country's "new era" on the other; or, they should preserve traditional culture on the one hand while being a contributor to the nationalistic agenda on the other. To accomplish these goals, they need to make use of their self-empowerment by selflessly devoting themselves to the country.

Under the current postsocialist context and with Communist China's collective ideological foundation, such practices in Chinese women have illustrated something slightly different from Yuval-Davis' (1997) definition of women's "dual nature." Yuval-Davis argued that women were included in the discourse of "nation" but were not treated as equal citizens of the nation. However, in the context of China, women's "dualistic roles" are situated within a hegemonic environment where women have become the preservers of tradition in order to construct national pride and nationalism. At the same time, they also bear the responsibility of demonstrating the outcomes of the country's progress and superiority by actively acknowledging the benefits they have received from

it and using their increased agency and newly gained resources to serve and repay the party-state.

Finally, there was a disproportionate number of female delegates on the NWC website who came from a rural background. Although this might demonstrate the ACWF's awareness of women who were typically overlooked by the mass media and popular discourses, the unbalanced emphasis on women from impoverished areas could also generate a biased result due to the large discrepancy in quality of life between rural and urban China. In other words, the ACWF's choice of cases and delegates tended to show more drastic changes and results due to the rural population's more compliant implementation of the party-state's policies. Women in an urban environment might have different struggles and achievements, but were ignored by the organization, even as it claimed to represent "all women."

Another problem in the ACWF's representation of everyday women was that, while using some representative delegates to demonstrate the country's development and burgeoning nationalism, the organization and related authorities failed to address the structural causes of existing difficulties which many women still face, such as issues regarding gender equality, job opportunities, and educational resources. Nevertheless, since the official discourses created by the ACWF have mainly associated women's success and empowerment with nation-building, these enduring and even urgent issues have been overshadowed by the overwhelming exhibition of China's upbeat nationalist discourses.

Chapter 5: Female PhDs in Chinese Media and in China's Nation-Building

Introduction

This chapter discusses the popular and problematic concept of "leftover women" (*sheng nv*) in China's social discourses, with a specific focus on female PhDs, or "nv boshi (女博士)." Highly educated, these women might be expected to enjoy significant social respect and appreciation, yet the mass media in China tend to portray them as the ultimate form of "leftover women," deemed unattractive and unwanted by a patriarchal and misogynist society. Though not all female PhDs are unmarried, by creating stereotypes about them, the mass media have constructed generalized images for the public to judge, intensifying the nationwide denigration of this particular group of women.

This chapter continues to use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to review Chinese media's coverage of female PhDs, especially the unmarried ones. It examines the media's hegemonic construction of discourses about them in news articles and commentaries, and how these stereotyped representations reflect the party-state's intervention in the life choices made by the educated women and its manipulation of public culture. This chapter also discusses the authorities' eugenically informed concerns about the nation, and points out the minorities within the female PhD population who are not even mentioned in the media coverage. In short, this chapter provides a detailed account of Chinese female PhDs' struggles under the party-state's ideological leadership and control.

Background of Women and Education in China

As mentioned previously, Confucianism, which advocates a set of oppressive familial duties for women, has influenced Chinese social and cultural practices for millennia. As a result, for a long time, Chinese women did not have the right and opportunity to speak for themselves. Historically, literati and artists portrayed women as subordinate to men and appreciated those who remained submissive and abided by Confucian injunctions and patriarchal rules. For example, in the Qing dynasty, a literati named Zhang Dai said, "a husband who is virtuous has talent; and a wife who is ignorant has virtue" (丈夫有德便是才,女子无才便是德). This saying, which continues to be popular today, clearly demonstrates the gendered expectations in mainstream Chinese culture. Specifically, it estranges women from obtaining an education in order to retain "virtue." Such deliberate separation of women and education was reflected through China's more than one thousand year's history of "ke ju (科举)," or the imperial examination. As a highly hierarchical exam that served to select governmental officials, the "ke ju" system highlighted the differentiation of classes through testing knowledge that was usually derived from Confucian thought. No woman was allowed to take the exam until 1853, when the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was temporarily in authority (Cheng, 2011).

Beginning in the twentieth century, especially after the Communist Party of China became the ruling power in 1949, the authorities put more emphasis on improving women's education and literacy, to follow Mao's "women can hold up half of the sky" slogan. According to Song (1995), since the 1950s, the Chinese government had been

working on “eliminating illiteracy” and propagating “education for all” (p. 86). Yao and You (2018) also observed that “a thorough revolutionary transformation of women’s role was accelerated when the CCP got power in 1949… At the same time, parents were more willing to invest in their daughters’ education” (p. 221). Indeed, according to the World Development Indicators of the World Bank, the literacy rates among men and women in China were 79.2% versus 51.1% in 1982. Since then, the number has increased drastically for women: in 2015, the literacy rates of men and women were 98.2% versus 94.5%.

The PRC has been implementing a “nine-year compulsory education” policy since 1986, serving both male and female students. Since then, Chinese women have also been presented with equal opportunity to participate in the national college entrance examination. In recent decades, the number of female students enrolled in colleges has surpassed male students in many regions of China. An article published on the All-China Women’s Federation’s website noted that, in Zhejiang, a province with a higher-than-average GDP compared to China overall, “in 2010, amongst the 255,200 Zhejiang students who enrolled in colleges after taking the college entrance exam, 52.2% were women… In other areas of China, such as Shaanxi Province and cities like Chongqing and Beijing, women college students have also surpassed their male peers” (Sun, 2012, para. 9-10). A survey by the Chinese Universities Alumni Association conducted in 2017 showed that from 2007 to 2016, female high school students have been performing better than males on the college entrance exams. And the survey results revealed that among all

the "gaokao champions[13]," 447 were females, and 390 were males ("Alumni Association," 2017). Moreover, in December 2019, the National Bureau of Statistics of China published the *Outline for the Development of Chinese Women (2011-2020)* and revealed that in 2018 alone, there were 1,356,000 female graduate students in Chinese universities, which was 49.6% of the entire graduate population, and this number also showed a 1.6% increase as compared to 2010. The report then claimed that the current status of women in higher education had made China "reach the top level in the world" ("outline," 2019).

Such figures demonstrate that Chinese women have been taking advantage of educational opportunities and showing impressive enthusiasm for higher education. However, despite these positive statistics, mainstream media discourses are at odds with this promising reality. Instead, it is common to see disparaging messages about highly educated women in the Chinese media, with female PhDs being particularly common targets. Thus, such women do not only confront the media's trivialization of their education and humiliation of their personalities and life choices, but also face judgment about their age and marital status from the society at large.

Perhaps one of the most famous female PhDs in China's popular culture in recent years is a fictional character named Hu Yifei, from a sitcom entitled *iPartment* (ai qing gong yu, 爱情公寓), which aired in 2011. In one episode, Yifei was accepted into a PhD

[13] "gaokao" in Chinese means the "national college entrance exam." And "gaokao champion" or "gaokao zhuangyuan," means the person who receives the highest overall score in his/her province.

program; however, she did not want to celebrate it with her six other roommates as she told only one of them: “It is good news for me, but not everyone will appreciate it [because of the stereotypes about female PhDs].” Somewhat unsurprisingly, this loose-lipped roommate revealed the news to the rest in a bar without Yifei’s knowledge one day. It was at this occasion that the witty male protagonist Zeng Xiaoxian uttered the now famous saying, “There are three genders in society: male, female, and female PhDs.” Throughout the series, Yifei was also known as a “nv hanzi (女汉子),” or “manly woman.” Besides having a degree that surpassed all the men around her, she was also good at many martial arts sports such as taekwondo and karate, thus further “scaring” men away.

Thanks to the series, the idea of female PhDs being “leftover” and belonging to the “third gender” became a running joke in China’s popular culture, and the stereotypes about them being “weird” and a “threat” to men were popularized by the media as well. It is worth noting that “third gender” here is different from LGBTQ studies’ uses of the term to refer to gender identities outside of the normative binary, but is an ill-intentioned statement carried out in a joking tone. Hence, the “third gender” here only makes sense when placed in a contemporary Chinese context to describe a highly educated woman who is boring and unattractive, unlike the other more feminine women, who obey men and Confucian gender roles. This chapter’s usage of the term “third gender” thus refers to this discriminative appellation against the female PhDs in Chinese society.

Together with the “leftover women” discourse, the term “female PhD” has also attained nationwide recognition if not notoriety in today’s China. It is common to see

female PhDs being portrayed in all kinds of negative ways, which has had the result of making them look homogeneous and sharing certain stereotypes. Moreover, the term "female PhD" or "nv boshi" has gradually become a proper noun and sometimes an adjective in the media and public culture with a disparaging connotation. Since Chinese media are known as the "mouthpiece" of the party-state, their constant humiliation of female PhDs can be analyzed as tied to the authorities' agenda of nation-building.

Materials for Study

This research involves a Critical Discourse Analysis based on 38 news articles about female PhDs. An advanced search on Baidu News was used to find news articles that contained keywords "nv boshi (female PhD)" and "sheng nv (leftover women)" in the headlines simultaneously, and the search results spanned January 2008 to January 2018. Although some of these articles were not from the state media outlets, they were still from established portal sites such as Sohu, NetEase (also known as 163), Sina, ifeng, etc., which were heavy-traffic news sites that strictly abide by the authorities' media regulation.

The analysis of the articles applied two cycles of coding based on Saldaña's (2016) coding manual for qualitative research. According to him, "first cycle coding is a way to initially summarize segments of data" (p. 236), and the second cycle is "to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of first cycle codes" (p. 234). These procedures should help with the analysis and synthesis of the articles on female PhDs. For the first cycle, the author used a combination of "in vivo coding" and "concept coding" to scan the 38 articles. "In vivo"

means directly jotting down the keywords appearing in the texts, while concept coding, as Saldaña explained, "tend[s] to be applied to larger units or stanzas of data—an analytic 'lumping task' that harmonizes with the bigger picture suggested by a concept" (p. 120). He also suggested that concept coding is especially suitable for cultural studies, sociopolitical inquiry, and critical theory "since it stimulates reflection on broader social constructs" (p. 120). In other words, the first step to deconstructing the data was to examine the paragraphs and discover the main ideas, concepts, or issues being addressed.

For the second cycle of coding, a "focused coding" was conducted which, as Saldaña elucidated, "searches for the most frequent or significant codes to develop the most salient categories in the data corpus and 'requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138)" (p. 240). Hence, the second step revisits the codes and marks the most prominent ones that could highlight a concept or synthesize the data into categories to be further examined critically. The recurring codes could reveal the directions and strategies of the media when they cover female PhDs, and the seemingly different representations thus became generalizable. It is worth noting that, although the author of this dissertation believes that female PhDs are heterogeneous and cannot be simplified into types as it would be a reenactment of the prevailing hegemonic simplification and repression of them, for this chapter alone, the author decided to make educated and critical decisions to sort and categorize the available textual data to discover common patterns of representations and thus identify the "social wrongs" (see Fairclough, 2013) surrounding the subjects of the study.

The following passages are thus developed based on the two cycles of coding. The author discovered that the media have constructed and presented to the public three "types" of female PhDs: "the anxious," "the eccentric," and "the mistreated." Most commonly in the mainstream media's point of view, female PhDs are either women who worry and feel anxious about their single status or act aggressively and strangely to keep themselves apart from social norms. However, in some accounts displaying some feminist consciousness, female PhDs are represented as the victims of social stereotypes and prejudices and thus are reintroduced as part of the norm, rather than deviants.

Three Types of Female PhDs in Media Representation

The Anxious

In this data pool, ten articles chose to focus on the female PhDs' anxiety about being single. In their coverage, the female PhDs were undoubtedly living in an environment filled with self-doubt and agony. The media's strategies included featuring these women's complaints about their degrees or education, capturing their failed experiences at matchmaking events, or letting them vent the frustration of being unpopular and too old. Then, instead of offering support and sympathy, these articles tended to denigrate them by highlighting the "flaws" in their personalities and demeanors, such as being nerdy, dependent on their parents, lacking social abilities, and having low self-esteem. The recurring codes in these articles included "age," "pressure (yali)," "anxiety (jiaolv)," being "helpless (wunai)," "weak (ruo)," etc. In one article, a woman even described herself as "a vegetable that is past its prime" to show her self-deprecating state as an unmarried female PhD ("Chang sha nvboshi," 2011). In these

articles, the female PhDs always seemed to be so isolated in the ivory tower that they did not know how to communicate outside their comfort zones. The media stressed their incapacity to follow social norms and blamed them for being different instead of examining the larger environment to see how it has shaped the way they view themselves and the way others view them, which are usually negative.

A good example is an article published on *Guangming Daily*'s website entitled "Female PhD took her mother on dates for 19 times. Is she going to marry, or is her mother?" (2013). The author used a mocking tone to introduce a 31-year-old woman, Miss Cheng, who had a PhD degree and always brought her mother to the dates arranged by matchmakers. In the article, Cheng was portrayed as a helpless woman who could not decide her fate without her mother being present. When she and her mother had different opinions about a man, Cheng would compromise and listen to her mother (para. 9). The author quoted Cheng: "My mother has experience and knows how to judge people; listening to her will not make me suffer losses" (para. 9). Meanwhile, the mother also expressed her overprotectiveness of her daughter, saying, "Although my daughter has an advanced degree, she had never had a romantic relationship and lacked social experience. I am afraid she would find a wrong man, so I have to be her gatekeeper" (para. 7). In addition, the author incorporated some matchmakers' comments. One matchmaker said, "She [the daughter] is over 30 years old and still bringing her mother to her dates; this will scare the men away." Another added, "When a man sees a woman bringing her mother to the date, he would feel uneasy and have no mood to talk further" (para. 11). Apparently, in the eyes of the matchmakers, Cheng was already "abnormal" for being

dependent and immature; but more importantly, she would threaten the authority of her male suitors, who would feel stressed by her and accuse her of damaging their self-esteem.

On further examination, all the interviewees and quotes included in this article functioned as to degrade the female PhD in different ways. Cheng's own words showed her lack of confidence, which conformed to the stereotype of female PhDs being unsocial and lacking agency. However, what the article did not point out was that such feelings were intensified by her mother, who exerted excessive control over her daughter's choices. To some extent, the mother was the one who internalized the patriarchal ideologies and imposed them on her daughter before society did. Moreover, the matchmakers provided a male-dominant perspective to humiliate Cheng further. While Cheng was the only person being criticized, laughed at, and demeaned in this article, it was actually the mother, the matchmakers, the invisible male suitors, and the entire patriarchal ideology and discourses that made her an undesired "leftover woman."

In order to present female PhDs' anxiety about being single and unwanted, some articles used these women's own words as "evidence" of their inferiority and weaknesses, which also helped popularize the impression that they were responsible for being the "outliers" in society. Since the media often portrayed these female PhDs as having low self-esteem, it seemed as if being a PhD student or holding a PhD degree was a burden, rather than something to be proud of, or at least to content with. Besides, the media also highlighted their frustration about their degrees by showing them ranting about how it affected their opportunities to find a partner and made them "leftover women."

An article published in 2009 on the website of *China Youth Daily*—the official newspaper of the Communist Youth League of China—featured two female PhD students from the top two universities in the city of Wuhan. The article emphasized the stress and anxiety caused by their education, as both women complained about how demanding and time-consuming their programs were. They also concluded that pursuing a PhD degree had deprived them of opportunities to be attractive and time to look for love. One woman, Zhao Yan, commented that, due to many hours of work in the lab, she sometimes "wanted to vomit when seeing the computer in the lab." She admired some fashionable female undergraduate students, while she was stuck in a cold lab with medicines and machines. She even moaned, "a girl's romance is buried in the measuring cups in the lab" (para. 5).

Moreover, this article showed some female PhDs discrediting their research skills and accepting their "natural" inferiority to their male colleagues. For instance, Zhou Yue, another PhD student featured in this article, told the journalist that the frustration of failing experiments in the lab made her feel like "a snail climbing a tree, constantly falling off, and then rising again. Women's logic is not as keen as men's, and sometimes I really want to give up" (para. 9). The article even confirmed their anxiety and already lowered self-esteem by listing possible consequences faced by female PhDs, such as being "cannot graduate, cannot find a job, cannot settle hukou[14], and cannot survive on one's own" (para. 11).

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[14] China's population registration system.

Examining the words of the interviewees in this article, it is clear that the authors deliberately selected quotes from the female PhDs to present a contrast between them and the more traditional or more feminine women who would be accepted according to social norms. As the two PhD students demonstrated envy toward the fashionable undergrads, as well as exhaustion from their work, the article implied that they made wrong life choices in not following the traditional paths.

Similarly, in an article on *Guangming Daily* entitled "Female PhD goes to matchmaking events 15 times a month, complaining her high education is an obstacle" (2012), the author reported on several female PhDs at a matchmaking event in Yantai, Shandong Province. The article observed: "At the event, some female Master's and PhDs looked so lonely" (para. 4). One woman who wanted to leave after a few minutes was quoted as saying, "Nobody pays attention to me because most men think they cannot control a female PhD" (para. 4). She also said that whenever a man knew she had a PhD degree, he would stop contacting her, which made her feel unconfident about her education and herself. However, she also insisted, "I would go to all kinds of matchmaking events. After this one, my parents will force me to go to another one… It is really my education that has hindered my love" (para. 4). Meanwhile, another female PhD at the event said that she and her female colleagues used different methods to find a partner. Yet since she had no luck, she speculated, "As I'm getting older, I really wonder if it was the wrong choice to pursue a PhD degree" (para. 7).

In the above two articles, media outlets did give the female PhDs a chance to speak; however, only their complaints and doubts about their education were shown to

the public, which functioned to convey the message that women should not become highly educated. Also, while the media portrayed female PhDs as lacking agency and being self-deprecating, these women's low self-esteem and lack of assertiveness was substantially due to patriarchal norms and ideologies. Furthermore, the media discourses examined here played a key part in leading these educated women into believing that they were "undesired" and "leftover," further discouraging them from challenging the patriarchal order.

As a result, female PhDs believed that their education had impeded their paths to finding husbands and being "normal" women. They started blaming themselves by sharing their feelings of losing confidence and being desperate about their singleness, without either thinking about their academic achievements or whether men should be blamed for judging them based on their education. It is also worth noting that both the *China Youth Daily* and *Guangming Daily* are newspapers directly supervised by the Publicity Department of the CPC, and since the above articles all presented doubting views about women's pursuit of higher education and reinforced the traditional stereotypes, they are suggestive of the party-state authorities' attitudes. As the female PhDs in the news continue to trivialize their own abilities and admire other women for being more feminine and attractive, the mainstream culture's hegemonic expectations of women are maintained in such public discourse.

In a word, what is obscured in the media's showcase of the anxious female PhDs is that the prevailing discourses about them being leftover, too educated, too old, too unattractive, too stubborn, and unwanted by men, are socially constructed, representing

the dominant ideologies in a highly patriarchal culture and society. When these female PhDs are feeling doubtful about themselves and questioning the meaning of their education, or feeling anxious about not being married, they not only reveal the results of patriarchal pressure but also their internalization of such repression. Meanwhile, by stressing such images of female PhDs, the media function to consolidate dominant ideologies and maintain the stereotypes about female PhDs in public discourses.

The Eccentric

In contrast to representations of being passive and lacking agency, another way the mainstream Chinese media framed female PhDs' deviance portrayed them as having too much agency, accusing them of being eccentric and not conforming to norms. In this category, female PhDs were usually described as aggressive and selfish, even threatening the stability of society and harming China's cultural integrity. These stereotypes were exemplified in media texts that highlighted female PhDs' unusual or absurd requests, values, or actions that the rest of the society would presumably find hard to understand and accept. Singling out rare cases that involved such female PhDs, these media then generalized their characteristics to all female PhDs, thus further diminished their social status and power.

In the data pool, 17 articles stressed or implied the eccentricity of the female PhDs. Besides offering sensationalist reports about them, these articles often made trivial and personal issues seem significant and overwhelming. The most commonly seen strategies or "codes" in these articles included using single cases to accuse the entire female PhD population of being problematic, blaming the victims and asking them to

self-reflect rather than finding the real cause of their behavior, and essentializing female PhDs' personal actions as harming national and cultural integrity. Furthermore, it is crucial to note that sometimes, more than one of these codes could appear in the same article.

For example, two articles on the same issue demonstrated the media's unreasonable association and stigmatization of the entire female PhDs population based on a single case. In 2015, both iFeng and Sohu reported on a PhD student at Stanford University who murdered her classmate due to her jealousy of the latter for having a boyfriend ("Stanford female PhD," 2015; "Stanford 26 years old," 2015). After briefly covering the murder, however, the article on iFeng went on to discuss the threat of having too many "leftover women" in society, including "negative mood, frequent nightlife, sexual repression, late marriage and childbearing" (para. 5). Moreover, it claimed that due to their single status and excessive night lives, the leftover women and men would miss the "optimal childbearing age" (para. 8). The other article on Sohu even revealed that there was actually no evidence showing the murder was triggered by jealousy. Nevertheless, the article still turned to the "plight" of female PhDs in China in regards to marriage (para. 3), as well as presenting statistics showing that women who had a graduate degree had a lower rate of marriage (para. 16).

Another example of the media attacking a single case and problematizing it within a broader context could be seen in a commentary on *Guangming Daily* from 2012. The author criticized a female PhD student who complained on Weibo about attending to a poor, grassroots educational institution. Besides condemning her public expression of

anger as a PhD student majoring in economics, the author further questioned her outlook on life and opined that her personal values were "highly concerning" ("Female PhDs stop leaving" 2012, para. 3). The author then referred to famous role models during the Maoist years and stated that the great politicians, militarists, literati, musicians, and economists all came from poor backgrounds, thus indicating the female PhD's lack of integrity and perseverance since she was complaining about being in the same situation. Finally, he called out "all the female PhD students" and asked them to "think twice before abandoning the grassroots" (para. 6).

In these three articles, each author only examined one case with a female PhD involved, yet made assumptions and condemned the entire female PhD population. These articles also attributed the female PhDs' problematic public images to their failure to follow gender and other social norms. They even accused the female PhDs of threatening the virtues of Chinese culture. Collectively, these media framings indicate that in China, the label "PhD" for women has acquired a highly gendered connotation rather than being a purely academic designation. Mainstream media and other public commentary expect these educated female scholars and educators to fulfill the gender roles according to patriarchal values rather than focusing on their professional achievements and contributions. In order to spread such hegemonic expectations and representations, the media sometimes even exaggerated otherwise personal or trivial stories about female PhDs, bringing different institutional pressures to bear against their agency and free will.

The media's emphasis on female PhDs' "absurdity" could be seen further in a news article published on ScienceNet.cn, a website co-sponsored by the Chinese

Academy of Sciences, Chinese Academy of Engineering, and National Natural Science Foundation of China. Under the headline "A 40-year old overseas returnee female PhD wants to find a boyfriend born in the 80s" (2013), the article also had a subtitle explaining, "She requires the man to be handsome, taller than 1.75 meters, have chest muscle, eyes that can 'talk,' and using cologne." Further, the article featured a photo of a woman, pseudonymized as "Carly," who was wearing a tight dress and smiling at the camera. It turned out that she was signing up for a matchmaking show that day, which would be broadcast on local television.

The lengthy headline already implied that the media considered it an absurd case when a female PhD in her 40s wanted to find a much younger boyfriend. The article started with a question, "If you were a man born after 1980, would you marry a 40-year-old woman who has overseas experience, owns a house and a car, and earns more than 100,000 RMB per year?" (para. 1). The question emphasized the contrast between Carly's age and her desired partner's; more importantly, it was asked from a male perspective, which weighed the woman's value based on her income and property, in addition to age. The next few paragraphs introduced Carly's experience overseas and her current job, as well as featuring her own words, explaining that she mostly worked with people born after 1980 and once dated a Ukrainian boyfriend who was 14 years younger than her. She even asked, "Why can people accept older men looking for a younger girlfriend, but not the other way around?" (para. 8). Further, she expressed her belief that social stereotypes about age and marriage would change, and she would continue her pursuit of a much younger boyfriend until she was 60 years old (para. 9).

Although Carly's words showed her confident and assertive personality, including positive views on the possibility of social change and most of all, a feminist attitude, the article did not really recognize these as commendable qualities; instead, the rest of the article featured comments from different groups of people, including the male guests at the matchmaking show, other men born since 1980, Carly's colleagues, her mother, and an "expert" working at a matchmaking agency. A male guest of the show said that Carly was "too naïve" and "even though she dressed young, one could still see the trace of time." He did not want to date her because he felt that she had a "self-centered pride" (para. 10, 11). Another 25-year-old man mentioned the "three highs" about female PhDs—i.e., high degree, high income, and high age—and stated: "The first two 'highs' were stressful for me, and the last 'high' was stressful for my mom" (para. 12). Compared to the men who despised Carly's degree and personality, Carly's colleague, who was a woman born after 1990, was supportive of her and appreciated her young heart and friendliness with her younger colleagues. Carly's mother also supported her by saying that "people's lives are diverse today, so their values should be too" (para. 14).

The contrast between how men and women viewed Carly was stark and indicative, but the article went straight to interview an "expert" from a matchmaking agency, who, unsurprisingly, defined Carly's requirements as "extreme and partial" (para. 16). The expert explained that "most men think that highly educated women are either pedantic or aggressive, either one is unfavorable to men. Also, men are usually slower to psychologically mature than women; and if a family acts 'against common sense' in having an older woman/younger man dynamic, the wife needs to have more

understanding and tolerance of the husband" (para. 16). Thus, the expert, who was also a female, suggested that "aged women"—as described by the article—should "have a clear self-understanding before deciding to be involved in an 'older woman/younger man' relationship" (para. 17). As the expert directly described such a relationship as "against common sense," she stressed the wrongness of it and also suggested that women be prepared to compromise. As someone who represents the traditional institution of heterosexual marriage, this expert from a matchmaking agency further confirmed the power relationship between men and women in marriage. In other words, a woman's own will and agency should give way to the man's needs, and a woman should also look inward to reflect upon herself rather than questioning whether society has set up unfair requirements for her conduct and choices. Thus, yet again, when unmarried female PhDs became the subjects of news, they were depicted as negative examples of women.

Strangely, besides stressing the importance of getting married for female PhDs, mainstream media and public commentary have also developed an arbitrary expectation that prohibits such women from being too eager to do so. Because of this, female PhDs' agency is indeed constrained, and they are always under scrutiny. This was especially demonstrated in a 2011 case, wherein a 30-year-old woman who completed her PhD degree in Nanjing refused to return to her previous institution where she had signed an employment contract. Her reason was that she did not want to go back to a small city in Anhui, where there were fewer opportunities to find herself a husband (Zhang & Wang, 2011; Ye, 2011; "Nv boshi sues," 2011). "A female educator with a PhD degree broke her job contract only because she wanted to find a husband in a big city" immediately

became heated news. The reasons were two-fold: first, this case strengthened the stereotype of a "leftover" female PhD who desperately wanted to marry. Second, as a highly educated woman, her act of "betraying" her previous institution and disliking her hometown and local men was something unappreciated by social and cultural discourses which expect women to be selfless and devoted to those in authority over them. Although this woman promised that she would pay the penalty for breaching the contract, which made the case a purely legal dispute that could be solved (Zhang & Wang, 2011, para. 8), it was her reason that challenged the cultural authorities and made it news. As a result, the media coverage of the case mainly depicted her as selfish, irresponsible, and inconsiderate.

Many articles started by directly attacking this female PhD's conduct. A commentary published on People.com.cn, the official website of *People's Daily*, criticized her for lacking the most essential virtue—integrity (cheng xin, 诚信)—and attributed her act to her "leftover women anxiety" (Jiang, 2011, para. 3, 4). Another article published on China News stated that this female PhD could be regarded as a "thief," since her selfish pursuit of love had 'stolen' her integrity toward her university (Yan, 2011, para. 4). China Central Television's (CCTV) website also covered the news in an article entitled, "Where can female PhDs find romance?" The article showed some understanding of this female PhD at first by saying, "Although having a job is important, love is more valuable. After all, marriage is a big event in life. If constrained in a small town for too long, she will get older and older, and finally become a leftover woman, which is saddening" (para. 3). However, even though this opinion valued a woman's

pursuit for love, it ended by stressing and naturalizing the connection between a woman's age and the demeaning appellation "leftover woman," and considered it a misfortune. Moreover, the article further discussed the implications of the case in a style that was more like a personal attack on this female PhD's age and personality: "But will this female PhD harvest love after she resigns her job? … They [female PhDs] have studied for ten years, received high degrees, but missed the best time to find love. Their age is their obstacle" (para. 4). This statement ascribed her singleness and possibly her reduced charm to her age; thus, she became a passive object futilely chasing marriage, even though in reality, she had the agency and determination to move to a better environment.

Similarly, an article on *Legal Daily*—another party-state supervised newspaper—condemned the same woman for having an "elitist sentiment" that was "self-centered and selfish… lacking gratitude, responsibility, and the virtue of repayment to her university" (Guo, 2011, para. 4). The author eventually escalated the case by ascribing it to the overall "degeneration of intellectual elites" in China (para. 4, 5), accusing them of being selfish while holding prestigious social positions. Again, by stereotyping the entire population of the female PhDs as an eccentric group that is troublesome and harmful to the country's ideological integrity, the media functioned as an omnipresent institution that constantly warns women of the consequences of defying patriarchal norms and the national honor.

What is unique about this particular case is that this female PhD's dispute with her previous institution could actually mark her as a devotee of the patriarchy, since her reason for leaving the university was to get married so that she would not be a "leftover

woman." However, as she pursued marriage by taking some bold but legal actions, the media—espousing the patriarchal ideologies—found her aggressive and accused her of challenging male dominance (with the concept of integrity as a foil for her behavior). Also, the media tried to use public discourses to shame her for her personal decision even though she actually wanted to fulfill the custom of marriage. In this case, the media exposed the arbitrariness of China's patriarchal expectations for unmarried female PhDs: while these highly educated women are pressured to get married in order to get rid of their "leftover women" stigma, they should not abandon the traditional feminine virtues, which basically boil down to being controllable by men. In this controversy, the idea of "a female PhD exerting her agency to proactively search for a man to marry" was the real problem that concerns the patriarchy, since it was the woman who took the initiative. Also, the media's propagation of this behavior further shaped her into a deviant and a "thief."

The Mistreated

It is noticeable that, since 2010, there has been an emergence of feminist awareness in the media's coverage of female PhDs in China. Though not a common phenomenon, there were indeed more news articles addressing society's unfair treatment of highly educated women. Among the 38 articles in the data pool, ten exhibited an empathetic attitude towards such prejudiced encountered by the female PhDs, and some even criticized the patriarchal system, which was rarely seen in previous coverage. Nevertheless, while they regarded the female PhDs as the mistreated group, there were

also some drawbacks and limitations in these articles that reflected the deeply rooted beliefs about the educated women.

The most straightforward way that the media presented positive views of and support for the female PhDs was letting them speak about their identity as PhDs rather than as anxious "leftover women." By giving them the space to explain what they do and how they view themselves, the media could transfer power from a patriarchal and judgmental standpoint to these women's own subjectivities. A good example is an article published in 2016 on ScienceNet.cn (the same website that had published the article about "Carly" previously) ("Walking closer," 2013). The article featured several female PhD students and PhD degree holders talking about their understanding of "female PhDs." As they all detested the stereotypes about them, this article functioned as a platform for them to challenge the dominant discourses.

In this article, a first-year PhD student named Lu Xiaohui disagreed with the idea that female PhDs were "unattractive" and "boring" by describing herself as the opposite. She told the journalist that female PhDs were called "UFO" by some Chinese, meaning "ugly, fat, and old" (para. 2); however, she did not exemplify this because she stayed up to date with popular trends, watched the same entertainment shows as other women, and was fashionable. In addition, she confidently said that there was hardly anyone among her colleagues that "wore super thick glasses and were as stubborn as a dinosaur" (para. 3). When asked how she viewed the discourse describing female PhDs as the "third gender," she answered, "The so-called 'third gender' should mean those who cannot get along in society. There are people like this in both male and female PhD populations, as

well as in other groups with lower degrees. So it is by no means particular to female PhDs" (para. 8). A female professor in this article likewise expressed that there was no necessary connection between an advanced degree, marriage, and career. As a married woman, she believed that she had broken the stereotype of female PhDs being "unwanted," and stated that "women with an advanced degree usually understand responsibility better, including the responsibility towards a family" (para. 12). Considering herself an "understanding wife and strict mother," she opined that the assumption that female PhDs could not take good care of their families was ungrounded and lacking support from valid data.

There were also cases where the media functioned as an advocate for female PhDs. Usually, these articles were driven by Western feminism and responding to injustices that had already become social spectacles. For example, an article published on NetEase entitled "Thoughts on 'recruiting male PhDs only': Does a female 'lose value' by pursuing a PhD degree?" was in response to a well-known case in 2014 wherein a professor verbally bashed female PhDs during the recruiting season. The professor, who was also a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in Guangdong Province, said in public that, "A woman is a product. It's been sold for twenty-some years and still hasn't been bought. In terms of marriage, pursuing a PhD wouldn't add value, but devalue them" (Huang, 2014, para. 2). This provocative speech went viral in January of that year and generated massive backlash from many female intellectuals and feminist groups in several universities. NetEase later created a webpage entitled "Women's Movement" with the bold headline, "Guangdong CPPCC

representative Luo Biliang, please apologize to all the women for your faulty words!" (2014).

The NetEase article listed several other cases where male professors expressed similar ideas during the university admission season, thus demonstrating the widespread problem of sexism in universities in China. For instance, a male professor said, "If I wanted to recruit a PhD student and saw a female applicant who does not have a boyfriend or has not married yet, I would suggest she find a boyfriend first. This is my consideration for her happiness in the future so she will not become a leftover woman" (para. 2). The professor regarded his sexism as doing a service for the female applicant, which was not unlike the words of Luo, who claimed that unmarried female PhDs were seen as products worth less than men, even though they might have a higher education than men. Moreover, the article criticized these sexist views by interviewing a female professor named Yan Hao with a background in women's studies. Yan explained the discrimination against female PhDs in these cases by identifying the patriarchal social order which judged women based on their marriage and fertility. She also pointed out that the reason many male professors did not want female students was that they worried that women were not as smart as men, given that there were fewer women in academia already (para. 9). Furthermore, she suggested that the emergence of discourses on "leftover women" was actually a good sign, demonstrating a growing feminist awareness and the diversity of Chinese society (para. 4, 7). As a commentary published on a popular Chinese website in the middle of a turbulent event involving female PhDs, this article came as strong support for female PhDs, as it recognized their struggles and supported

their pushback against stereotypes and humiliations. Moreover, it used a female professor's academic interpretation of the case to educate the public.

Another article, entitled "Leftover women and female PhDs" and published in EastDay.com (2011), presented an even more critical reading of the repression of female PhDs. The author first raised a problematic statement that had been circulating in the public discourse: "If the female population is fewer than the male and they are still 'leftover,' that means the women should be responsible for their own singleness" (para. 2). The author then pinpointed the problem of blaming the victims in this statement and discussed the reasons behind the social stigma against strong and independent women, noting, "The men do not want to see women being more powerful and better than themselves… Thus, 'leftover women' is also an instrumental term used by men to showcase their superiority. The subtext is: You single women are the leftovers unwanted by us, you are not good enough" (para. 2). The author further concluded that female PhDs had become an "entertainment" in the mass media run by men [the original Chinese says the media's last name is "man"] (para. 3). These statements have made this article a rare case in which the author intrepidly criticized the media industry for being male-dominated and exploiting female PhDs as a source of entertainment.

The above articles were positive examples showing how the media's coverage of the female PhDs has improved, especially by letting the female PhDs speak up and engaging critical voices to question the power structures. Nevertheless, there were also articles in this category that, though offering appreciative views of female PhDs, did not really abandon a patriarchal standpoint, and continue to justify the "male gaze" in the

name of doing justice to the female PhDs. The most common practice was to focus on the feminine temperament or physical attractiveness of the female PhDs in order to show their departure from the dull and stubborn stereotypes. For example, an article on ifeng.com titled "The mainland version of Chi-ling Lin [a famous model in Taiwan] appeared on *Idiom Hero*; a leftover woman looking for a husband on site" (2014) covered several contestants in a TV show testing people's knowledge of Chinese idioms. When describing one contestant who was a female PhD, the author said, "She [wore a qipao[15]] which made her seem like she had traveled from the imperial university in the Minguo era to the present. Her demeanor also reminded people of Xu Guangping [wife of Lu Xun, the famous writer]" (para. 20). And when introducing another contestant, the author highlighted her confidence by saying, "She described herself as a lotus rising from underwater," "she is both a beauty and a talent… she has high IQ and high EQ" (para. 4-5). Moreover, they reported that this contestant also wanted to use this program to find a husband (para. 5). As a program that tested people's knowledge of a classic subject in Chinese culture, the angle of the news nonetheless focused on the contestants' feminine disposition rather than their knowledge base, and constantly associated them with words such as "beauty," "wife," and "marriage."

In another example, Sohu reported on a 27-year-old PhD student named May Wang, who studied in the United Kingdom, had an extremely attractive body, and thus

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[15] "qipao" (旗袍) is a one-piece, tightfitting dress usually worn by upper-middle-class Chinese women during the 1920-1940s. Today, although qipao is no longer daily attire, some Chinese women still wear it during important occasions such as at weddings or other traditional culture-related events.

became an Internet sensation. The author expressed their appreciation for Wang and regarded her as someone who challenged the public's stereotypes about "female PhDs." Unlike the articles that ignored the education part of being a PhD, this article introduced Wang's inspiring story of how she gained confidence in speaking English and meticulously pursued her graduate degrees while managing her Internet presence and keeping a fit body. The article concluded by sending a motivating message to the readers: "If satisfying oneself with knowledge and exercise, one will eventually achieve a shining moment. May Wang used her experience to tell everyone that there is no conflict between beauty and intelligence, courage and profession, confidence and gender" ("D-Cup and long legs," 2018, para. 29).

Nevertheless, it was evident that such news sexualized its subject. Most specifically, the title of the article read: "D-Cup and long legs, who said that female PhDs could not be both beautiful and smart?" (2018). Besides highlighting her chest size and other attractive body parts, the article also bombarded readers with photos of Wang wearing bikinis, thus accentuating her sexy body shape and lines. The article even made a comparison between Wang and the images in the search results for "nv boshi" on Baidu.com, which were, unsurprisingly, the stubborn and unattractive stereotypes. To a large extent, then, this article was taking advantage of the visual impact of a beautiful woman who was also a PhD student, using her as compelling "entertainment" for clicks more than doing real justice to her or female PhDs in general.

To summarize, compared to articles that described female PhDs either as weak or aggressive, articles in the "mistreated" category examined in this section were more

progressive in addressing and critiquing the existing injustice and wrongdoings. They also recognized and appreciated these women's education, which was often downplayed or even neglected in the mainstream coverage. In addition, although most of the time these articles were not directly targeting the patriarchy, some of them did suggest looking beyond the phenomenon to find out the causes of such injustice towards female PhDs or offer a positive and inspiring call for other women.

However, this seemingly improved media representation also reflected some deep-rooted patriarchal thinking that judges women based on their looks and bodies. As May Wang's case illustrated, only those who were both physically attractive and academically successful were covered and appreciated by the media. While it was palpable that the article both paid tribute to her physical beauty and her perseverance as a PhD student and Internet influencer, the title of the article and the disproportionate featuring of her photos still indicated a discursive environment run by the "male gaze." At the same time, the more mundane, low-key, and essentially everyday women who are highly educated are still continually neglected and even despised by the media.

In addition, although more media have advocated for the female PhDs, many failed to recognize that the disruptive discourses and treatment experienced by these women should not be separated from larger, structural power inequalities between genders. In other words, combating the gendered repression faced by the female PhDs requires a more profound approach than proving them "normal." However, the media have not so far provided truly revolutionary advocacy. Consequently, overall, the

structural and ideological frames of China's media practices keep denigrating the identities and experiences of educated women.

This chapter so far has discussed Chinese media's most common types of portrayals of female PhDs. "The anxious" demonstrated the media and hegemonic culture's unreserved bashing of educated women, comprising attacks on their agency and self-esteem. "The eccentric" showed media's intentional vilification and clampdown of female PhDs who challenged hegemonic norms and male dominance by actively pursuing their own needs. And the "mistreated" reflected some media reports' sympathetic portrayals of female PhDs, but were also limited by dominant ideologies of gender. These three categories of female PhDs represented in the Chinese media exposed how media work with and within current ideological structures. Sometimes, they render such repressive power straightforwardly, expressing hegemonic definitions or judgments and situating women in an inferior position. Other times, they work more subtly, by referring to the authoritative rules and enlarging or problematizing personal conduct to push women into conformity as well as to sustain the social order. Overall, the analysis of these media texts suggests that current media attacks on female PhDs are not necessarily spurred by their degrees per se, but by the power associated with the attainment of these degrees, which triggers the anxiety of patriarchal authorities.

Discussion

A Discursive Marginalization

For female PhDs in China, especially the unmarried ones, gendered expectations and pressures emanate from all kinds of social institutions, including the government,

media, education, family, and even their female peers. To some extent, female PhDs are inescapably experiencing a nationwide, discursive marginalization, which imposes the party-state power and patriarchal ideologies, affecting their self-esteem and making their social encounters more difficult. Among these institutions, media is perhaps the most effective at disseminating and propagating such repressive power and influencing the public culture's attitudes toward these women.

The three categories of the media's representations examined above have demonstrated a top-down, party-state-initiated *othering* of a group of women who are highly educated and have competence and agency that should be respected, yet have ended up being depicted as an anxious, self-pitying, and eccentric "third gender" that is outside the culture's norms, not liked or desired by men, and even alienated from women who are more obedient to men. Since these female PhDs' intelligence is seen as a threat to the patriarchal power, the media's framing has deliberately associated them with certain types and images—usually negative ones—to downplay their social significance and question their virtues. In other words, to an authoritarian party-state that needs its individuals to represent the country's collective advancement, these female PhDs are not necessarily intellectual assets to the nation, but a potential challenge to the nation's maintenance of its patriarchal power. In the construction of a postsocialist "new China," such conservatism when it comes to women in education, and the fact that the media actively endorse such ideology, reveal China's enduring suppression of women's power and selective engagement with global economic and political forces. That is, while China has progressively embraced the deregulated and transnational models of neoliberal

production to serve its economic ambitions, it resists progressive ideologies for the rights of groups that have traditionally been underrepresented and marginalized.

Eugenics and the Population Quality

Another prominent practice in Chinese media's framing is that it regards female PhDs' domestic and reproductive values as more important than their professional worth. However, while the party-state and media work together to belittle the female PhDs in this respect, they also need these "deviant" women to perform as "normal" women to help with nation-building. In this case, the party-state does not use female PhDs' intelligence or increased power and agency to showcase the nation's advanced treatment of women in a neoliberal world, but to promote these women's traditional gender roles as proof of China's cultural virtues, and to take advantage of their bodies and dispositions to improve the "quality" of the Chinese population.

This phenomenon demonstrates the eugenic concerns of the Chinese party-state in the current postsocialist context. First, with more women obtaining higher education even to the postgraduate level, their personal pursuits become intertwined with the party-state's preservation of its patriarchy and ruling power. For the authoritarian regime to take advantage of such resources, the first step is to make sure that these women get married so that men are engaged in this construction of the "new Chinese-ness." Second, marriage is considered the building block of a stable society according to the Chinese government, and this idea is firmly rooted in Confucian gender roles which expect women to serve and take care of men (who always seem more carefree), and to nurture the children (Hong, 2014, p. 22-23). In this case, unmarried female PhDs are the potential

implementers of the authorities' agenda to improve the quality of the population; having married and given birth, they would then inherit the traditional roles both as wives supporting their husbands and capable mothers who can pass good education onto their children. When the country is desperately needing to gain international recognition for both its hard power and soft power, these female PhDs thus become valuable assets, not for their professional contributions as academics, but their presumed genetic advantage as fertile and nurturing women. As Hong (2014) pointed out:

> What better way to upgrade the quality of the population than to convince educated "high-quality" women to marry and have a child for the good of the nation? The very people the Chinese government would like to see having babies are highly educated urban women, who would be able to produce children with "superior" genetic make-up, and provide these children with the most nurturing environment possible. (p. 30)

In fact, eugenics has been an important component of China's nationalistic discourse and nation-building since the beginning of the 20th century. Due to the history of imperialist Europe's invasion and humiliation of the Chinese population in the 19th century, the Chinese nation has long had a complex attitude regarding the quality of its people and the display of national strength. Thus, the earliest reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao introduced social Darwinism into their agenda for social change and modernization (Chung, 2014). Later, during the Republic of China's regime, the primary goal of the ruling power was to unite the country's scattered ethnicities. Hence, the practice of eugenics was more about constructing a nation that could "keep the

coexistence" of different ethnic groups and fight imperialism (Chung, p. 796). It is under the Communist regime since 1949 that eugenics has become closely linked with the maintenance of Communist ruling power and the country's economic and ideological presentation to the world. Take the famous one-child policy as an example: Thompson (2012) observed that the policy began in the late 1970s because China started to pursue a "capitalist restoration, when all of social life began once again to be tendentially subordinated to the requirements of accumulation [of capital]" (p. 60). As China has now entered another "new era" proposed by President Xi, which is intertwined with global neoliberalism and filled with capitalist competition, the quality of the population has also become an indicator of the country's development. Thus, the urge for female PhDs to stop being "selfish" and to get married has become a nationalistic agenda. Associated with this notion is nationwide propaganda against "leftover women," who are mostly the highly educated ones, and possibly having alternative plans in life instead of getting married at child-bearing age. However, they are considered deviants by the media and public culture not only because they do not follow Confucianism-influenced gender roles, but also because they are not helping the nation appear competitive and strong to the world.

Moreover, Communist China's concern for eugenics continues to develop and increase according to the current political environment and the agenda of the party-state. For example, with the aggravating trend of an aging population, the government lifted the one-child policy in 2015. And as China hit its lowest birth rate in 2018 since 1961, a set of new propaganda grows in the media on a daily basis. A recent example was the party-

state media's synchronized endorsement for the "Spring Bud Project," a 30-year-old project that helps in "mobilizing social forces to help dropout girls return to school and to improve teaching conditions in poverty-stricken areas" (cctf.org). In media texts on *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, and other official media outlets, besides summarizing the achievements of the past 30 years and forecasting the future, they also conveyed the same message that "Today's girls are tomorrow's mothers and builders of the nation" (Wang, 2019). Thus, the connection among "women (even girls)," "education," "mother," and "nation" is again framed as a nationalistic agenda.

What is contradictory in China's emphasis on female PhDs' marriage and reproductive mission right now is that, even though the party-state believes they could genetically benefit society by giving birth and nurturing children, such appreciation is not equally applied to their education and academic achievements, although the latter is the foundation of these women's "genetic superiority" and, if acknowledged, could also indicate China's civil development in gender equality to the rest of the world. On the contrary, there is even a prevailing anti-intellectual sentiment in media's coverage of female PhDs, as many articles have promoted the idea that it is unnecessary or even useless for women to have too high a degree. Illustrated by articles examined in this chapter, many female PhDs regretted getting their degrees, or willingly expressed inferiority to their male counterparts because they did not think their education helped them attain happiness and success.

Here, the self-deprecating assessment of female PhDs has revealed the overwhelming hegemonic power of the Chinese party-state when it comes to the

supervision of public discourses and culture as well as the maintenance of patriarchy. The media have successfully fostered an unsupportive public culture saturated with patriarchal ideologies to oversee and interfere with female PhDs' personal choices. At the same time, the female PhDs have also absorbed such culture, and many have internalized it to develop a false self-concept. As a result, many of these women believe that their success is not judged by their intelligence per se, but what their bodies can do for society. In a postsocialist country with a collective and authoritative ideological foundation, this phenomenon is constantly being justified and confirmed by social institutions.

Diversity in Female PhDs

Due to Chinese media's strong political affiliation, though some articles about female PhDs have included their voices to talk about themselves, it is rare to see these women converge to question the dominant powers and the unjust treatment that they have been receiving, or at least create a scene via today's burgeoning social media. This chapter argues that the lack of presence of their collective negotiation is partly due to the surveillant media and public venues and partly due to the often-neglected diversity in female PhDs' life choices, disciplines, and values. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, "female PhDs" have never been a homogeneous group, and the reason for categorizing their representations in this chapter is merely to code the media texts for a critical analysis. However, in reality, even in the articles in this data pool, there are different opinions among female PhDs when it comes to marriage and the fulfillment of traditional gender roles. Indeed, some female PhDs may not consider marriage a

mandatory phase in life, some may be outside heterosexual gender norms, and some may have already handled both their academic and family life well.

Thus, a fundamental issue that has been overlooked by the media and the public is the real statistics of female PhDs' marriage rates in China, or at least a more specific presentation of their varied attitudes towards their own lives and the patriarchal culture. However, since the media favor the deviant, single PhDs, it is hard to get an overview of the real situation, even though it is clear that the idea of them being "leftover" is a stereotype mainly constructed by the media, and many female PhDs may not find it a concern or a conflict with their pursuit of higher education. Unfortunately, such dynamics within the female PhD population, which could help society rethink the stereotypes of them, are rarely considered newsworthy.

In 2015, Baihe Network, a Chinese online dating service, published a marriage report which surprisingly showed that female PhDs actually had more dating experiences than male PhDs, or any group with a lower educational level (with an average number of 7.12 times up until their current ages) ("2015 report," 2015). However, this information did not stimulate any challenge of the social stereotypes about the female PhDs, and there have not been other credible studies or data, particularly focusing on them and their attitudes toward marriage. Furthermore, the ideological foundations embedded in the mainstream media's coverage have easily led to the ratification of an established heteronormative society, which is also highly sexual. In this case, the media fail to pay attention to the sexual minorities among female PhDs, who may not treat a heterosexual marriage as mandatory in life.

Thus, it seems that the media have been conducting a large-scale, unceasing silencing of female PhDs who have either fulfilled the patriarchal expectations (especially getting married and giving birth), or are clearly outside the heteronormative social norms, or both. These women become anonymous and un-newsworthy, even though they may have experienced more difficulties and pressures by fulfilling both personal and professional roles. Hence, for an ordinary female PhD who may not be "special" enough, her existence is reduced to unrecognized labor that has successfully contributed to the country's stability, yet her subjectivity has been eliminated from public culture. Also, for those who do not consider heterosexual marriage a goal that must be fulfilled in life, they are completely shunned from the media and public discussion. As the real "minorities," they have been dealing with being the "deviants" in a heteronormative and sexual society on the one hand and undergoing the same patriarchal repression as other female PhDs on the other.

Given the diverse conditions and variables mentioned above, there is an inevitable shortage of shared grievance within the larger category known as "female PhDs." With the current media culture serving the party-state's ruling power, and with the public discourses inheriting and sustaining the dominant ideologies and cultural stereotypes, it becomes difficult for female PhDs, who are already a small unit in society, to rely on the current media environment and public culture to state their grievances or initiate movements. As a result, female PhDs in everyday practice are actually dispersed individuals undergoing the same cultural and ideological requirements and repression, yet they may react to them differently based on their varied identities. This situation explains

why there is a lack of collective negotiation from the victims' positions, and this further strengthens the party-state's omnipresent control and manipulation of the voices and presence of the female PhDs.

Conclusion of the Chapter

This chapter has discussed China's media and public culture's treatment of the female PhDs, which could, in turn, reflect how the party-state's immense power has been disseminated in Chinese society through a discursive culture. Since this dissertation highlights how the media is the mouthpiece of the Chinese authorities, what media texts reveal about a particular group of people can also indicate how the authorities have envisioned them. In this case, the term "female PhD" or "nv boshi" is a problematic appellation to begin with, as it adds a preliminary condition to a position that should be gender-neutral. In today's Chinese society, this term has specific social and cultural connotations, and exposes how hegemonic power works to impact public culture and discourses.

In order to analyze the media's representation of female PhDs, this chapter performed a qualitative coding of 38 articles and synthesized the codes, from which three categories emerged, i.e., "the anxious," "the eccentric," and "the mistreated." These categories or types of female PhDs reveal how media, espousing the authorities' ruling ideologies, have been treating female PhDs in prejudiced ways and how they influence the public's understanding and discourses about them. Though these types have different manifestations, they all reflect the media and the public culture's assumptions about female PhDs as being "other" and deviants from patriarchal norms and gender roles. In

the media, female PhDs' professional contributions and values are not considered as important as their gender roles. After all, in China's patriarchal society supervised by the authoritarian regime, women's bodies have become national assets for the most part. They are either presented as negative examples of untraditional women or used as warnings to other women as they showcase the consequences of being aberrant. Furthermore, even in the seemingly positive coverages of female PhDs, only those who are normatively attractive are featured. However, these chosen ones are by no means representatives of everyday women with higher education, who should be recognized for their academic achievements rather than, say, physical beauty. Also, those female PhDs who are able to disassociate themselves from this patriarchal quagmire still have some agency to challenge such social wrongs and escape being lumped into one of the media's "types" examined so far.

Moreover, the discussion section of the chapter has addressed three findings. First, the cultural phenomenon of criticizing female PhDs in current Chinese society has disclosed a discursive practice of marginalization, which is performed in a top-down fashion and has almost eliminated grassroots opportunities to resist. Second, the authorities' eugenic concerns were discussed in interpreting the overwhelming social and cultural pressure on female PhDs' marriage and fertility. Under the influence of neoliberalism and postsocialism, the Chinese party-state seeks to take advantage of the genetic and educational resources of highly educated women in the production of a "better-quality" population, but at the same time, refuses to recognize these women's academic contributions and downplays the significance of their education. Third,

although the term “female PhD” has generally been used as a unitary concept in this chapter, it is crucial to recognize the heterogeneity of this group. There are diverse disciplines, practices, and values among these women, and thus, they will have varied interactions with patriarchal society and different attitudes toward marriage and education. This could also explain why there is a lack of collective action among them on a public level. The diversity among female PhDs also pertains to the fact that the actual “minorities” who are un-newsworthy to the media are the ones dealing with multiple pressures at the same time. They are not being represented, yet are still subject to the repressive patriarchal system, which considers the utility of the female body more important than their professions.

To sum up, by pinpointing the traits, problems, and limitations of the Chinese media’s coverage and representations of unmarried female PhDs, this chapter has analyzed the impact of pervasive patriarchal power and ideologies that too often control and manipulate media discourses and public culture pertaining to the “deviant” and “mysterious” female PhDs. It has also assessed how dominant discourses about these women manifest themselves in a postsocialist context to consolidate the party-state’s regime.

However, under the same ideological backdrop, women with strong consuming power seem to enjoy more favoritism by the party-state when examining the socio-economic discourses. More specifically, while female PhDs are largely overlooked professionally and lacking positive public images, economically powerful women are more visible and appreciated nowadays by the media and public culture. This seemingly

arbitrary situation in China and its implications will be further examined in the next chapter, which delves into the relationship among women, consumerist culture, and nation-building.

Chapter 6: Chinese Women, Feminist Advertising, and Consumerist Culture

Introduction

On the topic of the "Reform and Opening Up" policy, a saying by Deng Xiaoping became famous in the 1980s: "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice." This remark captured the core agenda of "Reform and Opening Up": instead of continuing the highly centralized planned economy from the Maoist years, Deng suggested that China should pursue practical outcomes by applying the most effective methods regardless of ideological stance. This philosophy thus became a major trait of China's economic development in the following years, marking China's "postsocialist era."

While the economic reform was undoubtedly the turning point for China's resurgence and has consequently contributed to China's rising international status and power, it has also cultivated a culture that is excessively obsessed with capital and money. When Deng popularized the idea of "let some people get rich first" in 1985, he was hoping those who ended up at the forefront of the "Reform and Opening Up" could then help the less privileged attain common prosperity (gong tong fu yu). However, almost four decades after the reform was implemented, the gap between the wealthy and poor has only been expanding. This has also been the typical outcome arising from the transnational and transcultural circulation of neoliberal practices and discourses.

China's economic boom goes hand in hand with global neoliberal developments, and China's market economy with constant government intervention has made women especially vulnerable. This is because this reformed economy has produced conflicting

expectations of being a woman and a female consumer in China. This chapter considers the impact of a postsocialist consumerist culture on Chinese women by studying three cases. The first two are examples of the Western-originated "feminist advertising" or "femvertising," which has been adapted and circulated in China; the third is a Chinese smartphone game's adaptation of the Japanese-invented *otome* games that specifically for female players. Together, they illuminate the participation and practice of China's ideological agenda embedded in women's economic empowerment.

The connection among women, consumerism, and nationalism was once discussed by Rofel (2008), who called consumption in postsocialist China a "cosmopolitan identity" that was especially actualized by young heterosexual female consumers, who in turn were "pulled into negotiating the meaning of Chineseness" (p. 112). When conducting interviews with the younger generation of women growing up in the post-Mao era, Rofel observed that the freedom of consumption and the subsequent confidence experienced by these young women was mostly "imagined" by themselves. More specifically, these women usually had a sense of empowerment that lacked historical references. Thus, women were imagining the past and present through the lens of the state's framing, involving discourses that praised the burgeoning consumerism as a sign of abandoning the impoverished past and integrating with the global neoliberal culture of the present. As Rofel stated:

> But consumption, one of their measures of freedom, is not just about pleasure. It is a postsocialist technology of the self by which Chinese young women and, by

> metonymic association, the Chinese nation, enable themselves to transcend the specificities of place and identity and be part of the "world." (p. 118)

In addition, Rofel highlighted that the postsocialist China was founded on the emerging sensibility of "desire," explaining that, "The formation of postsocialist subjects requires not simply temperance but the positive development of desire," and such "longings, aspirations, and newly experienced needs articulate with the contradictions and inequalities produced out of neoliberalism in China" (p. 14). Rofel's observation shed light on the ideological premise of China's booming consumerist culture. For one thing, it pointed out the necessity of cultivating "desire," as this was part of the postsocialist agenda to ensure a state to catch up with the global neoliberal trend; for another, it indicated the positive role of the "imagined confidence" in sustaining domestic stability.

This chapter builds upon Rofel's observation of China's development of consumerist culture in a neoliberal context, with a special focus on advertising culture. By studying the emergence of femvertising and women's updated reception of their representation in advertisements, this chapter pinpoints media's impact on women's self-empowerment, and argues that such empowerment, in turn, could sustain the party-state's agenda of nation-building, since the authorities have been treating women's consumption power as an indicator of its economic, ideological, and nationalistic development. At the same time, Chinese women's negotiation with their evolving representation in the media has nonetheless revealed the enduring patriarchy ingrained in society, which limits their empowerment.

Feminist Advertising and Commodity Feminism

"Feminist advertising" is a genre originating in the West. Abbreviating it as "femvertising," Akestam et al. (2017) defined it as "an advertising appeal" which "is frequently used in advertising campaigns that set out to generate sales, while simultaneously empowering women and girls by avoiding perpetuating female advertising stereotypes" (p. 796). Since the target audience—women—has long been partially or mistakenly represented by highly stereotyped and sexualized images in the media, femvertising resonates emotionally with many women and effectively generates enthusiasm for the promoted products. Perhaps the best examples of feminist advertising in the last decade are Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" and Always' "Like a Girl," as they both convey empowering messages about girls and women being confident about their bodies and personal goals (see Johnston & Taylor, 2008; Bissell and Rask, 2010; Akestam et al., 2017).

Macdonald (2003) noted that the portrayal of women's relationship with consumerism changes according to the marketers and advertisers' observation of the changing social contexts (p. 41). At the same time, feminism has been developing and responding to such fluctuations in representations of women. Thus, when consumerism became even more prominent with the surge of neoliberalism and globalization, Third Wave feminism emerged and developed to address intersectionality. According to Banet-Weiser (2004), the Third Wave feminism was situated "within commercial and popular culture, and insistently positions Third Wave feminist politics as not only fundamentally different from Second Wave feminist politics, but because of the embrace of media

visibility and the commercial world, as also more representative for a new generation of women" (p. 121).

It was with Third Wave feminism, i.e., during the early 1990s, that "commodity feminism" came into being. Goldman et al. (1991) observed that "Women's magazines attempt to redefine feminism through commodities, interpreting the everyday relations women encounter and negotiate into a series of 'attitudes' which they can then 'wear.'" Therefore, such commodified feminism may "modify patriarchal hegemony, but bow to capitalist hegemony" (p. 336). Banet-Weiser (2004) pointed out that commodity feminism showed an ideological contradiction that women are both having their own freedom and agency in contemporary society, and are subjected to the "commercial merchandising of these claims" (p. 124). Femvertising today demonstrates exactly such a contradiction: it conveys feminist messages to empower women, yet commodifies such feminist ideas into products and promotes their mass consumption.

In fact, some scholars have also used "postfeminism" to interpret femvertising. However, while postfeminism stresses the neoliberal context and analyzes the phenomenon of commercial empowerment of women, it has never attained a universally agreed upon definition. McRobbie (2004) defined postfeminism as an "undoing of feminism" (p. 255). Gill (2007) suggested that "postfeminism is best understood as a distinctive sensibility" (p. 1), and later added that "young women should not only be beautiful but sexy, sexually knowledgeable/practiced and always 'up for it'" (2008, p. 35). Moreover, in an article published in 2017, Gill reviewed the ten-year development of postfeminism and opined that postfeminism should be seen as an "object of analysis"

rather than a "descriptive notion" (p. 607, p. 620), thus making "postfeminism" less of a theory and more of a developing subject. Consequently, to ensure the rigor and consistency of this dissertation, "commodity feminism" rather than "postfeminism" is used in this chapter to define the strategy used by femvertising.

Olay: "Next Destination"

With feminist advertising already generating commercial success in Western markets, it made its way to China as part of neoliberal circuits involving transnational corporations. The first ad analyzed here exemplifies the advertising creation of a transnational company for its Chinese market. On January 4, 2019, Olay, a beauty brand under the multi-national corporation Procter & Gamble, posted an advertisement on its Chinese Weibo account. The ad, entitled "Next Destination," was promoting its latest "White Radiance Light-Perfecting Essence" (nicknamed "little white bottle") and was made specifically for the Chinese market for the upcoming Spring Festival holiday season. Besides the video, the Weibo post also incorporated a passage which translated as follows:

> If life were a train, do we determine our "next destination" by age? Getting married at 28, giving birth at 30? Olay presents an inspirational film for the Spring Festival season entitled "Next Destination: Fearless of Age" #Fearless of Age#, and you can determine your next destination by yourself and see more beautiful scenery. What is your next destination in the New Year? Repost and share your story, the most reposted account gets a year's worth of the "little white bottle." (12 bottles)

Below the ad, another text box reads: “Start your next destination for the new journey without being afraid of aging: Get ‘Fearless of Age’ New Year limited box. New Year, new start.” Moreover, there is a link under the texts that can direct people to Olay’s Tmall online shop to buy its products (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Screenshot of the Olay Ad Posted on Olay’s Weibo Account. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from https://www.weibo.com/1645365377/Ham0huasP?from=page_1006061645365377_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime

The video ad has been positively received by Internet users. By November 19, 2019,[16] the ad on Weibo had gotten 86,260 reposts, 624 comments, and 1,683 "likes." The case study here delves into the content of the ad in order to analyze the strategies and ideologies behind its success, applying the method of Critical Discourse Analysis. As previously mentioned, it follows the "three-dimensional model" by Fairclough to first, deconstruct the texts and signs in the ad; second, interpret the process of the production of signs; and finally, bring the findings to the larger social context and examine the ad's social implications and significance.

The ad runs a little more than two minutes, yet it contains an ample amount of visual and textual signs to convey emotional messages to its target audience or potential consumers. According to Fairclough, discourse practice is concerned with "text production and interpretation, as opposed to social-institutional aspects" (p. 94-95). Therefore, to make the analysis more concise, this case study combines the textual and discursive practice of the ad by walking through the narratives while also examining how such textual and visual signs are produced, delivered, and interpreted. The study then conducts a synthesized interpretation of the ad's social practice by relating it to the larger sociocultural system to see how hegemony has played into the discourse.

Deconstructing the Ad

[16] Although the author planned to retract the latest data before submitting the dissertation, Olay recently modified its Weibo account so that content from only the most recent six months is visible. Hence, the nearest date for data collection was November 19, 2019, when this chapter was last edited.

In the prelude of the ad, the train conductor announced, “Next destination: marriage. Passengers in car number 28, please be ready to get off the train.” Right after the announcement, all the women in car 28 put on their wedding veils except the protagonist, who seemed to be unsure about whether she should do the same. Next, the ad presented a question on the all-black background: “Has your next destination been determined by your age?” This question set the central “problem” that this ad was trying to solve later: aging. The ad then replayed the theme “Next Destination” and noted that the ad was “inspired by real stories of Olay users.”

The ad followed a linear narrative by showing the female protagonist rushing into the train. The viewers were immediately presented with a close-up shot of her ticket with her background information. The ticket showed that her car number is 28, which indicated her age; the date of her travel is January 1, 2019, which signaled the beginning of a new year; the ticket was for a first-class seat, which was suggestive of her financial status; and at the bottom of the ticket, it showed that she was taking the Y2019 train going from the destination of “single” to “married.”

As the protagonist walked past different cars with numbers, indicating different “ages” on the train, she also recounted her life journey, which could also be applied to many other women’s. In car 22, she saw a space filled with energetic women in their graduation robe; and in car 23, she saw women dressed in professional suits ready for work. As she finally stepped into car 28, she saw many women helping each other put on their wedding veils. During this process, the background narration simultaneously stated, “graduate at 22, find a job at 23, and get married at 28.” The facial expression of the

protagonist has been uneasy and unsettled during the entire time, but she still decides to find her seat in car 28 and sits down. The narration chimed in again: “Following the track of age, stopping at predetermined destinations.”

As the protagonist sat down, she received a message on her phone. It turned out that her mother just texted her, “Your cousin is getting married during the New Year holiday. They are asking about you…” This is a typical strategy used by many Chinese parents to cue their single daughter to get married as soon as possible. Thus, the text message here was clearly a deliberate sign pressing the protagonist, as well as many Chinese women in their late 20s who were single, to get married. After reading this message, the protagonist looked embarrassed and held the smartphone to her chest. Meanwhile, the narration said hesitantly, “Should I, at the age of 28, also follow the ‘train of age’ and reach the marriage that everyone expects? Or should I follow my heart and chase my dream destination?”

As she talked about her “dream,” the video suddenly shifted to another cut-in scene with a dreamy, nostalgic ambiance in which the protagonist sat at home folding a paper crane. On the paper was her doodling with the words: “In 2019, I want to see a bigger world.” Here, the ad presented a sharp conflict inside the protagonist’s mind, as she was deciding between following the expected life path that everyone else seemed to follow, or chasing her dream to explore the world. However, her reverie was disrupted by the train announcement that asked women in car 28 to get off the train at the station of “marriage.” The protagonist became worried; she looked around but only saw other women happily putting on their veils, so she also followed suit.

Nevertheless, with the background music gradually reaching a crescendo, the protagonist suddenly pondered to herself, "Who said that life should only be following a fixed path? I want to see more scenery!" It was at this moment that the camera turned to show a bottle of Olay's Radiance Light-Perfecting Essence in her handbag, and for the first time, the audience saw the product being advertised. At the same time, the protagonist pulled out the paper crane that lied beside the Olay bottle and unfolded it to see her earlier statement about her dream. All of a sudden, she seemed so determined and empowered that she stood up from her seat and walked to the back of the train. The accompanying narration was: "My next destination has nothing to do with my age!"

This scene was the climax of the ad, and it was powerful for several reasons. First, the background music crescendo at the point when the protagonist stood up, and a beautiful female voice sang, "I pray to have a heart that is crystal clear and eyes that can shed tears, to give me the courage to believe again and to hug you again by overcoming the lies."[17] Although the song was originally produced by a male rock band called Escape Plan, the lyrics functioned as a statement encouraging the protagonist to be true to herself and to pursue what she wants. Moreover, the lyric of "overcoming the lies" could also indicate overcoming parental pressure to marry. Thus, this scene demonstrated a significant transition in the mindset of a once hesitant woman, who regained courage to pursue her dream.

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[17] The song was originally produced by a Chinese rock band named Escape Plan, and the song is modified for this ad to be sung by a woman.

Second, it was at this point that the product which Olay was trying to sell appeared in the scene and functioned as a sign with deeper meanings. More specifically, the facial essence product was placed with the paper crane in the protagonist's bag, and it was after she looked at these two things that she became empowered and found the courage to rebel. In this case, the two objects in her handbag were signs that have experienced some transcendence. The paper crane with the text enclosed in it directly denoted inspiring ideologies such as "dream" and "independence," and the paper crane also indicated the actual bird which further signified freedom and liberation. In addition, by being next to the paper crane, the Olay product shared its symbolic significance. Together in a quick and seemingly simple scene, these two objects as signs suggested an ideological transcendence—that the Olay facial essence product was associated with a woman's self-realization, her dream, her confidence, and courage to resist the traditional cultural repression.

At the end of the ad, the protagonist tore her ticket and walked back into car 28. She cheerfully greeted the train conductor and other brides, who all stared at her in shock. She finally walked out of the train and embraced the beautiful scenery outside. Now, she became a deviant in the eyes of the women who still followed the traditional gendered expectations, but she also became a brave rebel who chose her dream over marriage. To further emphasize the feminist ideology, the advertisement incorporated many inspiring statements of other women on the screen. The two most discernable statements were by Yi-Chan Liang, the 28-year-old actresses who played the protagonist in the ad, reading, "I hope I can be brave for my own sake at every stage of my life"; and another by Sichun

Ma, a 30-year-old actress who was also a spokeswoman for the Olay brand, saying, "Instead of chasing the traces of age, I'd rather spend my whole life chasing the camera." There were many other statements shuffling on the screen afterwards but were hard to read; however, it was obvious that they all sent similar messages like the ones above. By adding these supporting testimonials at the end, the ad not only emphasized the empowering messages, but also heightened the brand's persuasive power, since a usually personal choice of purchase and self-empowerment had become a collective effort and a supportive community shared by other women and celebrities.

Implications of the Ad

Having deconstructed the ad's textual and visual signs and their production and distribution, this section analyzes how the meanings and discourses within the ad are constructed and related to the larger Chinese social context. Fairclough (2010) stressed that discourse is "socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping, or *constitutive*" (p. 92). Therefore, it is important to recognize that the discourses embedded in the ad are shaped by the social discourses on women who may fall into Olay's target audience. Furthermore, the ad can construct and even reinforce social discourses that are derived from the party-state's ideological power structure.

The Inevitable Stereotypes and Stratifications. Femvertising tends to portray women as the protagonists in the narratives, giving them the opportunity to speak up. Many of these ads also criticize the stereotypical representations of women in the media, rejecting images of women that are overly sexualized, objectified, or submissive. For example, Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" challenged the dominant representation of

an ideal female body by showing women "who were wrinkled, freckled, pregnant, had stretch marks, or might be seen as fat (at least compared with the average media representation of women)" (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 942). By presenting these varied body shapes, Dove framed its campaign as an empowering message to women that "beauty comes in many shapes, sizes and ages" ("Celebrating beauty," 2007).

However, Akestam et al. (2017) observed that "empirical research shows that advertising has historically been mirroring, rather than challenging, female stereotypes and roles in society" (p. 796). That is to say, though femvertising attempts to overturn stereotypes of women in the media, it is still quite rare to see it abandoning the patriarchal society's fetishism for female body completely. This is especially because their campaigns are mostly selling products for women's personal care and beauty. As a result, it is still the female body and physical traits that are being highlighted, judged, and commodified by the corporations, thus neglecting the fact that many other features within a person, besides appearance, can be considered attractive.

Although the Olay ad was careful about ensuring women's subjectivity and centrality by focusing exclusively on women—even modifying the background music to be sung by a woman rather than the original male band—it still contained elements that continued to objectify and stereotype women. For example, the protagonist should presumably exemplify the type of women that the brand considered representative of its target consumers. However, the actress Yi-Chan Liang, who played the protagonist, was clearly not an "everyday woman." She was pale and thin, wearing delicate, shiny ear studs and a necklace, as well as holding a designer handbag and sporting high heels. All

these were carefully designed signs of a woman with particularly appealing appearance and high social status. Also, when she walked past several cars in the train, she did not appear to be an average woman since she was the focal point, more noticeable, and possessing more bodily adornments that made her a stereotypical feminine beauty.

Meanwhile, other women in the ad were largely homogenized and generalized. For example, women in car 22 (i.e., age 22) were all wearing graduation robes; some of them were taking selfies, while others were happily talking to each other. The celebratory and light-hearted atmosphere indicated a promising future ahead of them. When entering car 23 (i.e., age 23), the ambiance in the car immediately became more serious. The viewers first saw a woman in glasses hastily searching for her seat. The rest of the passengers were either on their cellphones or typing on their laptops. There was no interaction among these women, only tension and pensive expressions on their faces. In car 28 (i.e., age 28), all the brides-to-be were looking satisfied and excited. Some of them were chatting with others, while the rest were helping each other put on their veils and decorations. The atmosphere and tension in these three spaces were totally different, yet also demonstrated a generalized assumption of Chinese women's lives. It suggested that the common life path for women is to be graduating from college at 22, finding a job the next year, and marrying by 28. However, such representation of women's social and gender roles based on their age neglects the diverse lives that Chinese women might have, including those who cannot afford college due to certain social or economic constraints, or those who cannot find a white-collar job in big cities, as well as those who might not be heterosexual.

Thus, the ad reinforced a clear class division with its focus on urban women of middle- or upper-class backgrounds. Even though the ad's narrative later criticized the standard life paths by having the protagonist choose to pursue her dream, it ignored the fact that not every woman can experience the same kind of smooth and linear life. In this sense, the ad actually implied that empowerment was not for every woman, but only for those who belong to a certain class and have the ability to consume commercial goods like the Olay Facial Essence. The ad further proved that when consumerism is linked with the empowerment of women, it is likely to take effect in a cosmopolitan setting, as observed by Rofel. Akestam et al. (2017)'s statement that femvertising was "mirroring, rather than challenging the existing stereotypes" was also evident in this context, given urban women's superior deployment and access to resources as compared to lower-class women.

The Contradiction between Empowerment and Consumption. At a certain level, the Olay ad delivered a supportive message to women facing the stress of being "leftover." In fact, before this ad's airing, SK-II, another transnational beauty brand also under the Procter & Gamble parent company, produced an ad that addressed the same "leftover women" phenomenon. In that ad, several urban, middle-class single women in their 30s had endured numerous pressures from their parents and society. As a result, they decided to take over a "marriage market" in Shanghai where desperate parents posted their children's personal information in public in order to find a match. Though the SK-II ad ended on a positive note, given that the "leftover women" exerted their agency by making confident personal statements in public and eventually gaining their parents'

understanding, the ad still received some criticism from critical scholars because of the corporate agenda behind the seemingly feminist messaging, and the fact that traditional "family structures and obligations remain unchanged" (Wallis & Shen, 2018, p. 386).

While Olay's "Next Destination" ad did not directly address the term "leftover women," it implied that the protagonist would be considered "leftover" by showing signs of her age and her unmarried status. But instead of locating this pressure in external forces, Olay's ad focused on the woman's internal negotiation with the pressure to marry, with the protagonist reflecting on both her self-doubt and self-realization. In the end, as she realized her true will to pursue her dream, the anxiety of being a "leftover woman" was immediately gone. She seemed to be freed from the constraints of social norms and parental expectations, and truly became independent and "fearless" of her age. Because this narrative was situated in her own subjectivity, the ad was empowering in the sense that the woman did not have to prove anything to the patriarchal norm or hegemonic culture, but simply attained freedom of mind by being confident and brave.

Nevertheless, the rendering of this storyline could also be seen as a detour from the core problem. As discussed in the previous chapter, discourses about "leftover women" are constructed by China's party-state authorities together with the traditional patriarchal culture communicated via media. However, the ad did not really address such hegemonic power, nor did it teach women—who are experiencing the same social pressure and humiliation—how to deal with it and how to exert their agency to address such difficulties. Instead, the ad only suggested that consuming the Olay product would release their anxiety of marriage (without any real-life evidence). In this sense, the

"freedom" envisioned by the ad was more like escapism. It dodged the problem and provided a solution that could likely mislead women into a passive and conditioned form of self-empowerment.

Moreover, while the ad encouraged women to be "fearless of aging," the product being advertised, i.e., the Olay White Radiance Light-Perfecting Essence, actually helped women look paler and younger, or at least not look aged. Thus, the utility of the product contradicted the feminist ideology the ad was trying to convey. The ad still used "age" and "appearance" as benchmarks to determine women's self-worth and commercialized their anxiety about aging, which is imposed by the patriarchal taste and ideologies. Thus, the ad instantiated a common characteristic of commodity feminism (or, in certain contexts, postfeminism) that had been criticized by scholars.

For instance, Goldman et. al. (1991) argued, "When appropriated by advertisers and editors, feminism has been cooked to distill out a residue—an object: a look, a style" (p. 336). Cole and Hribar (1995) pointed out that postfeminism is "marked by the displacement of potential antagonisms between feminism and consumption through the remaking of feminism into desires and identities that are accomplished through consumption" (p. 356). Murray (2013) considered feminist advertising as a "socialization" (p. 87), proposing that when women purchase consumer goods, they can easily be socialized by the dominant corporate power to believe that the action of consuming demonstrates their empowered identity. In the Olay ad, although it is trying to encourage women to redefine their female identity, this uplifting goal was eventually

connected with the consumption of the product, which functioned to consolidate the dominant definition of female beauty.

Relating back to the "imagined" empowerment and economic freedom discussed by Rofel (2008) in the beginning of this chapter, postsocialist China is eager to embrace a consumerist culture because it can demonstrate the country's participation and engagement with neoliberalism. As consumption becomes an indicator of economic power and freedom of choice, the cultivation of desire for more consumable goods is part of the party-state's strategy to ensure its authority and nationalist influence on its people. In the Olay ad, women gained freedom through consumption in a literal way; yet such freedom fell into the party-state's construction of its postsocialist identity. Indeed, the party-state has been building a market that encourages consumption as a means of liberation; but the freedom and self-fulfillment experienced by female consumers can also contribute to the party-state's agenda of nation-building. Corporate adaptations of femvertising may help some Chinese women feel free from repressive social discourses such as that of "leftover women" (discussed in Ch. 5) and enjoy their increased economic power, but the ads also function to distract women from the gendered repression that nonetheless remains prevalent in Chinese society.

Chando: "No Matter What, You Are Beautiful from the Beginning"

The second ad examined in this chapter was made by Chando (zi ran tang), a domestic Chinese beauty brand. Instead of selling a product, this ad functioned as a promotional video for the brand as a whole. It was posted on Chando's Weibo account on

March 19, 2018. By March 9, 2020, it had received 13,695 reposts, 7,013 comments, and 26,415 "likes" on Weibo.

Unlike traditional feminist ads that usually portrayed women as protagonists, and sometimes even eliminate the presence and voices of men, the Chando ad entitled "No matter what, you are beautiful from the beginning (wu suo wei, ni ben lai jiu hen mei)," took a different approach by giving men a lot of air time. In the ad, several male job applicants were interviewed one by one by a board of female employers. The women asked each man some clearly gendered and even sexist questions that a woman would typically encounter at job interviews and observe their reactions. In the end, the female employers invited these men into a room with many powerful statements made by career women, thus confronting social stereotypes in front of these uninformed "representatives" of patriarchy.

Deconstructing the ad

The Interviews. On its Weibo post, Chando included the texts: "This is an interview that no man will pass. It gives you confidence for being fearless. What of it when you have experienced gender discrimination at work? Let's confront the difficulties and cheer for the 'career fairies' together! #NoMatterWhat, you are beautiful from the beginning." In addition, there is also a byline under the title of the ad that explains, "Regardless of good times or bad times, you look the best when you are confident and trying your best." (Figure 8).

Figure 8

A Screenshot of the Chando Ad Posted on Chando's Weibo Account. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from https://www.weibo.com/1863495000/G8466eUST?from=page_1006061863495000_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment

The video started with a statement that "the following scenes are from real interviews," which gave the audience a sense of truthfulness and sincerity. Compared to the previous Olay ad which was a carefully choreographed narrative film, the Chando ad was more like a short documentary revealing real social issues. To deconstruct the textual

and discursive practices of the ad, the following analysis first examines the questions and answers during the "interviews," and then assesses the turning point of the ad when the women explain the true purpose of the interviews and address their empowering statements.

Question 1: Do you wear makeup when coming to work?

Man A: Huh?

Man B: Why would a man wear makeup?

Man C: I don't have this habit.

Man D: No, no, no. I'm a big man (da lao ye men)[18]*, why would I wear makeup?*

This question was personal and judgmental by asking about women's appearances. Without showing knowledge about the gendered character of the question, all of the male applicants responded immediately by clearly nixing the possibility that they would wear makeup for work. *Man A* showed noticeable surprise on his face, as he probably had never expected an interview question like this. *Man C* seemed calm when answering the question, but had an embarrassed smile. *Man B* and *D* both answered with rhetorical questions, which emphasized their ridicule when hearing the question. *Man D* even used a chauvinistic term, "da lao ye men," to stress his manliness. Overall, all of them seemed eager to make a crisp distinction between themselves as "men" and the traditionally feminine practice of wearing makeup.

[18] "Da lao ye men," or "大老爷们" in Chinese, is a northern Chinese dialect describing married men, usually with a Chauvinistic connotation.

Question 2: How are you at handling stress? Do you cry when you are stressed by work?

Man E: I. Will. Not. Cry.

Man F: Erhhh….

Man G: I won't cry, because I have my own ways of venting stress.

This question reflected a sexist assumption that women were bad at handling stress at work and might cry when facing difficulties. Two of the three men featured here said that they would not cry. *Man E* stressed his point by slowly emphasizing every word in the sentence; while *Man G* explained that he had other methods for handling stress. Both of them exerted their male agency and superiority by accentuating the word "I" or "my," thus differentiating themselves from the descriptions in the question, which, according to social norm and stereotypes, were always associated with women who were supposed to have lower tolerance for stress.

Question 3: Are you married?

Man D: I'm single.

Man A: My daughter is three-month old now.

Man F: I'm married.

Once they finished answering the question about marriage, a woman employer added: *The company will devote significant resources to train you for your position, but we want you not to have children in the next three years. Can you accept that?*

Man F: [silence].

Man C: [laughs in disbelief] This question…

Man G: Yes.

Man B: I think I will be a more responsible person when I have my child.

Another woman then asked, *You have to feed the child while working, can you do your job well in this case?*

Man F: Well…

Man B: My wife will be taking care of the child… A man should focus on his career.

Man A: I will negotiate this with my wife.

This series of questions contained three focuses, but all under the theme of marriage and children. As already revealed in previous chapters, Chinese women face more pressure to marry than men do due to the prevalence of the "leftover women" discourse. In addition, taking care of children is also traditionally considered a woman's job. By observing these men's responses and reactions, it was obvious that they conformed to the traditional gender roles in not feeling any anxiety when asked about their marital status and associating the primary responsibilities of having and caring for children with their wives. Rather, they felt unambivalently proud for being career-focused, and having children only adds to their power and appeal since the role of a father makes them more authoritative and powerful in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, in the men's answers women seemed to be in their lives only to serve at their requests or fulfilling a supporting role at home. This expectation reflected the Confucian teaching requiring women to be obedient and submissive to men.

Question 4: There will be promotion opportunities, but if you want to reach the administrative level, your gender will not be to your advantage.

Man B: [sighs and smiles bitterly] Gender?

Man A: My gender will not be to my advantage? That's impossible.

Man D: In my previous company, most people in the administrative level were men.

Another woman then asked, *Will you ask for a leave during "those days" every month?*[19]

Man E: Huh?

Man B: "Those days" every month?

Man A: You mean "period"? You are so weird. What kind of job interview is this?

Man D: Are you serious?

Man C: Will men think about such a question?

These two questions were about women's promotion opportunities and the possible menstrual leave at work. The first question denigrated women's capacity to work by explicitly addressing the existence of a glass ceiling. The second question was blatantly personal and sexist since it considered women's physiological traits to be an impediment in the workplace. And instead of understanding this situation, the workplace tended to regard menstruation as a problem or fault of the female employees. When the men in this ad encountered these questions, they showed a sense of disbelief and ridicule. For example, when hearing that their gender would be a disadvantage, two men expressed their surprise and doubted facially and verbally. *Man A* repeated the question and commented that he did not believe in it. *Man B*'s facial expression indicated that he found

[19] Meaning menstruation.

this question unheard of. And when asked the second question about menstruation, these men were noticeably startled, some even offended, by it. Of course, this question was unfounded and meaningless when asking (cis-gendered) men, since they did not have the same physiological make up as (cis-gendered) women. However, their faces of discomfort and a sudden hostile attitude toward the female employers revealed that they felt their authority was being challenged both physically and perhaps psychologically.

The Turning Point. After the last question and answer, the ad showed a statement on the screen: “Think these interview questions are funny? But many people have to face them.” Here, “many people” referred to women, who were likely to encounter such questions at the workplace. After displaying the statement, the ad showed these men entering another room where they were presented with many message boards hanging from the ceiling. The texts on the boards were all related to the questions they had just been asked. The ones that the camera particularly focused on were: “If you want to get a promotion, you must promise not to give birth for three years,” “We don’t hire women, they are not good at handling stress,” “Menstrual pain is not a disease, you cannot ask for a leave,” “Girls’ appearance is the first, and ability second,” and “It’s better to marry well than work well. Women do not have to be so hardworking.” While reading these statements, which these men had probably never heard of themselves, their complex body language was captured by the camera. One man held his fist in anger, while another man touched his nose with a serious and sympathetic look on his face. Then, another cut-in scene with a statistic appeared on the screen: “81% of women experience gender discrimination at work.”

Next, the female employers came into the room. As they walked in, the sound of their high heels broke the silence in the room. These women were all wearing professional suits, looking confident and determined. At the same time, the ad revealed their true professions, which included “business executive,” “famous writer,” “project manager,” “architect,” and “pilot.” Then, another statement appeared on the screen: “Break prejudice. Support women to pursue their dreams.” As the background faded, these professional women flipped each message board and showed these men the inspiring messages on the back. Meanwhile, the women also explained these statements to the men. For example, the woman who was a business executive said, “We can both give birth and be promoted. There’s nothing to be afraid of.” The pilot said, “Why can’t women be pilots? If we have the ability, we can also fly to the sky.” The architect said, “We work to get what we want,” and flips the board which declares, “Waiting for a prince to build a castle? I can do it myself.” The writer said, “We are not competing for the strength, we are competing for the longevity of our lives,” and the board she held read, “Women do not have to be stubborn, but have to be strong!” Finally, a woman’s voice concluded, “No matter how hard it is, we will not give in.” The slogan of the ad eventually emerged: “You look the best when you are confident and trying your best. Chando, paying tribute to every fairy in the workplace. #NoMatterWhat, you are beautiful from the beginning.” Thus, the ad ended with an uplifting note as these women had confidently exerted their agency and beliefs, elaborated on their understanding of a successful career woman, and celebrated such realization and empowerment by fostering a supportive community.

Implications of the Ad

Like many femvertising ads, the Chando ad also followed the strategy of presenting gender-related conflicts in the beginning, and then created an event as a turning point to let women exert their voices in order to inspire and empower other women. However, unlike most femvertising that only featured women, the Chando ad incorporated men to reveal the conflicts and problems, and then let women teach them a lesson. Thus, the ad was innovative and powerful in that it directly confronted the patriarchal stereotypes and prejudices, and gave women an even higher power status than men. The ad depicted the gender discrimination that existed in the workplace and general social discourses, and provided a different way of viewing female identity by inviting men to be in women's shoes. Therefore, the most obvious and strident trait of this ad was the shift between the "subject" and "object" within an established media discourse of gender.

The Reversed "Gaze." The first half of the ad showed a gender relationship in which women held more power than men did. In every interview, there were always five female employers versus one male applicant, and he was being questioned and judged without knowing that the interview was staged for making an ad. Here, the traditional male authority was flipped, which also meant the subject of the action had been shifted to female. Mulvey (1975), who introduced the concept of the "male gaze" in film studies, noted, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (p. 62). In the case of this ad, the setting of the interviews created an imbalance that was literally giving women more active agency to

make decisions, while men sitting in a position to be looked at, and not having control of their upcoming fate.

As the ad unfolds, men's authority and power were continuously being challenged. This was not only reflected by the female employers' aggressive questions, but also by men's uneasy and even defensive verbal and facial expressions when asked about personal and judgmental questions regarding their habits, marriage, children, body, emotional states, etc. As Mulvey also observed in media's representation of gender:

> An active/passive heterosexual division of labor has similarly controlled narrative structure. According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the physical structure that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's roles as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen. (p. 63)

This observation could explain the apprehension that the male applicants had shown during the interviews. And it could also reveal the deeply rooted gender roles in men's self-identification, which not only exists in the Western media culture but also in China where the Confucian philosophies have put similar expectations on men and women. However, Mulvey's theory of "male gaze" is reversed in the Chando ad, as women are the ones who "make things happen" and who exert their gaze at men, though not necessarily in a sexualized way in this context. As the Chando ad reenacted the gendered stereotypes and made men experience them, the action itself was an unconventional, feminist move.

In the second half of the ad, by first presenting a series of highly prejudiced and patriarchal judgments on women to these male applicants, the problematic social discourses on women were brought into sharp focus. This time, these men were "gazing" at the discourses that came from a male-dominated world. Since they had just experienced a version of gendered humiliation in the interview room, they were now, to some extent, gazing at themselves and the larger patriarchal system. However, it was not until the five female employers walked into the room that the ad really reached a breakthrough moment. As these women flipped the message boards and elaborated on their understanding of career women in front of these men, they were revealing their true identities and social statuses, as well as being advocates for other women in society. This was a moment when women were shown to exert enormous power and agency: they taught the men about what women could do, and broke the stereotypes of women lacking work ethics or ability by providing successful examples.

At the same time, as an advertisement for a beauty and skincare brand, the Chando ad inevitably reflected the same corporate agenda as the Olay ad, by suggesting women's sexual agency as a form of empowerment, and that women's economic independence and consumption were convincing proof of female subjectivity. Therefore, while conveying the brand's empowering messages, the ad also maintained some traditional depiction of women's femininity, which again embodied postsocialist characteristics. More specifically, the women were independent and professionally powerful, yet they also had to meet the hegemonic expectations of beauty to become the

representatives of the empowered urban women in China who could thus represent its cultural identity and nation-ness.

The most obvious scene demonstrating China's postsocialist influence on women was when the five women walked into the second room and the camera immediately followed their high heels to accentuate the crisp clicks of the stilettos. Although the sound created a dramatic effect and drew the audience's attention to the upcoming empowering moment, the emphasis on high heels indicated the association between the feminine apparel and female power. Moreover, when the camera went on to capture these women's faces, what stood out the most was their sophisticated makeup and especially their different lip colors. And, as the ad introduced their professions, it was obvious that they all belonged to the upper-class of the society and had rather established social statuses. Their professions – business executive, project manager, influential writer, architect, and pilot – were traditionally dominated by men; thus, at one level, it was inspiring to see women in these positions. However, instead of depicting these women's professional practices and achievements, the ad focused on their heavy makeup, physical demeanor, and fashion elements that constructed familiar, homogenized images of successful career women in the mass media. Furthermore, there was hardly any sign of aging on their faces: they all looked young, radiant, and had no wrinkles. Once again, then, the ad perpetuated the hegemonic definition of beauty rather than highlighting any groundbreaking achievements by these women. For instance, the female pilot in the ad dressed just like the business executive, who wore a classy white jacket that denoted her

position as white-collar. Yet, a female pilot should be admired not because of her office attire, but for her skilled control of airplanes.

In addition, as the ad ended with the statement "Chando, paying tribute to every fairy in the workplace," another questionable appellation and generalization of women occurred. "Fairy" (xiao xian nv, 小仙女 in Chinese) has been a popular term on China's social media since 2016 to describe lovable women, initially derived from a meme that said, "You are a fairy, you should only drink dew" ("Xiao xian nv," para. 1). The original meaning of the meme suggested that women should watch their weight since fairies were usually thin and beautiful in traditional depictions. Furthermore, ifeng.com explained the meme that "Beauty is the only standard to judge a fairy" ("The suddenly popular," 2017, para. 8). Thus, calling a woman "fairy" in today's popular culture suggests the constraint of women into the hegemonic definitions of beauty. While much of the Chando ad seemed to promote women's self-confidence, power, and agency, ending with this highly feminized appellation was contradictory with the ad's more overtly stated messages.

The Staged Authenticity. The ad's neglect of women's professional achievements and its continuing usage of feminized name-calling sustained the hegemonic definition of femininity. Like the Olay ad, even though the Chando ad also encouraged women to be confident about who they were and to pursue their dreams, this inspiring idea ran counter to the function of the products under the brand. After all, Chando sells both skincare and makeup products, which are intended to make women look young and beautiful according to established norms.

There has been other research on this genre of advertising that is relevant here. For example, LaWare and Moutsatsos (2013) studied ads that invited female celebrities in their 40s to endorse anti-aging products. They argued that while these ads seemed empowering and revolutionary at first, they were messages of resistance communicated within the guise of "authenticity" (p. 191). They viewed celebrities' endorsements as the advertisers' strategy to make the brand appear real and effective to the consumers, since the celebrities' public influence can easily make people believe that they are the proof of the quality of the products. But these celebrities, most of the time being the representatives of the hegemonic definition of beauty themselves, were using their authenticity and popularity more to inform consumers about the products than to convey a feminist message.

Similarly, the Chando ad, which claimed to construct real scenes of job interviews and invited real everyday people to complete the ad, also demonstrated the "staged authenticity." Undoubtedly, the concept of authenticity was even more central to the Chando ad than in ads featuring celebrities since the former seemingly captured ordinary people's reactions. By telling the audience in the beginning that "the following scenes are from real interviews," the Chando ad stressed that all the reactions were unscripted. And by showing the male applicants' puzzlement during the interviews, the ad came across as extremely relatable to many viewers. As the audience connected with the situations in the ad, they were also entering an interactive stage. As LaWare and Moutsatsos further explained, "The use of trope of authenticity in advertising for antiaging products is not accidental, because it is so closely tied to self-discovery, originality, and the feminist

ideals of empowerment" (p. 193). However, because the male applicants were asked questions that were generally encountered by women in real life, the Chando ad was more relatable to the female audience who had experienced gender discrimination at work. Consequently, the ad was effective in striking an emotional chord with women, who were the main target audience.

While the audience might perceive the Chando ad as real, it was not entirely the case even though the ad constructed itself to be. The five women were, after all, acting as someone else in the first half of the ad. Also, the ad was, in fact, heavily edited. For example, the audience could readily sense the men's feeling of uneasiness, or pay attention to the women's makeups, which were the results of post-editing to shape viewers' perceptions.

In addition, even though there was no insertion of product or brand name to directly connect the consumer goods with the idea of empowerment, the Chando ad was still branding feminism for its own commercial purposes. Even as women found empowerment in the ad, they were simultaneously "encouraged to become a self-branded 'commodity sign,'" as Murray (2013, p. 87) puts it. Furthermore, the seemingly authentic and sincere feminist messages in the ad did not significantly challenge the patriarchal system that downplayed women's professional contributions and achievements, especially since the women in the ad were portrayed as conventionally attractive. Thus, these presumably "empowered" images still implied women's obsession with appearance, outfits, makeup, and everything that conformed to the normative beauty standards.

Paper Games: "Love and Producer"

The following case diverges from the femvertising but still focuses on the tension between Chinese women's consumption practices and political empowerment through the lens of advertising. This analysis examines an ad for a smartphone game, *Love and Producer*, that specifically caters to Chinese women, and examines how some female game players' online backlash against the ad reveals their resistance and negotiation with this particular form of new media's representation of and assumptions about them.

Background of "Love and Producer"

In December 2017, a mobile application game entitled *Love and Producer* suddenly started trending in China. Developed by Paper Games (Diezhi), a small game company specializing in "interactive entertainment for women" ("Love and Producer," n.d.), the game received 7.11 million downloads in the first month of its release. Moreover, the game's highest ranking on China's App Store was number four, which was the first "otome game" in China's mobile game industry to reach this rank ("Surprise," 2018).

Calling itself a "surreal love management mobile app game," *Love and Producer* follows the model of the Japanese *otome* games to create a love simulation that enables female players to develop romantic relationships with male characters. This genre of women's games, according to some scholars, is beneficial for women in many ways. For example, Kim (2009) praised *otome* games for empowering women, saying:

> Women's games are significant not simply because their existence potentially empowers the players with the understanding that she can be the normative,

> dominant audience, but also because she can experiment with and enact various female identities and female fantasies through the medium of electronic games. (p. 184)

In Kim's view, since video games have long trivialized women both in terms of game content and in the realm of production, games specifically designed by women and for women can empower them both technologically and psychologically. In *Love and Producer,* since the players—presumably women—can identify with the female protagonist in the narratives, they are by default in a subject position and making choices for the development of the storyline. This form of participation and interaction could be seen as them having power over the media product.

Another noteworthy phenomenon associated with *Love and Producer* is that many female players have spent enormous amounts of money on the game's in-app purchases, which even became a controversy in the news as the game developers received quite some criticism for its profit model (Duan, 2018). In the game, the in-app purchases take place when one wants to draw the rare character cards, upgrade to the next level faster, or want to have a hands-free feature. For example, a card worth 30 RMB can help unlock the "city wanderer" function which automatically unfolds the story rather than requiring the player to click on everything (Duan, 2018). According to Zuo (2018), "While the game is free to download, the various add-ons available to buy have seen it rake in solid revenue for its producers. In the first week after its launch, the game was estimated to have made an average of 300,000 yuan (US$46,300) a day." It is also estimated that the players of the game spent at least 200 million yuan (around $32 million) in just the month

of January 2018, to "improve their odds of having a successful virtual relationship via in-game purchases" (Huang, 2018). Moreover, studies showed that the female players were mostly living in first and second-tier cities with stable income ("Surprise," 2018). Therefore, though the game's profit model has been questioned and even criticized, women's spending on *Love and Producer* demonstrates their increasing economic power and agency.

To give some background of the game's main storyline, the heroine is a beautiful woman in her early 20s. Her father, the former CEO of the Diezhi Media Corporation, passed away in an accident two years ago, leaving his entire legacy to his only daughter. The story begins by showing the company at the brink of bankruptcy, and the inexperienced heroine, fresh out of college, becomes the producer of an entertainment show and tries to save the company with it. While struggling, she meets four men: Xu Mo, a 26-year-old genius scientist; Bai Qi, a 24-year-old special police; Li Zeyan, a 28-year-old CEO of Huarui Corp., the company that stopped funding Diezhi in the beginning; and Zhou Qiluo, a 22-year-old super idol.[20] By interacting with them, the heroine gradually discovers that her fate relates to the "Evol Project," which is carried out to accelerate the evolution of human beings and create "superhumans" ("Love and Producer," n.d.). Since the four male characters are somewhat involved in this secret

[20] In East Asian countries like China, South Korea, and Japan, an "idol" is usually a young and good-looking multi-talent who sings, acts, and appears in advertisements and entertainment shows.

project, the heroine can only learn more about her true identity by developing more intimate relationships with them.

While the content of this game also deserves analysis, the focus of the case study here is an official ad of the game that has generated backlash from the gamers during the 2018 Chinese New Year holiday. There are three reasons to study the ad rather than the game itself: first, as a smartphone game, *Love and Producer* has been updating its stories and card pools frequently, which makes it difficult to conclude an ongoing storyline and choose certain texts as the data corpus for analysis. Second, since this dissertation largely focuses on women's representation in media and their negotiation with the public culture under a postsocialist context, advertisements work as the most efficient form of media to engage the public, as well as produce or reflect the public culture. Third, this ad incited a lot of criticism from the female players because of its representation of them. Thus, these women's discourses about the ad revealed their negotiation with the franchise, as well as the relationship among women's consumption, self-empowerment, and dominant ideologies in a postsocialist and consumerist culture.

Besides continuing to conduct a Critical Discourse Analysis of the advertisement itself, this case study also extends to the female players' reaction to the ad by analyzing some comments under *Love and Producer*'s Weibo apology post to its players. These comments functioned as a discursive practice of resistance against the ad and the hegemonic power. The analysis suggests that, although these discourses were proactive, they also exposed some deeply rooted patriarchal thinking entrenched in these women's seemingly feminist negotiations.

Deconstructing the Ad

During the Chinese New Year holiday in February 2018, a live-action advertisement for *Love and Producer* began circulating online. It soon received a large amount of criticism, mainly from the female players of the game, who said that the ad misleadingly depicted and represented them. Although Paper Games immediately withdrew the ad from the Internet and issued an apology on its official Weibo account ("Apology regarding the Spring Festival ad," 2018, Feb 18), many angry players had already recorded the ad and posted it elsewhere, such as YouTube.

The three-minute-and-half ad entitled "Companion (pei ban,陪伴)" contained three events relating to the culture of Chinese New Year. The first event happened in a bus carrying people to their hometowns. One woman was playing *Love and Producer* in her seat with the sound on. When she heard the dialogue spoken by her favorite character Bai Qi, she giggled with happiness. Then, a woman sat across the aisle asked this woman to turn up the volume, saying, "so that I can hear what *my* husband was saying." The two women immediately got into a verbal fight about who was Bai Qi's "real wife." Amidst the quarrel, another woman who was overweight and less beautiful as compared to the first two, chimed in and said, "could you please be quiet? I cannot hear what my husband Li Zeyan (another male character in the game) is saying! He was just telling me that he would buy me handbags and perfumes!" After this, more and more women in the bus jumped out to join the fight, claiming one after another who their "husband" was. It turned out that all of them were loyal players of *Love and Producer* and they eventually decided to add each other as friends in the game. A narrator's voice then came up: "You

can find *Lian Yu Taitai Tuan* (*Love and Producer* wives supporting group) everywhere on your way home."

The second event happened in a karaoke room where four female friends gathered together during the New Year holiday. One woman first received a call from her boyfriend, and she was deliberately showing off by loudly talking into the phone: "Wow, you bought me something again? What? It's a *limited* version?" The woman next to her saw this and immediately picked up her phone and did almost the same thing by loudly asking her boyfriend, "Why are you sending me money again?" Although she sounded like she was blaming him, she actually had a satisfied smile on her face. The camera then turned to the third woman, whose husband, a short, overweight man, came into the karaoke room. The woman said to him with a flighty tone, "Darling, I told you that I like you for your personality;" but at the same time, she stared at her big diamond ring affectionately, indicating that she perhaps loved her boyfriend's money even more. Finally, the three women looked at the last one, who did not show off anything about her man yet. Aware of the anticipation in the room, this woman pulled four smartphones out of her bag, with each phone showing a male character from *Love and Producer* speaking. She then happily said to her smartphones: "Don't rush! You all have time to finish your words!"

The last scene took place in the same female player's home. As she finally arrived home for the holiday, and her mother kept complaining about her being single while their neighbor Auntie Wang's daughter had already given birth to a child. The female player was despondent for a while, but then hugged her mother and said softly, "There is a man

named Li Zeyan who is nice to me. He is the CEO of the company. He teaches me how to make puddings and would never allow me to stay up late. So mom, don't worry about me." After hearing this, her mother finally smiled with a sense of relief, and asked the daughter to bring Li Zeyan home next year for the New Year. However, only the viewers of the ad knew that Li Zeyan was only a fictional character in *Love and Producer.*

This ad produced by *Love and Producer* demonstrated a range of humiliating stereotypes of the game's female players, spanning the gamers' physical, economic, social, and cultural identities. The first story depicting several female players getting into a verbal fight for their virtual "husband," focused heavily on these women's visual appeal. The camera constantly provided close-up shots of each woman's exaggerated facial expressions when they yelled at each other. The disturbance of their visual presentation was reflected by one scene when a male passenger sitting in the bus clearly showed a look of disgust. In addition, the overweight woman who claimed to be "Li Zeyan's wife" was portrayed in an even more exaggerated way compared to other women. She was in the center of the back row, so when she stood up during the first two women's quarrel, she immediately drew everyone's attention. Also, she was wearing glittering white tops and short skirt, thus emphasizing her body shape.

Compared to other advertisements in the market where women are often portrayed as domestic, hypersexual, and eye candy for the male gaze, the *Love and Producer* ad used actresses that generally looked more like women of the everyday life, thus catering to the actual gamers' position in society. However, although the female characters in the ad did not wear excessive makeup or have unattainable body shapes,

their everydayness did not necessarily make the product more authentic or truthful to reality. In this ad's limited representation of the female players, they have simply been generalized as childish, noisy, inconsiderate, and crazy about men. They degraded themselves as attachments to men and indulged in unrealistic relationships with them. Such dependence and even worshipping of men, both in the game and in real life, was blatantly promoted in the ad.

Besides the questionable physical representation, women in this ad were also portrayed as extremely materialistic by relying on the wealth of men. In the first story, the overweight woman proudly announced that Li Zeyan would use his distinguished "black card" to buy her perfume and handbags. In the second story, such materialism was even more evident given the first three women's competitive phone calls showing off the economic satisfaction they attained from their boyfriends or husbands. Moreover, when the third woman's husband came into the room, the audience could immediately notice the incongruity of his appearance compared to the women's in the room. While all the women were finely dressed and looking like they belong to the middle-class, the man was wearing a ragged, hip-hop style outfit with excessive accessories. The ad also included a close-up shot of him showing his golden implanted teeth. All these are clichéd symbols in China that make a person look rich but lacking education or virtue. However, the fact that his wife showed him affection in public while looking more lovingly at her diamond ring pointed to the subtext that the woman had gone for his money rather than his personality. In this scene, there was no display of the women's economic independence; instead, they were excited and proud about their men's economic power and using it to elevate their

own status in front of other women. Among them, the last woman, i.e., the only *Love and Producer* player in the room, might seem different at first sight. But she was still being portrayed as someone who relied on virtual boyfriends to attain realistic satisfaction about her own attractiveness and value. Thus, she was not so different from her friends in the room.

Finally, the third story reflected patriarchal constraints on women by showing a mother-daughter conversation about marriage during the New Year holiday, which again, involved the "leftover women" discourse common in many single Chinese women's daily lives. The mother's complaints about her unmarried daughter and comparison between her daughter and their neighbor's also emphasized the Confucianism-influenced conflict between family duty (to get married as filial piety) and personal pursuit when it comes to marriage. By featuring a story showing the stress experienced by a single woman during the holiday season, the ad thus intensified and legitimized the "leftover women" discourse while assuming that the players of *Love and Producer* were likely to be single and were troubled by it. As a result, the ad made this game a solution to these women's "problem" of being "leftover."

The Female Players' Resistance

After receiving immediate backlash on the Internet, Paper Games' official Weibo account published an apology on February 18, 2018. The statement mainly apologized for the company's failure to "monitor the advertiser" which resulted in the production of an ad that was "far from our theme of 'companion.'" Paper Games also promised the players that it would take down the ad from all media platforms; but because it was during the

Chinese New Year holiday, it would take longer to execute. Finally, Paper Games said that it did a deep "self-reflection" and would "slow down a bit in the future development to avoid similar incidents from happening again" ("Apology regarding the Spring Festival ad," 2018).

This statement of apology instantly received thousands of comments from the players who were also Weibo users. However, most of the comments were still filled with anguish and condemnation of the company. By November 19, 2019, the post had received 6,251 reposts, 26,006 comments, and 8,325 "likes." The most popular comment which said, "There aren't many game companies that persuade their players to quit, but you tried hard and now you did it," had even received more than 30,000 "likes" from Weibo users.

Given the significant amount of influential online discourses surrounding the company's apology, these comments from the players are valuable paratextual data, as they represented the most common stances and opinions of the game's target female audience. While acknowledging the players' progressive feminist awakening in this case, the analysis here also identifies limitations in their arguments and negotiations, as they reflect the influence and outcomes of the postsocialist China's hegemonic ideologies about women's femininity and identity.

When examining the comments under the game's statement of apology, the most common accusation was the ad's misrepresentation of the female players' identities and personalities. Many people used the word "chou hua" (vilify) and "mo hei" (defame) to describe the ad's intention. There were also people condemning the ad for its

"objectification of women"— a Western-originated concept that has become popular in China in recent years. A Weibo user named *wobixuxiankanmingbaiwoziji* wrote, "Do you really know where you went wrong? You created a heroine who is slutty, and your ad 'disses' its players. If it were not for the excellence of the voice actors in the game, your company would have been shuttered a long time ago." Another user named *tanghechenzhi* said, "Your apology was so insincere by passing the responsibility to others and you did not confront your mistake of insulting and objectifying female players. You did not give any compensation to the players and now you even asked them to not spread the ad. What a weirdo!" *Buxuehaoshuxuebugaiming* also left a comment, "Let's put aside whether the game can 'accompany' us or not. You humiliated the image of your female players and promoted false values; how do you want to solve these problems? Do you see us players as some stupid women who treat unrealistic characters as true loves of our lives and spend all our money on them? Let me tell you, *we* players are your father! We are not only beautiful, rich, and talented, we can also criticize you. Good-bye!"

These harsh criticisms of the ad's objectification and humiliation of the female players showed that many women, at least those who have the ability to consume the game, have become more patent in realizing their power as consumers and the amount of agency they have by playing an *otome* game. Hence, when finding that the controversial ad challenged the power relationship by changing the female players from subjects who can make decisions in the game and make purchases whenever they want, to unlikable objects passively designed and misrepresented in the ad, the female players immediately condemned such deprivation of their power and rights.

In addition, many female players showed their anger towards the ad for portraying them as overtly materialistic and relying on men for economic gains. A Weibo user named *Xiguazi_* commented that "This ad presents women who like to compare and worship money and attach to men for materialistic gains. This clearly demonstrates how the company views women." Another user *zongongtoushangyoudaimao* concluded that, "The key problem of this company is that it regards the female players as poor, single, and only wanting to receive unconditional love without making any effort." Indeed, their anger is justifiable because in reality, female players have demonstrated significant economic power in consuming the game. Thus, being portrayed as relying on men for money runs counter to this reality.

Moreover, some players were also unhappy about the fact that the ad assumed them to be "leftover women." This was especially demonstrated by the third scene of the ad where a mother blamed her daughter for being single and only became happy when the daughter told her that she had a boyfriend (even though he was a character from the game). Although there might be people who played the game to get a sense of real romance, comments under the game's official apology showed that this was not often the case. The reason that many female players immediately found the third story offensive was because it reinforced the discrimination against single adult women in Chinese society. The way some of them protested was to write comments to announce their consciousness in distinguishing the romance in the game from in real life. A Weibo user *Suisuibudeqingpingjiu* commented: "I play it *not* because I cannot find a boyfriend. I play it only because I like Li Zeyan." Another user named *yunqizhaomujian* said, "I would not

really treat these characters as my boyfriends; I would not introduce them to my friends or to my mom; I would not yell in a bus; and I would not show off something I do not have. These are the real losers' actions, not mine."

Moreover, a player named *Weimang* provided an alternative scenario to not only express her discontent, but also discuss her desired romantic plot. She said, "Why can't you make a story of the girl becoming confident, brave, and strong because she has the support from these men? She is not afraid of loneliness. She is working to accomplish her dream. She could hold a cup of coffee during break and sees 'his' smile and encouragement from the window's reflection. But look at what you produced? What did your ad have to do with 'companion?'" This comment received 403 "likes" and 30 responses from other players. Interestingly, many of the players who responded to her not only agreed with her idea, but also shared how they had been encouraged by some plots from the game before the ad came out. One player stated: "… because of their (the male characters) companion, I became motivated to live a good life and to earn more money. These characters will never despise us." These reactions clearly showed the female players' resistance when the ad strayed away from their desired ways of being portrayed, especially when it was about their real-life romantic statuses. Therefore, they addressed their capability and agency to distinguish between the game and reality, and even provided personal examples or alternative ideas to retaliate the ad.

As many players of the game used Weibo as a gathering place and discussion board, this mode of online protest was effective. They stressed their mature and critical understanding of the purpose of the game and its ad, and even provided alternative

scenarios to make their advocacy convincing. The fact that one comment had inspired many other players to follow suit and give their own cases of empowerment through playing the game further revealed these women's proactive subjectivity and control over the game and what they wanted to get out of it.

Limitations of the Female Players' Resistance

One can clearly sense the growing feminist awareness in these female players' resistance against the ad; however, this analysis argues that their backlash also revealed a lack of thorough consideration about inclusion and self-empowerment, as their arguments were partly constrained by patriarchal thinking. For example, who decides how female players of *Love and Producer* should look like? Certainly, the game developers and advertisers assumed certain characteristics of the players and generalized them in various stereotypes. Nevertheless, why should the players be outrageous about the not-so-perfect images of female players? In other words, why would they call the heroine a "slut," or get offended by being portrayed as overweight or unmarried? In this case, by criticizing the ad, these female players' comments also functioned as an acquiescence to the cultural hegemony that dominates and stabilizes what a "truthful representation" of female game players should be. Hence, some of these female players were also stereotyping and generalizing themselves in a "better" way that would be more pleasant to watch based on the established patriarchal norms. As a result, on the one hand, they sharply criticized the ad's sexist representation of themselves; on the other hand, they also did not buy into the imperfectness of women in the ad. Thus, they were trying to differentiate themselves from women who might be single, poor, and emotionally attached to fictional characters.

In this case, they somehow created a sublevel hegemony within the female players' community by othering those who might not belong to the patriarchal taste and judgment.

What is more, considering the gameplay or maneuver system of *otome* games in general, the players never really have full control over their character's fate because they have to constantly consume what has already been designed for them. While they may feel like they are choosing the route for the upcoming stories, they actually can only choose from preset options with discourses to alter the story or the relationship with the male characters. Not to mention that the storyline in the case of *Love and Producer* is based on a highly clichéd romantic pattern. Consequently, the female protagonist controlled by the player needs to make constant judgments with a patriarchal perspective in mind, i.e., thinking in a way that would please the male characters (Figure 9).

Figure 9

A screenshot from Love and Producer. *Retrieved March 3, 2020*

Note. This screenshot shows a choice between "I just wanted to cancel the date" or "I didn't send the text message (to cancel the date)."

It is thus important to point out that the female players' criticism and contribution to the existing problems did not completely escape patriarchal norms, as they continued to produce stratifications within the female population by distinguishing themselves from the women portrayed in the ad or those who were less privileged. For example, one comment reproduced similar discriminatory language against women by saying that the

women in the ad were “ugly,” “fat,” and “daydreaming.” Also, for some players, they were disappointed in the ad because it failed to construct a narrative with men motivating them. In this sense, these female players were actually expecting to receive empowerment supplied by men instead of taking initiatives themselves. Finally, there was no challenge to the “leftover women” discourse in these comments, and the fact that some female players became defensive after seeing the ad’s portrayal of “leftover women” showed that they, too, regarded being single as something wrong or problematic. Indeed, their expected scenes and solutions, nonetheless, proved their confirmation of the patriarchal norms and gender roles.

This case of Chinese female game players protesting a game due to its ad has provided an example of Chinese women utilizing their consumer agency in the service of resistance. Their actions also demonstrated their negotiation with postsocialist Chinese ideology, in which the prevailing consumerist culture and the enduring patriarchal values about women’s gender roles are intertwined. As a result, these women’s arguments and advocacy also reflected such a complex reality. For one thing, as active consumers of the game, they tried to establish their authority and agency by criticizing the ad and presenting their own expectations of what it should have been like. For another, their alternative solutions to the problematic ad still did not fully overcome the deeply rooted patriarchal thinking. Moreover, by differentiating themselves from the less privileged women or those who seemed to deviate from the norms, they created another level of discrimination to perpetuate some of the same patriarchal repression. That is, to a certain degree, they criticized the ad not necessarily for its negative representation of women, but

for how it denigrated them in making them look less successful in conforming to established gender roles.

Conclusion of the Chapter

Although existing studies on gender and advertising are mainly conducted within Western capitalist contexts, the market of postsocialist China is actually not so different. Besides the enduring Confucian philosophy which sustains male superiority in Chinese public culture, the PRC's four decade-long period of successful market economy has added credibility to the authorities' leadership in terms of managing economic integration with the rest of the neoliberal world. Under such influences, a variety of global cultural and ideological trends have circulated in China and been adapted to the local context.

While China has experienced a rather Westernized economic and cultural development in recent decades, the media industry and public culture have clearly reflected the party-state's postsocialist ideologies, which constantly negotiate the balance between its external appeal and domestic power. As a result, Chinese women are facing a postsocialist dilemma that requires them to represent the country's economic and ideological advancement, while serving as the major actors who construct and maintain the virtues that define "Chineseness."

The growing femvertising scene in China is thus an example showing such a dilemma. Femvertising is well-received by the public, especially by the female population, because of its empathetic approach to the female struggles. In addition, it indicates that women, especially urban women's subjectivity and power to consume, are recognized and appreciated by the media and the state; in fact, the authorities sometimes

point to such consumer power to demonstrate China's development to the outside world. At the same time, however, the women addressed and uplifted by the femvertising are, to some extent, the empowered "representation" of women within the consumerist culture, rather than the actual, everyday women who may still be fixed in the same position under patriarchal repression, or even moving farther away from the empowerment constructed primarily for consumerism and nation-building. Hence, there is a gap between the "target audience" perceived by the advertisers whose agenda conforms to the nation-building and the everyday women who also need to consume. This gap is hardly acknowledged by the femvertising, nor the stratified society, yet this "representation" of empowerment is the "imagined confidence" that Rofel (2007) has pointed out, and is also the agenda that the authorities try to convey to Chinese society and the world.

Meanwhile, this gap is blatantly reflected in the controversy about the *Love and Producer* ad, which was by no means femvertising, but still provoked feminist responses and backlash. Compared to the femvertising which conveyed feminist messages from a consumerist perspective and in a top-down fashion, the backlash caused by the *Love and Producer* ad showed a more proletarian and grassroot advocacy that was perhaps even more powerful in that it demonstrated female consumers' spontaneity and agency when facing unfair treatment. Nevertheless, based on the demographics of the gamers, the women who got upset and condemned the ad were mainly those who belonged to the urban upper- and middle-class, and believed in the discourse of consumerist "empowerment" constructed by the postsocialist ideologies. In other words, these women's specific social context and statuses were favored by the party-state authorities.

Thus, these economically independent women who spoke up for themselves were more connected to the "positive energy" that the nation has been promoting rather than being the representatives of those repressed by the dominant ideologies. Hence, they inevitably adopted an authoritative perspective and unconsciously alienated the women who were on the other side of this "gap of representation."

When the postsocialist China promotes the idea that spending money is an empowerment for both self and nation, it becomes quite difficult for women to pursue economically independence and personal confidence while questioning the repressive modes of production and consumption. The reality is, while the political, social, and cultural contexts of China seem to have advanced women's subjectivity and economic power, these women are also expected to exert such power by further consuming and fulfilling their desires. The "desire" here, however, is oftentimes a cultivated one, which "is a key cultural practice in which both the government and its citizens reconfigure their relationship to a postsocialist world," as explained by Rofel (2007, p. 3).

In postsocialist China, consumerist culture is highly endorsed by the party-state in the name of strengthening the country's economic power and nationalism. Chinese women are more vulnerable subjects of this agenda than men, since the patriarchal culture and dominant discourses have enduring and established ways of constraining their freedom and agency. Therefore, women who fall into the consumerist culture's interpellation reveal an unsettled postsocialist phenomenon influenced by neoliberalism, which is that the empowered ones are mostly representatives who productively serve the authorities' nation-building, whereas the majority of everyday women are struggling with

negotiating an independent self alongside the unavoidable authoritarian and patriarchal pressure from the social and political systems. These struggles also continue to grow with the authorities' and the media's constant cultivation of desires for further consumption.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

> *The huge discrepancy between daily life under residual socialism and the hyperreality of the fledging market is keeping Chinese society in a permanent state of economic mobilization and ideological agitation. At the same time, the market has made visible the persistence of the socialist system and the discourse of the unconscious of the rising consumer masses—their frustrations, fears, resentments, their newly achieved freedoms and sense of power, their obsessions with the here and now, as well as their need for a new collective identity and social ideal. (Zhang, 2008, p. 162)*

If I were to give a list of keywords and terms that could represent "postsocialist" China, I would at least include "post-Tiananmen," "WTO," "consumption," "censorship," and "consent." While this dissertation mainly regards the "Reform and Opening Up" policy as a watershed differentiating socialist from postsocialist China, I see the latter really beginning with the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protest. This is because the 1980s had actually witnessed, if not enjoyed, an unprecedentedly liberal period, to the point where even state media could be critical of the authorities, and that made this period different from the later "postsocialism," which has more authoritarian restrictions along with the country's global outreach. Zhao (2004) recalled that in the 1980s, "many liberal writers published literary works revealing the 'dark side' of the Mao years and expressing their desire for a more democratic polity," and there were also TV shows aired on CCTV that contained metaphors and allegories trying to criticize authoritarian rules (p. 132). However, this temporary "liberty" and "democracy" accumulated to a pivotal point, only

to be clamped down on after the Tiananmen incident. And then, everything seemed to experience a reset, and post-Tiananmen China has sealed this particular history and become more careful in designing its ruling strategies in a more sophisticated way.

Thus, even though the "Reform and Opening Up" policy signaled a new era in Deng Xiaoping's context, that era really began when the Chinese party-state realized the importance of reassuring its Communist and authoritarian core before welcoming and engaging with the outside world. As a result, joining the World Trade Organization in 2001 did not cause a disruption of the socialist system, as some developed countries had envisioned. Moreover, entering the second decade of the 21st century, China has become even more adept at maintaining societal equilibrium despite numerous signs that seem to indicate that China might become a chaotic postmodernist simulacrum. Instead, the Chinese authorities have built a unique form of postsocialist country, which is relatively stable, peaceful, and at the same time, flourishing, a nation-state that has come to challenge the world's current cultural and political hegemony.

I have always considered China's governmentality a miracle that is unduplicable elsewhere, because a country of this scale, diversity, and population that also manages to maintain stability and enjoy its citizens' consent seems like a mission impossible. However, the Communist Party of China does just that. Its strategy of governing—constructing an interrelated system involving the Party, state, and people in which ruling ideologies permeate all aspects of people's daily lives—has proved to be extremely successful. But another crucial element that has added to its effective governing—and is also unparalleled by other countries—is the rich Confucian patriarchal history and

culture. These have, over generations, become an ingrained civilian ideology that fosters grassroots self-governing which emphasizes order, hierarchy, obedience, and consent. As the CPC both exerts its political tactics and its significant control over its citizens' cultural norms, the construction of a nation-state of consent becomes less of a challenge.

However, as summarized in the literature review about the nation-state and nationalism, if a state is the highest organizational power in a given society, there must be negotiations and compromises on the part of the nation to accentuate the power of the state. In the case of China, the compromises made by the citizens, both consciously and unconsciously, seem to be far more than negotiations. One of the goals of this dissertation is to expose and deconstruct these compromises while also addressing the negotiations of citizens with state power through examining representations of women.

The overarching theme of this dissertation is that postsocialist China exemplifies the conundrum of both wanting to become an advanced and competitive world power, and to maintain the CPC's hegemonic power domestically to reinforce nationalism. This goal has also contributed to distinctive developments for Chinese women: i.e., in China's postsocialist context, women have attained some heightened agency and power, but at the same time, they are still constrained by the regime, the growing power of which has partly been at the expense of their subjectivity and equal rights with men.

There were two research goals in this dissertation. First, to reveal Chinese women's compromises and negotiations with the postsocialist regime and public culture; and second, to examine the relationship between Chinese women and the CPC's construction of nationalism. Through the literature review, it is quite clear that China's

public culture and party-state authorities are never separate entities. Instead, "public culture," which encompasses both the traditional doctrines like Confucianism and new trends brought by globalization and neoliberalism, is actually part of the party-state's comprehensive administration of Chinese society and citizens in order to maintain its stability and ideological leadership. As a result, the current public culture reflects a complex, contextual, and powerful one-party government's supervision of both China's politics and culture in both the public and private domain. Mass media, which functions as the most effective and efficient way of connecting different levels in the national patriarchy, not only helps disseminate the CPC's ideological agenda but also constructs and stabilizes a public culture that is essentially serving those in power. In such an environment, Chinese women's empowerment—as reflected through examples such as increased educational rate, employment rate, income, media visibility, and their improved agency and ability to make independent decisions—is increasing, but also developing within specific, constrained conditions. That is, such improvements are also incorporated within discourses of nation-building without the authorities giving any significant credit to the importance of women's own efforts and agency.

To address the first research goal, three analytical chapters were designed to mark women's political, cultural, and social life and struggles, as covered by the media. Since this dissertation argued in the beginning that China's current ideologies and policies have seldom specified "women," these chapters aimed to not simply examine the group known as "Chinese women," but also to stress the heterogeneity within the female population by

digging into their varied statuses, positions, and problems, and seek out shared patterns in their representations.

By examining the state media's coverage of the "first lady" Peng Liyuan, and the All-China Women's Federation's description of the general female population, it is clear that the authorities' discourses about women are mainly from a patriarchal standpoint, which judges women's value based on two criteria. First, both the first lady and the representatives at the National Women's Congress have been highlighted in terms of their maintenance of traditional feminine virtues. In the case of Peng, she received much media coverage for her fashion and her public demonstrations of love for President Xi. In the latter case, many female delegates at the NWC website were actually praised more for their filial piety to parents, nurturing roles to children, selfless devotion to the local community, and their inheritance of Chinese traditional culture and artifacts, than for their perseverance and professionalism.

Second, both the media discourses about Peng and the female delegates automatically situated them within discourses about serving the nation. These women were mainly appreciated for their "function" in contributing to national pride rather than their agency or any feminist awakening of self-care, self-love, or self-empowerment as individual women. In Peng's case, her physical charm, confidence, and compassion as a charitable figure were transformed by the state media to represent the country's adaptation of a "globalized first lady" who looked no different from those of other countries and who could showcase the best possible facets of Chinese women. Thus, Peng has become a symbol of China's openness and integration with the developed

world. In the ACWF's case, the website for the NWC was already a blatant tribute to the Communist party-state and Xi Jinping Thought. With this backdrop, many female delegates were initially portrayed as nationalistic forerunners. Thus, instead of actually representing "all women" of China, these female delegates had their achievements turned into national assets, benefiting China's domestic and international images. Sometimes, their personal choices of contribution, even sacrifice, were defined by the ACWF as "repayment" for the nation's kindness to them, which downplayed and even deprived them of their subjectivity and agency in their actions.

The chapter about media and public culture's treatment of female PhDs explored the cultural repression faced by a group of women well-positioned in terms of their advanced knowledge and professional life choices. Their title of "female PhD" has become a term with highly negative connotations within the mass media and public culture, with their single marital status constantly evaluated. Here again, various patriarchal social institutions work to weaken these women's subjectivity and confidence, especially through shaming and directing public focus to their supposed "failures," thus vilifying and marginalizing them from the majority of women.

Moreover, such nationwide humiliation and public shaming of unmarried female PhDs is also associated with China's nation-building agenda, which involves a set of contradictory practices by the authorities. More specifically, the party-state looks to highly educated women to showcase China's improvements in gender equality, but it is also afraid of the potential of such education to challenge male dominance. As a result, the value of female PhDs, as framed by much of the media coverage of them, is often

deemed to be their role in raising well-educated and stable families, especially nurturing "better-quality" children. In this way, female PhDs can still be largely under patriarchal discursive control, with their primary "utility" to contribute to China's eugenics agenda, which in turn leads to a stronger nation-state. This explains why the mass media have been so focused on female PhDs' marital status.

Therefore, the mass media have attacked these women's unmarried status, lack of social experience, and sometimes also show "rare" cases where female PhDs were "surprisingly" like "normal" women. In this way, the mass media have not only constructed and consolidated stereotypes of female PhDs for the public culture but also function as an institution that has directly weakened these women's agency and power, which they had diligently acquired despite competition with their more privileged male counterparts. Moreover, this media culture reinforces such stereotypes by ignoring other life trajectories of female PhDs, leaving the "unmarried" ones at the center of public culture attention and making them the common enemy of nation-building. Therefore, those who not only have a PhD degree but also fulfill their traditional gender roles are unacknowledged and forgotten, not to mention those female PhDs who belong to other minority groups in terms of sexual orientation or religion, for example.

Finally, the chapter about Chinese women and consumerist culture revealed the dilemma of women who are economically empowered yet still socially passive and subject to becoming exploitable objects of official nation-building. At first sight, this chapter might seem to present the most progressive and feminist scenario in recognizing contemporary Chinese women's increasing consumer power, feminist knowledge, and

even capacities to push back online against corporate messages that offend them. However, even though being able to consume as one pleases is undoubtedly one of the most visible examples of empowerment for Chinese women today, the essence of their consumption, in the context of a postsocialist China, still boils down to a sophisticated nationalist task which the party-state authorities have wittingly "assigned" to them via mass media's cultivation of desire. In other words, Chinese women are encouraged by the party-state and media to consume, because it not only shows their consumerist power, but also contributes to many outcomes that benefit China's image, such as increased GDP, a way of displaying the authorities' support for gender equality, and the country's successful integration with the developed capitalist world.

In addition, as the media's construction of the desire to consume mainly targets women instead of men, another problem emerges, which is the media's partiality in focusing only on cosmopolitan women who belong to the upper middle-class. More specifically, as the media, especially advertisements, have been manufacturing a sense of empowerment for women, they mostly feature those with the capacity to consume products that are not strictly necessary, such as overpriced skincare products. However, there are a large number of much less frequently represented women, such as the impoverished ones and migrant workers, who have limited access and opportunities to be exposed to this kind of "taught empowerment." Considering the party-state organs are behind media practices, the fact that the media generally ignore those who cannot consume also reflects the authorities' lack of attention to underrepresented women, or even the attitude that they are less "useful" to the nation-building agenda. Thus, both

urban women and rural women are being exploited. The former bear the pressure to consume as a way of contributing to nationalist goals, and the latter simply suffer from blatant social stratification, which does not give them the same opportunity to consume or to protest the causes of such inequality.

The observations about media practices in the three analytical chapters also help examine the second research goal, which is to assess the relationship between Chinese women and nation-building. Although this goal sounds broad, it actually can be recapitulated as the ambivalent discourses of Chinese femininity in the context of postsocialism. As mentioned previously, official discourses tend to downplay gendered differences between citizens when stressing their guiding ideologies. Thus, the "24 words" listed in the "Core Socialist Values" and the "Chinese Dream" usually do not reflect what Chinese women have to deal with in a postsocialist society. Yet for women, besides chanting "patriotism," "dedication," "integrity," "friendship," etc., the actual tasks assigned by the party-state through media propaganda are more complicated than the nationalistic slogans and mottos, and their femininity is thus subject to ongoing revisions based on the requirements of the party-state. In this regard, this has been a common thread since the inception of China's Communist regime, with the roles of women that are officially encouraged frequently changing per the CPC's agenda to garner greater public support in service of constructing the nation.

In today's China, women have to fulfill contradictory, and sometimes even arbitrary, roles because their lives are inevitably dictated by the patriarchal culture initiated on the party-state level and applied to their everyday practices. To some extent,

their bodies are not theirs but are national entities. They need to maintain traditional virtues because the media have framed traditions as representing the mainstream, the popular, and above all, "Chineseness"; they also need to be independent and embrace consumerist culture because the media have portrayed these traits as praiseworthy in the construction of a better country. Furthermore, even though women may have received certain benefits from party-state policies as part of its showcase of improved gender equality, at the same time, women are also "in debt" for these gifts, and thus, are expected to devote and sacrifice more to demonstrate gratitude. Besides examples of female entrepreneurs being praised for "repaying" the country, and childbearing-age women being described as improving China's population quality, another example would be the authorities' dropping of the one-child policy in 2015. This seemingly lenient change only became another form of repressing women's bodies, as the National Health and Family Planning Commission stated that China was planning to see more than 30 million new laborers by the year 2050 (Juan, 2016).

Moreover, even though some official policies and rules are labeled as helping women, it is important to recognize that the actual implementation may be flawed, rigged, and end up increasing the gender gap, since there is hardly any governmental organization or state media platform to guarantee and monitor their practices. A recent example was the Spring Bud Project scandal. As a 30-year old project under the leadership of ACWF that works on "mobilizing social forces to help dropout girls return to school and to improve teaching conditions in poverty-stricken areas" ("Spring Bud Project," n.d.), it was discovered by netizens that many donation funds were given to

boys as well without notifying the donors. However, in the project's apology, its excuse was that "staff had found boys in poverty-stricken areas were also in need of aid" (Zhang, 2019). Considering the project was exclusively designed for helping girls and is led by the ACWF—the only organization that serves women in China's political system—the scandal and its handling did not satisfy the public at all, yet was unsurprisingly later suppressed by the media.

Therefore, Chinese women today face the challenge of producing their identities as women within the contexts of state power, because, most of the time, their empowerment and increased agency are inevitably associated with nation-building, and thus also monitored by the media, public culture, and social institutions, which are all parts of the party-state system. It is exactly this intertwining and mixture of "nation" and "self," of "nationalism" and "culture," and of "public" and "private," that have entangled Chinese women in this postsocialist conundrum. They try to grasp a "postsocialist empowerment" even though it may be partial and contradictory, because this is the closest that they can get to feeling their power and agency. However, while they have benefited in various ways, especially through China's economic growth and its absorption of globalized culture, the enduring patriarchal exploitation of them in the postsocialist environment still significantly affects their personal lives and self-recognition. Like Zhang (2008) stated, and I quoted in the beginning of this chapter, today's Chinese people are dealing with a mixture of emotions—"frustrations, fears, resentments, their newly achieved freedoms and sense of power, their obsessions with the here and now, as well as their need for a new collective identity and social ideal"— due

to the country's postmodernist "chaos." Yet furthermore, women are especially vulnerable, because whether in the economic or cultural realms, in terms of being constructed as collective citizens of a nation-state, they are never treated the same as their male counterparts.

Contributions to Media Scholarship and Women

However, the above passages do not mean that Chinese women are completely powerless in the system and that those who cannot fit into the norm will only be marginalized and forgotten. In fact, there have been increasing cases of Chinese women using new media to express dissent amidst the strict censorship and patriarchal repression. Chapter 5 briefly mentioned that some female PhDs were able to disassociate themselves from the patriarchal quagmire by organizing feminist seminars and working with popular media platform to protest against a government official's demeaning description of female PhDs (see "Guangdong CPPCC," 2014). In the literature review, there was also an example of a female blogger who analyzed and criticized female representations in China's Spring Festival national gala (see Chuang, 2015). In academia, many female scholars have criticized the patriarchal culture, written about the problems, and even educated the public through mass media (see Professor Yan Hao in Chapter 6). And of course, this dissertation will hopefully also be a meaningful addition to feminist scholarship by addressing Chinese women's relationship with the country's nationalistic agenda through examining official and mainstream media texts.

Meanwhile, no matter what the above-mentioned women do to express their feminist opinions or challenge the patriarchal norms, they share their usage and

consumption of new media, especially social media. As a communication platform, social media, with its easy accessibility, is at the forefront of receiving globalized culture and influences, including more "progressive" knowledge such as feminism, from the West. As a research site, social media, with its ample real-time information and discourses that have circumvented censorship, have provided oftentimes marginalized voices and shown the significance of such a space, where hegemonic voices and rebellious ideas can coexist and contest each other. To some extent, this situation also reflects China's ongoing neoliberal dilemma. On the one hand, the authorities need social media and imported new ideas in order for China to be productively engaged with global discourses, and on the other hand, they wish to maintain strict censorship to preserve the current power structure. Thus, the practices of the Chinese party-state in this regard also exemplify neoliberalism's clash with the local context.

Today, even though China's Internet censorship is part of its intensified centralization of power, it is still more common to see female Internet users utilizing the platform to try to alert other women to their concerns. Even in the case of *Love and Producer* as discussed in Chapter 6, the fact that a large-scale backlash from female game players happened on Weibo and eventually caused the company to apologize illustrates a successful case of women's gradual endeavors in feminist practices. While the content of their complaints and advocacy were not critical enough to fully abandon a traditional patriarchal thinking, their action has been a positive sign showing social media's possibilities for women's empowerment.

Thus, besides addressing the social injustices to Chinese women associated with the country's nationalist constructions, this dissertation has another significance, which, in identifying the party-state and mainstream media's strategies of exploiting and repressing women under a patriarchal agenda, therefore also points to alternative paths for women to explore their expression and empowerment. Moreover, by sharing the analyses of women's portrayals in politics, society, and consumerist culture, this dissertation can potentially educate more women to critically examine the media, as well as the "benefits" that they have received from the authorities, in order to reconsider whether they have truly been respected and what really counts as "empowerment."

Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

As mentioned in the introduction, one proposed significance of this dissertation is to open up further research opportunities to explore the voices of Chinese women. As a study in the field of mass communication, this dissertation chose to examine problems in media's representations of women in relation to China's nation-building and its impact on the female population. However, the limitation of this approach is that it was also from a top-down perspective, which deductively synthesized the key issues and implications from the data. In this case, although women's agency and negotiations have been addressed, they were mostly from accessible resources, which were also provided by the mass media, rather than from more personal and private sources. Therefore, future research could seek to hear directly from women who live within the postsocialist system, facing daily inequalities and struggles and undertaking patriarchal and cultural pressures, through in-depth interviews or ethnography.

Another direction for future research is to focus more on women's negotiation with state power and even women's advocacy efforts. In this dissertation, not every case examined contained the possibility for women to negotiate with the authorities, sometimes because there was a lack of shared grievances due to the heterogeneity of women's identities, while other times it was too risky for women to directly challenge the authoritarian regime under the current political environment. As a result, examples of women's negotiations with power in this study only happened on a small scale, usually executed by highly educated women or those who were savvy in new media technologies and used them to voice their opinions. However, this does not mean the majority of Chinese women are completely restrained from fighting injustice. In recent years, there have been more cases, largely inspired by the global #MeToo movement, of women using Weibo to reveal and fight sexual harassment and domestic violence. Although significant success is still hard to achieve due to strict censorship, many female Internet users have shown a braver attitude in supporting each other, which has also resulted in several cases leaving vivid public memory on the Internet or drawing international attention. A good example was a woman nicknamed Xianzi who, after being sexually harassed by a famous TV host, decided to publicize the case on Weibo and use her abundant knowledge of feminism to educate other women and call for public support for her lawsuit. Her move eventually resulted in the resignation of the host from that year's Spring Festival gala (Hernández, 2019).

Finally, one can further develop the examination of Chinese women, media, and nationalism by examining the development of China's Internet regulation/censorship

policies, and exploring their triggers, practices, and impacts on the female population. The most recent case happens as I am writing this conclusion, which is a new regulation beginning March 1, 2020, entitled "Ecological Regulation of Internet Information and Content" (网络信息内容生态治理规定) issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China under the supervision of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission. Occurring at the same time as this regulation—what some believed to be a coincidence while others thought otherwise—was the sudden censorship of the Hugo Award-winning fanfiction site Archive of Our Own (AO3) in China on February 29. As the majority of Chinese fanfiction readers and writers are women, AO3 had long been their last refuge because other sites for creative works have been strictly monitored by the censors. Frustrated female fans had been accusing a particular fandom of reporting AO3 to the government; however, with the introduction of this "Ecological Regulation," the online discourses seem to be heading divergent directions.

The reason for ending the dissertation with this ongoing case is not only because it provides a fresh research opportunity, but also that it again demonstrates the ultimate characteristic of postsocialist China's governmentality, which is that the political and cultural are never independent but interrelated. The party-state's new policy, the popular discourses influenced by a globalized fandom culture, and women's freedom of speech and pursuit of pleasure, can all be at stake simultaneously. Just like any other case examined in this dissertation, Chinese women's fates are reflections of the party-state's agendas of nation-building; and, again, quoting Zhang from the beginning of this chapter, "their frustrations, fears, resentments, their newly achieved freedoms and sense of power,

their obsessions with the here and now, as well as their need for a new collective identity and social ideal" continue to be contested and negotiated as long as the Chinese party-state remains the nation's ideological core.

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