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# Precarious Peripheries: Gender from the Margins of China

Coraline Jortay, Chang Liu, Jennifer Bond

► **To cite this version:**

Coraline Jortay, Chang Liu, Jennifer Bond. Precarious Peripheries: Gender from the Margins of China. *Sextant*, 38, 2022, 10.4000/sextant.697 . hal-04285844

**HAL Id: hal-04285844**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04285844>**

Submitted on 14 Nov 2023

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SEXTANT

38

# PRECARIOUS PERIPHERIES

Gender from  
the Margins of China

Jennifer Bond  
Coraline Jortay  
Chang Liu  
(eds.)



Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles 2021



**Sextant**

Revue de recherche interdisciplinaire sur le genre et la sexualité

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38 | 2022

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**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/sextant/697>

ISSN: 2795-8736

**Publisher**

Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 December 2022

ISBN: 978-2-8004-1777-6

ISSN: 1370-267X

**Electronic reference**

Jennifer Bond, Coraline Jortay and Chang Liu (dir.), *Sextant*, 38 | 2022, "Precarious peripheries" [Online], Online since 01 December 2022, connection on 14 December 2022. URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/sextant/697>

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE PUBLICATION

The construction and imagination of China's margins – ethnic, political, socio-cultural, geographical, religious – has long engrossed China scholars, from anthropological works such as William Skinner's classic study of historical geography and the macro region model, to travel writers from Marco Polo to San Mao, to ethnographies of Chinese minorities and new Qing histories.

In recent years, academic attention has widened its scope to new margins including environmental histories of China's politically contested borders, and the projection of China's soft power in contemporary science fiction that claims space as the newest frontier of the Sinosphere. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of gender in imagining and creating China's shifting centers and peripheries.

What and where are these margins and what role does gender play in their construction and imagination? Who are the inhabitants of the margins: minorities, women, religious groups, itinerants, disabled people and the poor? In what ways does gender condition their experience of the peripheral spaces in which they operate? What are the social and gendered implications of traversing these boundaries – personal, political or physical? How do marginal actors negotiate their place at the borders and what is the impact of their positioning and perspectives on the very conception of Chineseness? A gendered perspective can better help scholars to transverse and dissect the borders of China, historically, socially, politically and geographically, and throw new light onto their fluid and permeable construction across time and space.





Structure de Recherche  
Interdisciplinaire sur le  
Genre, l'Égalité et la Sexualité

Créée, en 1993, à l'initiative d'Éliane Gubin, la revue *Sextant* fut la première revue universitaire consacrée aux études sur les femmes en Belgique. Multidisciplinaire, elle a longtemps émané directement du Groupe interdisciplinaire d'études sur les femmes (GIEF), fondé en 1989 à l'ULB. Elle a aussi bénéficié du soutien de la Chaire Tassier. En 2008, la revue a été reprise par les Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles et *Sextant* a obtenu pour la première fois une subvention du FNRS en 2014. En 2015, *Sextant* est devenue la revue de la structure de recherche Striges. *Sextant* est aujourd'hui une revue profondément interdisciplinaire et internationale. Spécialisée en études sur les femmes et le genre, elle s'est fait une place dans le monde de la recherche et dans l'espace francophone. Au cours des années à venir, elle souhaite consolider sa place d'unique revue en études de genre de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles et renforcer les liens avec des revues similaires en Belgique et à l'étranger.

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Photographie de couverture :  
Delivery man, Chongqing, China  
par Jida Li / Unsplash

**ISBN** 978-2-8004-1777-6  
**eISBN** 978-2-8004-1778-3  
**ISSN** 1370-267X  
D2022/0171/24

© 2021 by Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles  
Avenue Paul Héger 26  
1000 Bruxelles (Belgique)

[editions@ulb.be](mailto:editions@ulb.be)

[www.editions-ulb.be](http://www.editions-ulb.be)

Imprimé en Belgique

Publié avec l'aide financière du Fonds de  
la recherche scientifique – F.R.S.-FNRS





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## Introduction

# Gender from the Margins of China

Jennifer Bond, Coraline Jortay, and Chang Liu<sup>1</sup>

National geographies and gender norms both rely upon neatly drawn boundaries, state-sanctioned behaviours, and socially constructed identities that seek to tell us *who* we are. They are both constructed through the creation of normative centres and peripheries, with clearly demarcated and heavily policed borders. But if the border is a line, the frontier is an area, a liminal space where people do exist on their own terms. Its inhabitants live in constant awareness of their relative marginalisation and of the expectations of the centre. It is through their relative closeness or distance, their deemed “progressiveness” or “backwardness” from the idealized normative centre that they are examined, measured, and defined. But what changes, then, when *we* step away from dominant narratives of the centre to focus with intention on those historically relegated to the periphery? Reflecting on her *grand oeuvre* centring Black history and Black women’s experiences, Toni Morrison stated: “I stood on the border, stood on the edge, and claimed it as central. Claimed it as central, and let the rest of the world come over to where I was.”<sup>2</sup> In turn, what do we see when we envision gender from the margins of China as pivotal, in the literal sense of the term, that is, worthy of letting our understanding shift over?

This view from the margins which decentres national narratives is well-known to scholars working in postcolonial and subaltern studies. For many decades also, China studies scholars interested in border regions have scrutinized China’s margins and their critical linkages to the centre. They have challenged China’s centredness,<sup>3</sup> questioned the homogeneity of hegemonic categories such as the Han,<sup>4</sup> or compelled us to pay closer attention to the shifting and uneven boundaries of what we have come to call “China” over the centuries.<sup>5</sup> But what are the epistemological implications of

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<sup>1</sup> All authors have contributed equally to this paper and are listed in alphabetical order.

<sup>2</sup> T. Morrison, interview by J. Wendt, *Toni Morrison: Uncensored*, Beyond Productions, A Presentation of Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1998, video, 6:14, <https://youtu.be/DQ0mMjll22I>.

<sup>3</sup> P. K. Crossley, H. F. Siu, and D. S. Sutton, *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China*, Berkeley, University of California, 2006; S. D. Blum and L. M. Jensen, *China off Center: Mapping the Margins of the Middle Kingdom*, Honolulu, University of Hawai’i, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> T. S. Mullaney, *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China’s Majority*, Berkeley, University of California, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> G. B. Lee, *China Imagined: From European Fantasy to Spectacular Power*, London, Hurst and Company, 2018.

interrogating marginality and marginalisation as they intersect with gender in China, today and yesterday? We think of geographical margins, of course, given the dynamics outlined above, but we think of marginalisation of other kinds, too. Invoking “China” in relation to its “margins” has historically been tied with scholarship focusing on *shaoshu minzu* as categorized in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), often loosely translated as “ethnic minorities” or “minority nationalities” as opposed to the Han majority.<sup>6</sup> Twenty-five years ago, women’s studies scholars already highlighted how representations of ethnic minority women as “exotic” in mainstream PRC cultural production had, in effect, helped solidify a unified Han majority identity through the essentializing of an “internal Other.”<sup>7</sup> Though more recent work has nuanced this explanatory framework,<sup>8</sup> scholarship focusing more inclusively on the critical juncture of gender and ethnicity in China has been booming in recent years, branching out from its original location in women’s studies to include more broadly questions of gender, masculinities, and queerness in their relation to ethnicity.<sup>9</sup> From earlier attention in anthropology, sociology, and history, such efforts have extended into film and literary studies, as these fields have simultaneously embraced the conceptual tools of feminist, postcolonial and Sinophone studies.<sup>10</sup>

This special issue of *Sextant* seeks to further this interdisciplinary effort, looking not only at geographical margins (Hong Kong, Guizhou, Xinjiang) in the strict sense, but also at physical and intangible spaces that have been understood as marginal by a variety of actors. The six articles of this issue take us on a journey which starts from the political margins of China in Hong Kong to diasporic Chinese communities of Mexico City’s popular markets, from alternative spaces within mainstream Internet platforms to underground bars within the capital heartland of Beijing, and back to the geographical frontiers of the PRC in Guizhou and Xinjiang. In the same movement, these articles reach beyond margins in their strict geographical sense: to varying degrees, they examine gender with attention to its intersections with age, religion, race, ethnicity, class, labour, and linguistic differences. In the first article, Gina Marchetti uses a case study of two films by female Hong Kong filmmakers, Ann Hui’s *A Simple Life* (2011) and Flora Lau’s *Bends* (2013), to unpick how class, age and gender intersect

<sup>6</sup> For a brief discussion of how these categories (along with their English translations) are problematic, see Steven Pieragastini and Arianne Ekinci’s articles in this issue. For a more comprehensive treatment of the socially constructed categories of the Han/non-Han and majority/minority as they have been used in the PRC, see T. S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> L. Schein, “Gender and Internal Orientalism in China”, *Modern China*, 23/1, 1997, 69–98, p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the limits of ‘internal Orientalism’ as a framework of analysis, see E. Wilcox, “Beyond Internal Orientalism: Dance and Nationality Discourse in the Early People’s Republic of China, 1949–1954”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 75/2, 2016, pp. 363–386.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance L. Schein, *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China’s Cultural Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2000; M. Bryson, *Goddess on the Frontier: Religion, Ethnicity, and Gender in Southwest China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2017; R. Harris, *Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2020; K. Shernuk, “Ethnicity—a queerness of relation: The plight of the “ethnic minority” in Chan Koon-Chung’s *Bare Life*”, in H. Chiang and A.K. Wong (eds.), *Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies*, New York, Routledge, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> A recent example can be found in the literary depictions of the marginalisation of Korean and Russian Jewish women as colonial subjects and refugees in 1930s Manchuria by C. Iwasaki in the article “Homeless in the Fatherland: Xiao Hong’s Migrant Geographies”, *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, 2019, 31, pp. 162–182.

to entrench the precarity of cross-border lives in the special administrative region. The second article by Ximena Alba Villalever follows another group of migrants to the peripheries of the overseas Chinese diaspora in Mexico. Villalever analyses how cultural constructions of gender and race are used by Chinese migrant women workers in Mexico's markets to resist the precarity of their marginal position and build allyship with Mexican women merchants in a male-dominated business world. Moving from the diaspora to the online world, Fan Wang's article explores how online publishing platforms have provided space for fiction that centers non-normative gender roles, including matriarchal fiction, and the ambiguous relationship they maintain with market capitalism and state regulations. Blurring gender binaries further, Liu Yilong explores embodied queer experiences of sex, happiness, and precarity through the lens of Qiu Jiongjiong's *Madame* (2010). Their night scenes of crossdressing performers in Sanlitun's pubs bring us to the spatial undergrounds that lay within the geographical heartland of Beijing, and to the peripheries of mainstream socio-cultural norms. Finally, we come to the geographic frontiers of the PRC and the sometimes-fraught relationships that they entertain with gender, ethnicity, nation, and religion. Drawing on rich archival sources, Steven Pieragastini explores how state efforts to collectivise agriculture played out along gendered lines in Guizhou in the 1950s. For the same time period, Arianne Ekinci explores the CCP state construction of "modern" Uyghur women subjects through the case study of a former illiterate shepherdess turned model Chinese-speaking proletarian secular performer, hailing from Hotan, Xinjiang.

## The Margins of China Through Interdisciplinary Perspectives

In moving through and beyond national boundaries and gender norms, the contributors to this issue simultaneously bring to the fore questions of age, religion, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, and linguistic differences – and often several of these together – as co-constructive phenomena that entrench the delineation of the margins. More or less directly or explicitly, they bring this special issue into dialogue with the ground-breaking theoretical work of scholars of colour in the United States on intersectionality. Intersectionality has emerged from Black women's intellectual production in Black feminism and race/class/gender studies in the 1980s, and its coining is widely credited to feminist and legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw.<sup>11</sup> At its inception in the United States, it was foremost instrumental in laying bare how race, class, and gender intersect to deepen the marginalisation of Black women, and why

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<sup>11</sup> K. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 1989, pp. 139–67. For a discussion of the emergence of intersectionality as a field of study within the context of Black feminism and race/class/gender studies and women's studies, as well as Crenshaw's place within this intellectual genealogy, see Collins P. H., "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41/1, 2015, pp. 1–20.

single-axis analyses fail to fully capture the “problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power.”<sup>12</sup> Over time, this approach has been taken up by other scholars to analyse the interlocking logics of not only gender, class, and race, but also sexuality, ability, age, nation, ethnicity, and other markers which are entangled in social power hierarchies – not only in the United States, but also elsewhere around the world.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, the question of whether intersectionality could or should be a traveling theory – or even a theory at all – has been a highly contested topic, both geography and category-wise.<sup>14</sup> Scholars have criticized its institutional travels from social movements into the neoliberal academy since the early 2000s, itineraries that have removed it from its radical roots as a social justice project and perhaps, some argue, transformed it into a catch-all phrase of academic liberal feminism.<sup>15</sup> They have pointed out its depoliticising geographical travels into the European context, uneasy passages that have favoured class and gender while stripping away race and racism from their analytical potency.<sup>16</sup> They have singled out the dangers of additive models that simply add up more categories and layers of marginalisation onto the pile at the expense of deep critical engagement with any of them.<sup>17</sup>

As one can see, the pitfalls of the theoretical transplant abound. And our intention is certainly not to merely add “China” uncritically onto that pile. First and foremost, as historians, we are acutely aware that time and place matter tremendously. Across different national and transnational contexts and at different points in time, intersecting power relations might take different shapes, and different forms of inequalities might be more or less pronounced – and that affects the ability of concepts to travel unchanged.<sup>18</sup> Without attuning to these particularities, we face the risk of emptying out categories into pseudo-analogical, ahistorical shells.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, national contexts are not the only ones that need historicising: different kinds of inequalities also possess their particular traditions, histories, and effects.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore crucial

<sup>12</sup> S. Cho, K. W. Crenshaw, and L. McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38/4, 2013, p. 795.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion on expanding intersectionality’s focus to other related analytical categories, see Kim-Puri H. J., “Conceptualizing Gender-Sexuality-State-Nation: An Introduction”, *Gender & Society*, 19/ 2, 2005, pp. 137–59. For an intersectional analytical framework travelling outside of the US, see for instance M. Alinia, *Honor and Violence Against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> S. Salem, “Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 25/4, 2018, pp. 403–418.

<sup>15</sup> J. Parker, R. Samantrai, M. Romero (eds), *Interdisciplinarity and Social Justice: Revisioning Academic Accountability*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2010; B. Tomlinson, “Colonizing Intersectionality: Replicating Racial Hierarchy in Feminist Academic Arguments”, *Social Identities*, 19/2, 2013, pp. 254–72; Bilge S., “Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionality Studies”, *Du Bois Review*, 10/2, 2013, pp. 405–424.

<sup>16</sup> Knapp G.-A., “Race, Class, Gender”, *The European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 12/3, 2005, pp. 249–265; M. M. Ferree, “The Discursive Politics of Feminist Intersectionality”, in H. Lutz, M.T. Herrera Vivar and L. Supik (eds.), *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-faceted Concept in Gender Studies*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 55–65.

<sup>17</sup> N. Yuval-Davis, “Beyond the Recognition and Re-distribution Dichotomy: Intersectionality and Stratification”, in H. Lutz, M.T. Herrera Vivar and L. Supik (eds.), *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-faceted Concept in Gender Studies*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 155–69; A. Ludvig, “Differences between Women: Intersecting Voices in a Female Narrative”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 13/3, 2006, pp. 245–258.

<sup>18</sup> P. H. Collins, “Intersectionality’s Definitional Dilemmas”, *op. cit.* p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> A. Phoenix and P. Pattyama, “Intersectionality”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 13/3, 2006, pp. 187–92.

<sup>20</sup> See A. Arondekar, “Border/line Sex: Queer Postcolonialities, or How Race Matters Outside the United States”, *Interventions*, 7/2, 2005, pp. 236–250; N. Yuval-Davis, “Intersectionality and Feminist Politics”, *The European*

to attend to historically-specific patterns of inequality and structures of power. On many levels, 1950s rural Guizhou and the market stalls of Mexico City described in this issue are vastly different from the original context in which intersectionality developed – and are also vastly different from one another.

And yet, one cannot be endlessly relativist and follow the frequent exceptionalist postulation that China absolutely cannot be discussed in certain terms because China would be somehow incommensurably “different”. The dynamics of marginalisation that are at play when projecting that quintessential “Other” smack of Orientalism and share similar dynamics to the kind of power relations that intersectional scholars are trying to unpack. We are ourselves scholars from white and Han middle-class backgrounds working in privileged institutions and academic fields which have, only in recent decades, started to come to terms with their colonial roots. As such, we have witnessed the historical tendency that the study of “China” should stay tightly snug within sinology or area studies departments, in a way that has made it difficult for many of us to engage with our colleagues in history, literature, or gender studies. While the issue is structural, we are nevertheless particularly grateful to *Sextant*, a generalist gender and sexuality journal, for having welcomed us within its pages and pushed through to build up dialogue.

This special issue thus seeks to exist in the space of tension between these two caveats. In putting it together, we were struck by the interlocking logics of marginalisation and privilege that emerged from the contributions that we received. In China, too, single-axis analyses seemed to fail to capture the complexity and co-constructive nature of processes of marginalisation. This special issue thus seeks to build bridges towards cross-disciplinary and cross-areal dialogues – recognizing in equal parts the theoretical potency of intersectional perspectives as conceptual tools, as well as the crucial need for attunement to historically and place-specific structures of power. In this, we were influenced by other approaches drawing from the simultaneous vantage points of critical race theory, whiteness studies, and the legacy of New Qing History.<sup>21</sup> We follow, in a sense, the invitation of Cho et al. when they speak of “analytical sensibilities.”<sup>22</sup> And as time and place are important, before turning to the articles that make up this issue more especially, we will try to outline how those concepts have travelled to China, and to what extent they have or have not been taken up by Chinese feminists or academics themselves.

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*Journal of Women's Studies*, 13/3, 2006, pp. 193–209; D. W. Carbado, “Colorblind Intersectionality”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38/4, 2013, pp. 811–845.

<sup>21</sup> T. Mullaney, *Critical Han Studies...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> S. Cho, K. Crenshaw, L. McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis”, *Signs*, 38, 2013, pp. 785–810.

## Intersectionality in the Chinese Context

Despite inspiring both academic discussion and activist action, the question of whether one could or should discuss intersectionality in a Chinese context has been the subject of debate among scholars both within and outside China.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, some categories that have been discussed as pivotal to the understanding of European and North American societies, such as class, race, and sexuality, have been recognized to varying degrees in Chinese academia. Moreover, as a consequence of the radical social changes and revolutions that have marked China's twentieth century, what these categories signify locally has also varied rapidly and sometimes dramatically. For example, the application of the Marxist-Leninist conception of class in China has shifted over time, from the first partial translation of the Communist Manifesto in an anarcho-feminist periodical in 1908,<sup>24</sup> its institutionalisation after the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and through to the re-emergence of a new "middle class" since the reform and opening policies of 1978.<sup>25</sup> As a result of the particular salience of class in the early PRC, a generation of scholars of Chinese women's history both in the anglophone and Chinese contexts used primarily a Marxist framework as the main analytical tool to dissect interactions between gender and class in twentieth-century China.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, for the other side of the Pacific, the intellectual roots of intersectionality can be found in a corrective to Marxist feminism by Black feminist Marxists in the late 1970s, who while explicitly aligning themselves with Marxism, deplored the lack of attunement of analysis to the specificities of the condition of Black women.<sup>27</sup> From this starting point, scholars inheriting their legacy have conducted an extensive critique of the pitfalls of forms of economic reductionism which posit race, gender or sexuality as secondary categories to class, which they argue contributes to depoliticising their intersections.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Y. Dong, "Does China Have a Feminist Movement from the Left?", *Made in China Journal*, 4/1, 2019, pp. 58–63; Y. Su, "Jiaochaxingliupai deguandian fangfa jiqi duizhongguoxingbieshehuixue de qifa 交叉性流派的观点、方法及其对中国性别社会学的启发 [Intersectionality: A New Perspective for the Chinese Gender Sociology]", *Shehuixueyanjiu 社会学研究 [Sociological Studies]*, 4, 2016, pp. 218–241; Y. Dong, "Xinshijiao xincailliao qianyanmakesizhuyinüquan lilunshijiaoxia de shehuizhuyizhongguoyanjiu 新视角、新材料: 前沿马克思主义女权理论视角下的社会主义中国研究 [New Perspectives, New Materials: Socialist China Studies Seen from Avant-Guard Marxist Feminism]", *Funüyanjiuluncong 妇女研究论丛 [Journal of Chinese Women's Studies]*, 5, 2017, pp. 18–23.

<sup>24</sup> L. H. Liu, R. E. Karl and D. Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 5–6.

<sup>25</sup> See for example, Li Lifeng, "Jiejihuafen de zhengzhigongneng yixiangguanyutugai de zhengzhishehuixuefenxi 阶级划分的政治功能——一项关于“土改”的政治社会学分析 [The Political Function of Class Division: A Political-Sociological Analysis of 'Land Reform']", *Nanjing shehuixue 南京社会科学 [Social Science in Nanjing]*, 1, 2008, pp. 65–71; N. Pun and J. Chen, "Jiejihuayu de xiaoshi 阶级话语的消逝 [The Disappearance of Class Discourse]", *Kaifangshidai 开放时代 [Open Times]*, 5, 2008, pp. 53–60.

<sup>26</sup> For a summary of these historiographical trends, see G. Hershatter and W. Zheng, "Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis", *American Historical Review*, 113/5, 2008, pp. 1404–1421; E. Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978; D. Davin, *Woman-work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the place of e.g. the Combahee River Collective and Angela Davis within this genealogy, see P.H. Collins, "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41/1, 2015, pp. 1–20.

<sup>28</sup> See S. Farris, "The Intersectional Conundrum and the Nation-State", *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2014, available at: [viewpointmag.com/2015/05/04/the-intersectional-conundrum-and-the-nation-state/](http://viewpointmag.com/2015/05/04/the-intersectional-conundrum-and-the-nation-state/) (accessed 14 October 2021).



In parallel, the relationships between feminist movements and the state have been vastly place-specific. Whereas in the US feminists have frequently petitioned against the state and have considered the state responsible for consolidating gender inequality, in China feminists' agendas have often been components of the state's various programmes for national strengthening and building of state socialism. In the late nineteenth century, both reformers and revolutionaries seeking to topple the Qing empire promoted women's education for national salvation. Across the twentieth century, the state played a comparatively much larger role in co-ordinating feminist concerns, including women's status in politics, education, health, and employment.<sup>29</sup> When the PRC was established in 1949, the All-China Women's Federation, one of the biggest mass organisations in the PRC, quickly set up its branches across China. Today the Women's Federation remains the main state-sponsored organisation with the stated aim of promoting gender equality and women's rights. As Su Yihui points out, the idea of intersectionality emerged from a tide of civil activism in the 1980s US, when feminists sought to build alliances with movements that campaigned against other forms of inequality, such as those of gender and race.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, the problem faced by Chinese feminists was quite different in the second half of the twentieth century. As scholars including Wang Zheng have shown, Chinese feminists working within the state apparatus, both pre- and post-1949, had to carefully negotiate their struggles for gender equality within broader national imperatives.<sup>31</sup> As a result of the monopolisation of feminist concerns by the state after 1978, grassroots feminist activists whose concerns do not align with state-sponsored goals have been marginalised. Their efforts to agitate for change have also been hamstrung by the official view that Chinese women have, since 1949, been liberated from feudal oppression, thus making any sustained critique of the status-quo politically unacceptable.<sup>32</sup> Over the last four decades, China's re-entry into global capitalism and turn away from state feminism have given rise to what Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong describe as an "alignment of the post-socialist state's agenda, market forces, and rekindled patriarchal values [that] has culminated in a gendered marriage market that emphasizes hypergamy, institutionalizing women's sexuality as their means to economic security."<sup>33</sup> The increased connectedness of the internet era has also provided more platforms to feminist groups and topics, especially among university-educated urbanites. This context has given rise to many shades of what Wu and Dong call "made-in China feminisms," among which a New Feminist Movement that is internationally well-connected and explicitly concerned with class/gender/sexuality intersectionality. As Séagh Kehoe outlines, there is however, a relative dearth of focus on the ways in which gender and ethnicity

<sup>29</sup> G. Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019; G. Hershatter, *Women in China's Long Twentieth century*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007, pp. 79–105.

<sup>30</sup> Su Yihui, "Jiaochaxingliupai deguandian...", *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1964*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> For more on feminist activism in China in recent years see W. Zheng, "Detention of the Feminist Five in China", *Feminist Studies*, 42/2, 2015, pp. 476–482.

<sup>33</sup> A. X. Wu, and Y. Dong, "What is Made-in-China Feminism(s)? Gender Discontent and Class Friction in Post-Socialist China", *Critical Asian Studies*, 51/4, 2019, pp. 471–492.

intersect within Chinese feminist activism, a blind spot compounded by the difficulty of building cross-cultural feminist solidarity in China today.<sup>34</sup>

Scholars of contemporary China have given increasing theoretical attention to intersectional questions in recent decades. This has particularly been the case for scholars who examine feminist movements and increasing gender inequality in China after 1978. The introduction of market economy in the Reform era redefined class as well as China's rural-urban divide. Rural women and men moved to work in urban production lines and became part of the so-called "floating population."<sup>35</sup> With China's entry into global economic markets, Chinese people also began to migrate to other parts of the world, including Western Europe and North America, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Against the background of the evolving economic and political conditions since the beginning of the "Reform and Opening-Up" policy, increasing international academic collaboration and discussions of gender between Chinese and foreign scholars have coincided with a turn away from class antagonism as no longer the only officially approved theory to explain gender inequality. Gender studies in China have blossomed since the 1980s, and some scholars have criticized the reductive horizon of solely scrutinizing gender as a single-axis category of analysis. Qin Fang, for example, has recently raised the criticism that scholars of women's history in mainland China today sometimes tend to prioritise gender over class, region, the family, generation, and ethnicity, and thus limit the horizon of their research.<sup>36</sup> Bringing these discussions to bear on earlier time periods, others have tried to show how the intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity complicate our understanding of gender relations, women's identities, and social roles during the Ming-Qing periods.<sup>37</sup> Generally, scholars around the world have continued to interrogate the critical junctures of gender and race, gender and disability, as well as other *loci*, in shaping marginalisation in China, or more widely transnationally against Asian communities.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> S. Kehoe, "Global Connections: Chinese Feminism, Tibet and Xinjiang", *Made in China Journal*, 4/1, 2019, pp. 72–77.

<sup>35</sup> T. Cheek, "Reform and Rebuilding, 1976–1988", in J. Wasserstrom (ed.), *Oxford Illustrated History of China*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 226–249.

<sup>36</sup> Qin Fang, "Zailishiyuxingbiezhijian daludiqu jindaizhongguofunüshiyianjiu de zhishishilujing 在历史与性别之间——大陆地区近代中国妇女史研究的知识史路径 [Between History and Gender: Understanding the Studies of Modern Chinese Women in Mainland China from the Perspective of Knowledge Production]", *Funüyanjiuluncong 妇女研究论丛 [Journal of Chinese Women's Studies]*, 6, 2020, pp. 74–84.

<sup>37</sup> Jo-lan Yi, "Lunzhongguoxingbiezhishiyianjiu de duoyuanjiaozhi 论中国性别史研究的多元交织 [Intersectionality and Chinese Gender History]", *Jindaizhongguofunüshiyianjiu 近代中国妇女史研究 [Research on Women in Modern Chinese History]*, 2, 2017, pp. 167–229.

<sup>38</sup> S. Dauncey, *Disability in Contemporary China: Citizenship, Identity and Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020; Liu Wen, "Internationalism Beyond the 'Yellow Peril': On the Possibility of Transnational Asian-American Solidarity," *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 11/2, 2020, pp. 21–24; Liu Wen, "Narrating Against Assimilation and the Empire: Diasporic Mourning and Queer Asian Melancholia," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 47/1-2, 2019, pp. 176–192.

## Where the Margins of China Lie

These analytical sensibilities thus lend a particularly acute approach to explore the experiences of migrant workers, domestic workers, children in rural China, older people, and ethnic minorities, as well as helping us to critically rethink how to build bridges between feminist theories in the Chinese context.<sup>39</sup> In this light, the six articles in this special issue start off from a variety of disciplines (film studies, history, literature, anthropology, etc.) to examine the power dynamics at work in the representation of marginalised communities across different social and historical contexts in the PRC from the 1950s up to the present day. These intersections of class, nation, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality play a pivotal role in creating and defining the margins of China itself. They are found at what Leslie McCall has characterized as “multiple subordinate locations.”<sup>40</sup> These are locations of marginality and inequality, but also constantly moving, fluid spaces which people are pushed and move into, out of, and across according to their personal circumstances, thus shifting transnational consumption patterns and state policies.

Global market forces have a role to play in shaping where the margins of China lie. Marchetti reveals how Hong Kong, once a hub of global trade, has since its return to the PRC in 1997 become increasingly overshadowed by new powerhouses of trade and commerce across the border in Shenzhen. Hong Kong residents are at the mercy of the vagaries of their mainland business partners as well as shifting state policies at the internal border. People can often “fake it” in such rapidly changing circumstances, moving from the centre to the periphery of class, wealth, and gender norms with dizzying speed. This is illustrated in the roller-coaster life story of Anna the housewife in Flora Lau’s 2013 film *Bends*, who rises from humble origins and is then pitched into a dramatic decline in fortunes as she is abandoned by her husband. Neo-liberal capitalism has also resulted in the feminization of migration patterns, in the movement of Chinese women to Mexico, or in the flow of female domestic labour to Hong Kong. Marchetti’s insight that “women negotiate borders differently,” could also be applied to Villalever’s article that highlights how women hailing from different regions of China and speaking different languages have negotiated their positions as transnational agents, but also as marginal outsiders in Mexico’s informal economy.

The margins are therefore essentially porous and precarious zones in themselves, and their contours and visibility are circumscribed by the caprices of the State. This is particularly the case in Pieragastini’s article where rapidly shifting policies towards private land ownership of bride lands in the 1950s had a seesawing effect for minority women, rendering them at the mercy of local and national cadres’ powerplay. Who

<sup>39</sup> For example: Du Ping, “Chongshen jiaochaxing nanxingtezhi de liluntipoyuyanjiuqishi 重申交叉性:男性特质的理论突破与研究启示 [Reaffirming the Crossing: Theoretical Breakthrough of Male Trait and the Research Inspiration]”, *Nankai xuebao* 南开学报 [Nankai Journal], 4, 2017, pp. 101–110; Du Ping, *Nangong, nügong: Dangdai Zhongguo nongmingong de xingbie, jiating yu qianyi* 男工女工: 当代中国农民工的性别、家庭与迁移 [Factory Boys, Factory Girls: Gender, Family and the Migration of Rural People in Contemporary China], Hong Kong, The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> L. McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30/3, 2005, pp. 1771–1800.

gets to speak for and from the margins is also controlled by the State. A similar power dynamic is at work in Ekinci's work, where former shepherdess Shalamaiti is made to speak with the voice of the State in her stage performances of Uyghur women's new subjectivity, thus enacting her transformation from "helpless victim" of a supposedly "backward patriarchy" to enlightened and productive State subject. Those who are empowered by the centre to speak "for" and "from" the margins accordingly face a double process of marginalization and self-erasure: they must conform to the narrative of the paternalist centre in order to be made visible and able to speak.

Some articles allow us a fragmentary peep inside the margins from the perspective of those living there. The articles highlight the affective and embodied impacts of life on the margins. In Liu's article we are allowed a view into the embodied emotional effects of precarity on the queer identity construction of both Fan Qihui and their drag-queen stage persona Bilang de Linphél, as presented in Qiu Jiongjiong's 2010 film *Madame*. Marchetti's article highlights the physical toll pushed onto gendered labouring and aging bodies within Hong Kong's underfunded public healthcare system. Women's bodies on public display in Mexico's informal markets are subjected to sexualization and harassment in Villalever's work. The health, labour and reproductive potential of minority women's bodies come under state interference and are subject to campaigns in both Pieragastini's and Ekinci's contributions. And while the inner world of the twirling Shalamaiti who performs her 'modern gendered Uyghur identity' on stage remains unknown, the reader wonders what the affective impact is on Shalamaiti as her body becomes both a site of precarity and the promise of a better tomorrow.

Negotiating the precarity of life on the margins and its embodied affects, is also a concern of this issue. As Marchetti highlights, those living in such rapidly changing circumstances must have a "chameleon-like" ability in order to survive. Mutual dependency and trust are also key power dynamics at play as actors negotiate their marginal existences. Villalever uncovers a relationship of mutual dependency and allyship between Chinese and Mexican women in the informal economy in Mexico City, in which the main ingredient for success is mutual trust. While Marchetti also illustrates relationships of mutual dependency at many levels, such as that between Hong Kong and China, in which the main feature is mutual suspicion, the power dynamics that they entail are also made clear. Intersections of class, age and gender create mutual dependencies between Roger and her employer Ah Tao in Ann Hui's 2011 film *A Simple Life*. However, Roger's emotional dependency on Ah Tao can be seen as less existential than that of Ah Tao's economic dependency on Roger, without whom she would not be able to pay for her care. Meanwhile Shalamaiti's career as a Uyghur performer is absolutely dependent on the paternalism of the state in Ekinci's article.

As such, all of the articles highlight the exclusions, but also at times the possibilities, that being on the margins of China represent. In Gina Marchetti's work, the relative marginality of Hong Kong women filmmakers within their industry both exclude and empower them. They work from a place of relative privilege in contrast to the workers they depict despite their own marginalisation within the film industry, and use this privilege partly to tell others' stories, partly for their own advancement. They rely on *guanxi* in their productions, but also use their cross-border positions,

networks, mastery of the English language, and fewer travel restrictions to benefit from the cosmopolitanism of Hong Kong society and get access to global networks and audiences. In Ximena Alba Villalever's work, Chinese women in Mexico also benefit from their position as interlocutors who have access to transnational networks, while they remain in positions of vulnerability as women and visible foreigners in the often violent, male dominated world of the informal economy. In both Steven Pieragastini and Arianne Ekinci's work, minority women benefit from their exclusion from state campaigns and control: minority women are able to keep a higher proportion of their bride lands for private cultivation before the Great Leap Forward, and Uyghur women of the early PRC who manage to go beyond the reaches of the state's view also move beyond its control. On the other hand, this invisibility means that they are excluded from access to state benefits including healthcare.

Taken together, these articles reveal how the constantly fluid constellations of gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity continue to define and circumscribe the margins of China, yesterday and today. We learn of the extent to which marginal identities can empower, while they simultaneously exclude, and how the affective bodily experience of living on the peripheries is negotiated through layers of mutual dependency, the ability to adapt, transform and perform according to continually changing state and market demands that is crucial to survival in these precarious spaces. In the process of construction of the margins in China, questions remain about the locus of power. If, as scholars of postcolonial history have taught us, the centre and the periphery are mutually constitutive, where and how do the peripheries of China impact on the identity formulations of a male, heteronormative Han-Chinese centre? And, in final analysis, what does the experience of precarity in China, constructed through these intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality tell us about the ways in which state-sponsored Chinese nationalism has flexed itself to subsume and appropriate the voice of the margins, for its own ends?

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# Intersections of Gender, Generation, and Class at Hong Kong's Border

*Precarious Peripheries in Ann Hui's A Simple Life (2011) and Flora Lau's Bends (2013)*

Gina Marchetti

## Introduction

At the margins of a male-dominated film industry and working at the border between Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China (PRC), female directors struggle to make a living in an often tense cross-border business environment. Moreover, the demands of globalization exacerbate the competition local filmmakers face in their efforts to exploit the expanding motion picture market on the Chinese mainland. Nevertheless, Hong Kong female filmmakers still manage to tell stories about women from the margins of society who navigate the uncertainties of life in the nebulous border regions of Chinese society. Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* (2011) and Flora Lau's *Bends* (2013) make use of the border between Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China to explore stories about women marginalized by their reliance on men, as well as Hong Kong's increasing economic dependence on mainland China.

Based on the experiences of film producer Roger Lee Yan-Lam (played by actor Andy Lau on screen), *A Simple Life* narrates the story of his elderly housekeeper's transition to a nursing home after she suffers a debilitating stroke. *A Simple Life* effectively uses the Hong Kong film business as a backdrop to explore the changing class dynamics of the territory in the years following the Handover by contrasting the glamour of the entertainment industry with the "simple life" shared by Roger and his domestic helper Ah Tao (Deanie Ip). Because she relies on Roger's precarious status within the film business, Ah Tao is doubly dependent on the good graces of her employer as well as his standing in the Chinese-language film market with its rapidly shifting fortunes.

*Bends* also deals with an "upstairs-downstairs" story in which the difficulties a chauffeur Fai (mainland star Chen Kun) has in finding a maternity hospital for

his mainland wife, pregnant with their second child, parallel the precipitous fall in economic circumstances of a wealthy woman Anna (Carina Lau) suddenly abandoned by her husband. *Bends* concretely displays the gendered nature of the bourgeois housewife's social class status through her reliance on her husband's financial success that ostensibly depends on his mainland Chinese business connections.

The cross-border nature of the films' narratives highlights the ways in which gender inflects class, age, and status at the margins of Hong Kong and mainland Chinese society. As businessmen rely on mainland China to generate profits, the cross-border mistress replaces the pampered "trophy" wife as an indicator of social status, and, as geopolitical labor relations transform domestic service in the territory, temporary domestic workers from Southeast Asia provide an alternative to local labor. The Hong Kong socialite in *Bends* as well as the faithful amah in *A Simple Life* represent a vanished era of the territory's history. Their families have scattered to other parts of the globe, and post-colonial Hong Kong moves even further to the margins of the Chinese-speaking world. This analysis<sup>1</sup> accordingly focuses on the impact of the border in defining the identities of the female protagonists in *Bends* and *A Simple Life*. Pushed to the periphery of a male-dominated Chinese society, these women struggle to survive as they navigate fluctuating class and gender constraints at the borders of a rapidly changing world.

## Intersectional Precarity in Hong Kong-PRC Cross-Border Productions

In an essay published in 1989, legal scholar and feminist theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the notion of "intersectionality" to discuss the way in which gender and race intersect to magnify the marginalization of African American women in the United States.<sup>2</sup> As the concept evolved over the next decades, intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, religion, (dis)ability, age, and other markers of identity began pointing to the various ways in which power hierarchies must be understood in nuanced terms to facilitate meaningful social change. The border between mainland China and Hong Kong produces its own particular anxieties involving intersectional identities, with gender playing a key role in relation to class, age, language, nationality and immigration status.

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<sup>1</sup> Research for this article was partially funded by a GRF (General Research Fund) award, "Gendered Screens, Chinese Dreams: Women Filmmakers and the Rise of China in the Twenty-First Century," Research Grants Council, Hong Kong, 2019-2021. (HKU17612818) Many thanks to Georgina Challen and Louis Lu Yu, who helped prepare this article for publication.

<sup>2</sup> K. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 1989, pp. 139-167. Reprinted in D. Kairys (ed.), *The Politics of Law: A Progressive Critique*, New York, Pantheon, 1990, pp. 195-217.

Even after Hong Kong's change in status from a British colony to a Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China on 1 July 1997, a hard border continues to produce contradictory feelings of security and anxiety. Events such as the 2019 protests against a proposed extradition bill that would have made it easier for mainland Chinese authorities to demand the transfer of suspects for trials, as well as the 2020 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis in which health care workers went on an unprecedented strike to demand stricter border controls to mitigate the spread of the disease point to two instances that illustrate Hong Kong residents' feelings about the threat posed by a permeable border.<sup>3</sup> From mainland China's perspective, unruly Hong Kong symbolizes the promise of a more unfettered market, a less monitored society, and the advantages of the "rule of law." However, its educational, legal, and political systems also threaten one-party rule and the certitude of social "harmony" assured by the great Internet firewall that maintains an illusion of ideological coherence. With each one suspicious of and yet fully dependent on the other, Hong Kong finds itself on the margins of an exponentially larger economy across the border, while Chinese immigrants to Hong Kong suffer from being marginalized as parasites and "locusts" who bring disease, buy up essentials such as baby formula, drive locals out of the property market by buying luxury condominiums, and strain social services ranging from transportation and hospitals to schools and public housing.

Border-crossers traverse sexual, class, and income divides, and their intersectional identities create a broad spectrum of precarious legal, social, and economic positions. In *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011), Guy Standing points to Chinese migrant workers in Prato, Italy, as an example of the ways in which migration upends local class stratifications.<sup>4</sup> A trickle that began in 1989 with fewer than forty workers increased exponentially over the years. Standing, in *The Precariat*, does not discuss the gender of Prato's laborers. However, he eloquently explains the "feminization" of the global workforce in other contexts, and this can be seen in Prato as well. Although men and women work in these Prato sweatshops, female workers experience migration differently. In *Meet Me in Venice: A Chinese Immigrant's Journey from the Far East to the Faraway West*, Suzanne Ma uncovers the extraordinary difficulties faced by female migrant laborers in Italy.<sup>5</sup> Barbie Latza Nadeau points out in her article "Italy's Garment-Factory Slaves" (2013) that Chinese women routinely face human trafficking, kidnapping, forced prostitution, sexual harassment, and rape.<sup>6</sup> Women migrant workers within China often face similar conditions, and gender plays a role in the politics of Hong Kong migration as well. Women navigate borders differently, and the intersection of gender with increasingly precarious economic relations created by globalization and neoliberal economic policies shape lives on both sides of the Hong Kong-mainland China border.

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<sup>3</sup> The bill was withdrawn, but the People's Republic of China imposed the sweeping National Security Law on the HKSAR on July 1, 2020, in its place.

<sup>4</sup> G. Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> S. Ma, *Meet Me in Venice: A Chinese Immigrant's Journey from the Far East to the Faraway West*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> B. Latza Nadeau, "Italy's Garment-Factory Slaves", *Daily Beast*, 20 August 2013, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/italys-garment-factory-slaves> (accessed 4 April 2021).

In *A Simple Life* and *Bends*, the female characters lead lives marginalized by their gender as well as their relationship to the border. In *A Simple Life*, for example, Ah Tao relies on the economic fortunes of her employer Roger, whose livelihood increasingly depends on the health of the film industry in mainland China. After her stroke, she depends on the availability of cheaper, primarily female, labour from across the border to staff the nursing home in which she resides. In *Bends*, Anna's fortunes follow her husband Leo's success in China, until he mysteriously disappears. Her chauffeur's wife ends up in the most precarious circumstances, since she depends on her Hong Kong-employed husband to find a way for her to deliver their second child across the border. When his employer's family implodes, he struggles at the margins of the cross-border economy, forced to rely on the shaky status of his female boss.

## Filming across Borders

*A Simple Life* and *Bends* illustrate the particularly precarious nature of the economy for women behind the camera as well, since the financial relations illustrated in their films' narratives parallel the world in which the creative talents behind the scenes operate. Mainland Chinese company PolyBona, with ties to the business branch of the People's Liberation Army, partially funded *A Simple Life*, and Bona Group's head, Yu Dong, makes a cameo appearance in the film. In fact, Hong Kong filmmakers share a history of cross-border production with the People's Republic of China dating back decades, and they have considerable experience telling stories that reflect their own experiences as cross-border cultural workers.

Before *A Simple Life*, Hui made *Ah Kam* (*Stunt Woman*, 1996), featuring Michelle Yeoh in the eponymous role, which also narrates a story about cross-border film production and the precarious nature of the Chinese-language film business.<sup>7</sup> Many in Hui's New Wave cohort maintain ties to mainland Chinese producers, and both *A Simple Life* and *Bends* draw on the same network of Hong Kong New Wave talent. Tsui Hark appears in Ann Hui's film and his now ex-wife and longtime business partner Nansun Shi produced *Bends*. As a story based on the reminiscences of producer Roger Lee, who had worked with Ann Hui and Tsui Hark on other projects, *A Simple Life* contains several cameo appearances by other industry regulars including Sammo Hung and Anthony Wong. For *Bends*, the New Wave connections include Wong Kar-Wai's regular cinematographer Christopher Doyle serving as the Director of Photography. Another Wong Kar-Wai collaborator, William Chang, known for his work as production designer, costumer, and editor in films by Tsui Hark, Yim Ho, Stanley Kwan, and Patrick Tam, assists as Art Director. Moreover, Flora Lau attended

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<sup>7</sup> For more on this film in relation to Michelle Yeoh's career, see T. Williams, "Michelle Yeoh: Under Eastern Eyes", *Asian Cinema*, 12/2, 2001, pp. 119–131.

the same film school in London as Ann Hui, and she thanks her fellow alumna in the credits for *Bends*.<sup>8</sup>

Being at the margins of mainland cinema enables the creative talent involved in both films to take advantage of networks that extend beyond China's borders, since they speak English, enjoy fewer travel restrictions, and benefit from the cosmopolitanism of post-colonial Hong Kong society.<sup>9</sup> As Ruby Cheung points out in her book *New Hong Kong Cinema, A Simple Life* (2016) made money on both sides of the border as well as within the regional market.<sup>10</sup> Esther Yau notes in "Watchful Partners, Hidden Currents: Hong Kong Cinema Moving into the Mainland of China" (2015) that the brief appearance of Yu Dong in Hui's film provides "a vignette of the budget-and-profit centered conversations and a mercenary approach as the centerpiece of mainland-centered partnerships after CEPA [2003 Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement] came into effect."<sup>11</sup>

The impact of CEPA can also be seen in scenes featuring Grasshopper (Anthony Wong) as a former stuntman/action choreographer who has moved into the more lucrative nursing home industry.<sup>12</sup> As Mirana M. Szeto and Yun-Chung Chen point out in their research on the post-CEPA Hong Kong industry, the changes in production arrangements have hit below-the-line workers particularly hard, since they do not have the same level of expertise and celebrity as directors, scriptwriters, cinematographers, and star performers.<sup>13</sup> Roger and Grasshopper thereby navigate the cross-border economy as men in a male-dominated business; however, as *Ah Tao*, the Chinese title of *A Simple Life*, underscores, the narrative revolves around the eponymous *Elder Sister Tao* (*Tao Jie*, literally "peach sister" in English). Both Roger and his elderly domestic helper are, in essence, dependent on the volatile Chinese film business. They share a "simple life," and the film draws a parallel between Ah Tao's dependence on Roger and his dependence on China.

<sup>8</sup> A. Heskins, "An Interview with Flora Lau (*Bends*)", *easternkicks.com*, 5 November 2013, <https://www.easternkicks.com/features/an-interview-with-flora-lau-bends> (accessed 4 April 2021).

<sup>9</sup> For more on cross-border film production, see M.M. Szeto and Y.C. Chen, "Mainlandization or Sinophone Translocality? Challenges for Hong Kong SAR New Wave Cinema", *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 6/2, 2012, pp. 115–134.

<sup>10</sup> R. Cheung, *New Hong Kong Cinema: Transitions to Becoming Chinese in 21st-century East Asia*, New York, Berghan Books, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> E.C.M. Yau, "Watchful Partners, Hidden Currents: Hong Kong Cinema Moving into the Mainland of China", in E.M.K. Cheung, G. Marchetti and E.C.M. Yau (eds.), *A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema*, Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell Press, 2015, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> M.M. Szeto and Y.C. Chen, "To Work or Not To Work: The Dilemma of Hong Kong Film Labour in the Age of Mainlandization", *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 55, 2013. (<http://ejumpcut.org/archive/jc55.2013/SzetoChenHongKong/index.html>) (accessed 4 April 2021).

<sup>13</sup> M.M. Szeto and Y.C. Chen, "Mainlandization and Neoliberalism with Post-colonial and Chinese Characteristics: Challenges for the Hong Kong Film Industry", in J. Kapur and K.B. Wagner (eds.), *Neoliberalism and global cinema: capital, culture, and Marxist critique*, New York, Routledge, 2011, pp. 239–260.

## Keeping Up and Playing Down Appearances

The film places both characters at the edges of Hong Kong society, and its peculiar charm relies on the notion that they share a cross-gender, cross-class, cross-generational bond. Wearing blue windbreakers, caps, and backpacks, Roger is mistaken for an air-conditioner repairman and a taxi driver as well as being unquestioningly accepted as his maid Ah Tao's godson or nephew rather than employer. The ease with which Ah Tao can pass as his aunt with the application of a little make-up, jewelry, and hand-me-downs from Roger's mother confirms that performing across the class divide does not take considerable skill in a society in which roller-coaster capitalism can boost or ruin prospects at the speed of light. Although the story of the faithful family servant and the loyal employer seems to belong to another age, their chameleon-like ability to cross classes speaks to the fracturing of identity in postmodern capitalism, where performativity overshadows any illusion of essence.

In *Bends*, keeping up appearances takes on different connotations on each side of the border and at each level of the social hierarchy. Male chauffeur Fai hides his wife's second pregnancy with a plan to sneak her from Shenzhen to Hong Kong in order to deliver the baby. In doing so, Fai and Ting Ting (Tian Yuan) hope to circumvent the punitive fees attached to having a forbidden second child under China's One Child Policy in force at the time of the film's production.<sup>14</sup> They school their first child, daughter Hai Hai, to say that her mother has gone to visit her grandmother in their village. When Hai Hai eagerly tells a stranger, Fai tells her that she only needs to tell the story to those who ask about Ting Ting's absence. As a preschooler, then, Hai Hai learns to perform a role necessitated by her family's low class standing and inability to pay the fine for a younger sibling. Indeed, their marginal social position forces each member of the family into dishonesty. While ostensibly performing the role of the faithful husband and servant, Fai, in fact, does his best to seduce his former girlfriend, a nurse in a maternity hospital, and charm her into writing an admittance letter for his wife, just as he secretly steals parts from his employer's Mercedes-Benz to help finance his scheme.

Even though Fai possesses the proper documents to work in Hong Kong, his precarious economic circumstances lead him into the risky, underground shadow economy of counterfeit auto parts. However, his border town existence between Shenzhen and Hong Kong is concretely manifested on screen by the constant movement of people transporting cardboard cartons of goods and engaging in parallel trading of lucrative commodities such as infant milk powder. Topically referring to the 2008 scandal of melamine-tainted formula sickening thousands of babies in China and leading to several deaths due to kidney failure, *Bends* subtly uses hawkers in the background of its scenes at the Lo Wu checkpoint to highlight the endemic corruption underpinning

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<sup>14</sup> The policy changed in October 2015 to allow most married couples a second child. For more on the One Child Policy, see M. Fong, *One Child: The Story of China's Most Radical Experiment*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016; see also N. Wang and J. Zhang's documentary *One Child Nation* (2019).

cross-border society.<sup>15</sup> Following a Hollywood screen tradition in which border towns signal crime and violence (e.g., *Touch of Evil*, 1958 ; *Bordertown*, 1935), *Bends* joins a number of films that take up the urban border shared by Hong Kong and mainland China in similar ways (e.g., *Running on Karma*, 2003 ; *Durian Durian*, 2000 ; *Night and Fog*, 2009 ; *A Touch of Sin*, 2013).<sup>16</sup> As Danica Van de Velde observes in her analysis of *Bends*: "...the divisive issues of identity and belonging are continually emphasized through the camera's focus on passports and identity documents, reinforcing the restrictions and obstacles to navigating both geographical and sociopolitical boundaries."<sup>17</sup>

Just as Fai puts on a show to hide his desperation, his employer, Anna, engages in a similar performance to hide the fact that she was abandoned by her husband Leo (Lawrence Cheng). Leo has left Anna scrounging for money and struggling to keep up the appearance of a prosperous and glamorous "trophy" wife or *tai tai*, the pampered spouse who displays the wealth of her bourgeois husband. Before Leo exits the picture, the film introduces Anna as adept at playing this role of socialite. She first appears on screen applying face powder in the backseat of her Mercedes-Benz while preparing for a dance class. The thematic connection between physical appearances and the superficiality of social class distinctions becomes subsequently clear when her hairdresser tells her that her credit card has been declined. She pays with cash instead, but losing the power and prestige of plastic to consume goods and services marks the beginning of her precipitous descent.

*Bends* concretely displays the gendered nature of Anna's class status through her dependence on her husband's financial success and social standing. Her own upper-class identity, as a result, rests on Leo's commitment to their marriage. Leo, in fact, blends gender, risk, and business when he criticises one of his associates by saying : "Why can't you be more decisive ? You're such a woman sometimes. Let's go sign the deal." The two men are seen chatting in the rear of a composition obscured by out-of-focus objects in the foreground, and the haze of the relationship between masculine potency, money, and women's class standing clouds the few glimpses of Leo in the film.

The film in fact shows only the consequences of his abandonment – useless credit cards, unpaid bills, frozen bank accounts, real estate agents demanding entry to put her home on the market, and a scramble to get as much cash out of their common property as possible before the entire façade of her life as a *tai tai* at the top of Hong Kong's exclusive Victoria Peak crashes down around her. When Anna pays a visit to Leo's office to try to find him, moving boxes and a view to the container port outside point to his investment in an economy marked by rapid change and the ability to pack up and relocate at a moment's notice.

The English title of the film plays on the homophone that connects the luxury car brand Mercedes-Benz to the crippling effects divers experience when rising too quickly

<sup>15</sup> T. Branigan, "Three die in tainted baby milk scandal in China", *The Guardian*, 18 September 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/sep/18/china> (accessed 4 April 2021).

<sup>16</sup> For an illuminating analysis of gender and geography in *Bends*, see D. Van de Velde, "On the Threshold: Urban Exchange and Intervention in Flora Lau's *Bends* (2013)", *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*, 11/1, 2017, pp. 180–205.

<sup>17</sup> D. Van de Velde, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

in water. However, the Chinese title, which refers to crossing the border, alludes to another meaning of the word. As director Flora Lau explains :

*...I came up with that title because when I cross Hong Kong and Shenzhen, I always see the river. And the river is this really narrow bended river. That river really inspired me, the imagery of it, and what it means. It's such a small thing that can separate us SO much. So I wanted to name it after that curve, and also because of that sickness when you dive down and come up too quick. It kind of represents the people, the characters' feelings.<sup>18</sup>*

Both Fai and Anna, servant and mistress, mainland émigré and Hong Kong local, suffer from the twists and turns they experience as dependents in a household headed by an unreliable patriarch embodying the uncertainties of a new economy based on quick cross-border deals, counterfeit goods, and corruption.

Coming up “too quick” in the social hierarchy, Anna has risen in society presumably through marriage. Her humble origins in one of Hong Kong’s squatter villages become clear in a scene in which she returns to visit her mother, who runs a small horticulture business specializing in potted plants. The contrast between Anna’s mother’s modest potted shrubs and her own exquisite bonsai tree collection speaks to the enormous cultural and social as well as economic chasm between the women. Performing as a *tai tai*, strutting around town in designer heels, carrying oversized and overpriced handbags while wearing stunning designer necklaces, stylish sunglasses and kaftan dresses, takes considerable effort, and Anna must stay on her guard to maintain her class status, which she owes, as argued, to her husband’s financial and social position.

An expert at cultural and linguistic code-switching, Anna speaks to Fai in Cantonese or Mandarin and in English to her daughter, her Philippine domestic helper Rima, as well as her dog. Through the course of the film, Anna’s chameleon-like identity enables her to move through various social strata in a desperate quest to keep up her expensive lifestyle. Throughout *Bends*, Anna’s role as *tai tai* peels away as she descends into the gray areas of Hong Kong’s economy. In one scene, she goes to a casino, where she meets a man. She has sex with the high roller, steals money from him while he showers, and returns to her home to discover it has been ransacked. The juxtaposition of the two scenes indicates that Leo (perhaps Anna’s casino lover in disguise or in league with him) knew she would be out on the town long enough to get his belongings and key valuables without her knowledge. In another scene, Anna keeps an appointment with her circle of well-to-do female friends for tea at an exclusive café located at the Asia Society in Admiralty, a posh area on Hong Kong Island. She has sent Fai to cash a check so she can pay the bill and sweats anxiously through the conversation about teenagers, Facebook, and shoes before her chauffeur returns with the cash. Her ability to treat her friends cloaks her financially precarious circumstances.

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<sup>18</sup> “Exclusive Interview With ‘Bends’ Director Flora Lau”, *Hong Kong Hustle*, November 2013, <http://www.hongkonghustle.com/movies/15776/bends-flora-lau-hong-kong-movie-hk-carina-chen-kun-christopher-doyle/> (accessed 4 April 2021).



## The Precarity of the Glance

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant notes that the concept of “precarity” has “become elastic, describing an affective atmosphere penetrating all classes,” which reflects “the process of society as a whole becoming more precarious and basically destabilized.”<sup>19</sup> Berlant goes on to define a so-called “Cinema of Precarity” as follows:

*Returning to the hinge between the melodramatic realism associated with Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s and postwar Italian neorealism, the Cinema of Precarity melds melodrama and politics into a more reticent aesthetic to track the attrition of what had been sustaining national, social, economic, and political bonds and the abandonment of a variety of populations to being cast as waste...the films record the loneliness of collective singularity, the impacts of affective fraying, and the tiny optimism of recuperative gestures in the middle of it all, for those who can manage them.*<sup>20</sup>

This describes the aesthetic of both *A Simple Life* and *Bends* quite well. Visual restraint, attention to quotidian detail, and emotional excess come together to reinforce said “collective singularity” as traditional family structures disintegrate, older class hierarchies collapse, and men and women struggle at the border of an unpredictable economy. Anna, Fai, Ah Tao, and Roger all experience these struggles differently, and, although dependent on each other as employer and employee at the beginning of each film, their economic bonds weaken through the course of the narratives until they rupture completely.

Ann Hui and Flora Lau communicate the gendered nature of their characters’ marginalization through the positioning of the camera and the composition of the mise-en-scene in a way that challenges visual norms associated with the “male gaze.” In 1975, Laura Mulvey defined the “male gaze” of classical Hollywood in terms of a visual power regime in which women serve as passive objects of heterosexual males’ active look.<sup>21</sup> In those parts of the world where American film dominated the screens, the male gaze followed. However, Hui and Lau reveal a regime of looking that underscores women’s position at the periphery of the patriarchy in which they are dismissed by the “male *glance*.”

<sup>19</sup> L.G. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011, p. 201.

<sup>20</sup> L.G. Berlant, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>21</sup> L. Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Screen*, 16/3, 1975, p. 6-18. Mulvey revisits gaze theory in her 1982 article, “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946),” (in S. Thornham [ed.], *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 122–130) in which she takes into account the experience of the female spectator oscillating between male and female perspectives. In an important contribution to gaze theory, bell hooks noted that the ‘oppositional gaze’ associated with spectators such as African American women who seldom see themselves on screen for any length of time highlights the intersectional power dynamics at play in Hollywood visual culture (see *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Boston, South End Press, 1992). In 2016, Jill Soloway delivered a passionate speech on the topic of the ‘female gaze,’ which updates the concept for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see “The Female Gaze” TIFF: Master Class, *Topple Productions*, 11 September 2016, <https://www.toppleproductions.com/the-female-gaze/>) (accessed 4 April 2021).

Lili Loofbourow argues that the overinvestment in the male gaze minimizes women's importance as fully functioning characters in narratives that only "glance" at them as human beings. In mainstream cinema, for example, a viewer's perfunctory look at a female character enables the spectator to discern everything significant about her:

*The male glance is the opposite of the male gaze. Rather than linger lovingly on the parts it wants most to penetrate, it looks, assumes, and moves on. It is, above all else, quick. Under its influence, we rejoice in our distant diagnostic speed. It feeds an inchoate, almost erotic hunger to know without attending – to reject without taking the trouble of analytical labour because our intuition is so searingly accurate that it doesn't require it ... Rather than investigate or discover, we point and classify.<sup>22</sup>*

Indeed, the glance may be more damaging than the gaze since domestic figures such as the housemaid and the trophy wife can easily be categorized and dismissed. *A Simple Life* and *Bends* begin with Roger and Leo merely glancing at Ah Tao and Anna, and the female protagonists only really get a peek at the men so central to their livelihoods as their stories begin to unfold. Rich and poor, these dependent women remain at the edges of Hong Kong society as an afterthought in what the late Jean-François Lyotard might have called the "grand narrative" of the "rise" of China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>23</sup>

In a male-defined world of public action, women find themselves consigned to the seclusion of the private sphere. In the so-called "woman's film"<sup>24</sup> aimed at female audiences, with women embroiled in romantic or family dramas, domestic spaces serve as physical symbols of the female protagonists' class status and state of mind.<sup>25</sup> In both *Bends* and *A Simple Life*, the women – mistress and servant – take the lead in organising household objects as well as setting domestic routines. However, the domestic sphere remains marginal in a world that demands public engagement with the global economy. Men simply glance at women in the kitchen before moving out into the world.

The last glimpse Anna has of Leo, for example, comes early in *Bends*.

<sup>22</sup> L. Loofbourow, "The male glance : how we fail to take women's stories seriously", *The Guardian*, 6 March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/06/the-male-glance-how-we-fail-to-take-womens-stories-seriously> (accessed 4 April 2021).

<sup>23</sup> J.-Fr. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

<sup>24</sup> For more on the 'woman's film' see M. Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2016, pp. 153–188.

<sup>25</sup> See Th. Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama" and L. Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama", in C. Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, London, British Film Institute, 1987, pp. 43–69 and pp. 75–82, as well as Ch. Kleinhans, "Notes on Melodrama and the Family under Capitalism", in M. Landy (ed.), *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1991, pp. 197–204.

**Figure 1.** With an insouciant grin, Leo pokes his head through the frosted glass partition in the following scene to grab a snack on his way out the door – and out of Anna’s life in *Bends*. Frame grab



The partition separates her domestic sphere of consumption from her husband’s public role as provider, and the haziness of the barrier between these gendered spaces parallels the narrative’s failure to give any specific reasons for Leo’s decision to leave Anna and liquidate all their shared property. He may have gambled on a risky venture and lost, or he may plan to use bankruptcy to hide assets in a divorce; Anna, however, experiences Leo’s disappearance as sudden, unexpected, and irrational.

In *A Simple Life*, Roger, too, merely glances at the faithful servant he takes for granted before Ah Tao’s stroke separates them. In an early scene, Ah Tao serves Roger his meal of steamed fish, crab, and seasonal vegetables, which she carefully selected at the local wet market, at the kitchen table. Roger takes her service for granted and does not bother to look at her as she provides his meal.

**Figure 2.** Roger takes Ah Tao’s service for granted and does not bother to glance at her as she provides his meal in *A Simple Life*. Frame grab



He eats his dessert with his tea and fruit in the living room, and they chat as Ah Tao stands in the doorway eating her own bowl of rice for supper. Their conversation revolves around food, and Ah Tao warns that the ox tongue Roger craves contravenes doctor's orders to stay away from fatty meats because of his cardiac condition. However, close ups of the preparation of the dish speak to the fact that Ah Tao cannot deny the "young" master his wish. Later, after Ah Tao moves to the nursing home, Roger's middle-aged friends discover the delicacy in the freezer and call the cook to reminisce with her about their youth. Out of sight, only traces of Ah Tao's existence remain in Roger's apartment.

When she suffers her stroke, Ah Tao is on duty near the washing machine in the kitchen, and, later, Ah Tao and Roger go through her personal effects in the same room. The first five dollars she earned in service, Roger's embroidered baby sling, and his movie magazines that were forbidden by his strict parents all speak to her role as part of the warmth and succor of the kitchen. After her hospitalisation, Ah Tao's relationship with her now former employer changes, and they sit together sharing a newly discovered intimacy.

**Figure 3.** Roger and Ah Tao sit together sharing a newly discovered intimacy in *A Simple Life*. Frame grab



Gazing at the remnants of a shared past, Ah Tao and Roger gradually become able to look at each other more genuinely.

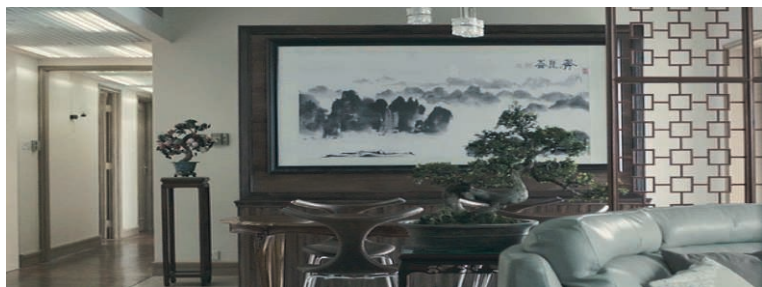
## Domesticity at the Border

When Roger searches for Ah Tao's replacement, he is startled by the realisation that migrant labour has changed the nature of domestic service. He comes to appreciate the fact that no one can compete with Ah Tao, and, in a comic scene in which the retired maid interviews prospective replacements, the women clearly cannot measure up to her high standards. The applicants refuse to do dangerous work such as cleaning

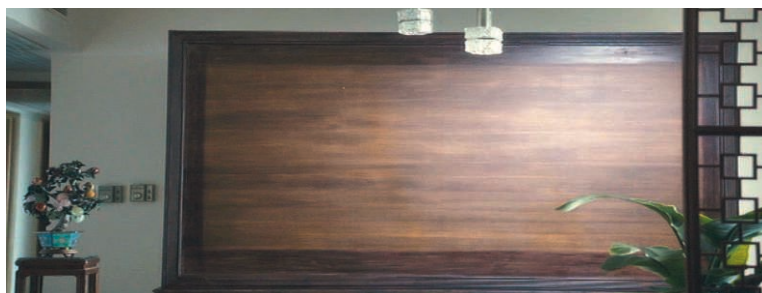
windows, touch men's underwear, serve guests, cook rice in clay pots rather than electric rice cookers, and buy fresh seafood according to a strict schedule. Rather than hire any of these prospective domestic helpers, frugal Roger takes up Ah Tao's house cleaning duties and even helps to clean her room at the nursing home. However, he never quite manages to match her cooking skills, so Roger takes Ah Tao to dine at the local *cha chaan teng* (neighborhood diner) and later in the film is even seen eating bowls of noodles out of Styrofoam containers.

*Bends* portrays the changing nature of the domestic sphere in a more affluent environment. As hostess, Anna commands her kitchen with Rima, her Filipina domestic helper, on hand to help. However, Anna's life, as wife and mother, revolves around the living room and bedrooms more than the kitchen. The clutter in her daughter's room, vacated because she went to study abroad, and the devastation of Anna's own bedroom concretize the chaos of her life after Leo's disappearance. To restore a sense of balance in her life, Anna calls in a *feng shui* master who uses an elaborate wheel to calculate the best positions for her household objects. He recommends changing the direction of her bed, purchasing gold elephants to guard her door, and for her to wear more purple. She enlists Rima to help with moving the furniture, including a heavy marble fountain; however, the advice does not improve Anna's circumstances. A shot of the frame empty of the elegant Chinese landscape painting that previously dominated the living room concretizes Anna's loss.

**Figure 4.** An elegant Chinese landscape painting dominates the living room in *Bends*. Frame grab



**Figure 5.** Its disappearance marks the loss of Anna's class standing. Frame grab



Eventually, she packs up the antique art objects her husband left behind to sell to a dealer across the border in Shenzhen – moving, like her chauffeur, into the shadow economy of cash for Chinese antiquities. As she packs up vases and scrolls, she packages these precious artefacts to monetize her own cultural capital. Visually, as Anna wraps up these markers of her husband’s good taste, the composition narrows to box her in as well. Implicitly she so becomes another decorative object to be traded, commenting on the narrow confines of her formerly pampered life now closing in on her.

**Figure 6.** Anna boxed in along with the objects she wraps for sale in *Bends*. Frame grab



The difference between Anna’s and Fai’s homes provides a concrete contrast in class circumstances in *Bends*. Modest, but far from dilapidated, what stands out in the Shenzhen apartment involves Ting Ting’s attempts to conceal her presence from the neighbours. She artfully uses screens as well as newspaper and magazine clippings to obscure the view from the windows. However, whether these attempts to use collage to hide her pregnancy draws more rather than less attention to the inhabitants of the flat remains moot.

**Figure 7.** Ting Ting artfully uses newspaper and magazine clippings to obscure the view from the windows in *Bends*. Frame grab



Ann Hui and Flora Lau use ‘empty’ shots of spaces devoid of human inhabitants to comment on loss, emptiness, and the melancholy at the heart of *A Simple Life* and

*Bends*. In *A Simple Life*, the camera lingers on the vacant living room couch or the interior of the apartment after the characters leave the frame. In *Bends*, an empty shot of a small bonsai tree on a table in front of a window, framing a mountain, between two chairs flanked by curtains, speaks to the serenity of a natural order that transcends the impending collapse of Anna's bourgeois household. Objects take on a life of their own outside the drama and comment on the transitory quality of life and the precariousness of the characters' material circumstances.

## Class and Care

*A Simple Life* and *Bends* stage key parts of their narratives in care institutions. In *Bends*, Fai struggles to get his wife admitted to a maternity center in Hong Kong, and the film details his frustration as he makes repeated trips to several health facilities in vain. In *A Simple Life*, Roger shops for a suitable nursing home for Ah Tao, and the preponderance of the film chronicles her life there before her death. Taken together, the films cover birth and death through Hong Kong care institutions and uncover the role money and class clout play in defining women's biological lives.

Director Ann Hui is no stranger to stories dealing with Hong Kong's aging population. Her acclaimed 1995 feature *Summer Snow* deals with a middle-aged woman (the Chinese title of the film is *Woman at Forty*), played by actress Josephine Siao, who cares for her elderly father-in-law with Alzheimer's disease, precisely because she cannot find a suitable care facility to take him after his wife's death. In *A Simple Life*, Hui continues her authorial interest in both aging and social institutions – a topic she meticulously covered in *Night and Fog*, a searing drama on spousal abuse, which takes a victim of domestic violence on a journey from a battered women's shelter to the office of a social worker, district councillor, and police officer before she meets her death at the hands of her abusive husband.<sup>26</sup>

From the moment the ambulance transports Ah Tao to the hospital after her initial stroke to her deathbed in the film's penultimate scene before her funeral, *A Simple Life* offers a detailed picture of the ways in which elderly women move through Hong Kong's system of institutionalized care. This aspect of the film balances its more mundane treatment of Roger's increasingly intimate relationship with the family's loyal maid. As Ah Tao moves outside the domestic sphere, her world expands, and director Hui uses this opportunity to explore the operation of the nursing home as a for-profit institution as well as a microcosm of Hong Kong's social stratifications.

When Ah Tao announces from her hospital bed that she wants to retire and live in a nursing home, Roger agrees to help her. Although she offers to pay for the facility herself, Roger knows that he needs to foot the bill, subtly indicating that government

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<sup>26</sup> For more on *Night and Fog*, see G. Marchetti, "Feminism, Postfeminism, and Hong Kong Women Filmmakers", in E.M.K. Cheung, G. Marchetti and E.C.M. Yau (eds.), *A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema*, Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell Press, 2015, pp. 237–264.

subsidies supplemented by a domestic servant's meager savings would not provide suitable care. In fact, as Roger shops for a nursing home for Ah Tao, the lucrative nature of the business in caring for Hong Kong's aging population becomes abundantly clear. After haggling with the saleswoman at one facility, only Roger's unexpected personal connection to his old friend Grasshopper gives him confidence in the deal he strikes to secure a private room, with no extra charges for heating or air-conditioning, and discounted supplementary services for Ah Tao. Even with his "guanxi" personal connections, Roger has only managed to place Ah Tao in a mediocre facility.<sup>27</sup> Her "room" is a partitioned cubicle with a curtain serving as a door offering only minimal privacy. Although she feeds herself at the communal dinner table, other residents sit in an assembly line to be spoon-fed by an attendant wheeling from person to person in an office chair. Ah Tao's journey to the bathroom for her first night proves particularly challenging as she hobbles to the toilet only to find that she must return to her room for tissue paper. To guard against the smell, she stuffs two wads of paper into her nostrils before entering the cubicle.

Given that poor Hong Kong seniors often opt to move to mainland China to retire because of the much lower cost of living, all the residents in the nursing home appear to be vaguely "middle-class" by local standards. However, the film still uncovers a distinct class hierarchy. The oldest resident, for example, sits at the bottom, abandoned by a family that has left Hong Kong, and completely dependent on a small government allowance. At the highest rung, the Headmaster (Leung Tin) also seems isolated, but his dapper attire and a scene in which he leaves the facility in the company of a male Filipino helper indicate that he has financial means in addition to the cultural capital he flaunts by reciting classical Chinese poetry.

Passing as Roger's godmother, Ah Tao floats outside the home's social hierarchy. A visit from Roger's mother brings a precious gift of birds' nest soup to share. Residents assume Ah Tao is well-to-do and turn to her for financial help, but her skill with a needle also puts her in demand for domestic chores such as sewing buttons. She cleans her own room, but is tapped for cash by a male resident, Uncle Kin (Paul Chun), who uses the money to feed his sex addiction with a neighbourhood prostitute. When Roger discovers where the money went he attempts to clue Ah Tao in, but she already knows about Kin's vices and simply enjoys seeing him have some fun while he can. Vacillating between a maid and a matron, Ah Tao occupies a unique position in the nursing home as a single woman enjoying a close relationship with her former employer and patron Roger. Moreover, her unmarried status frees her from the constraints placed on widows in traditional Chinese households. Rather than being required to maintain a respectable veneer of bourgeois or Confucian propriety, Ah Tao can do as she pleases with her time and limited finances.

The residents, however, represent only one part of the class order in operation in the institution. Grasshopper staffs his facility with cheap labour from across the border, and Ms. Choi (played by PRC actress Qin Hailu) manages the facility but

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<sup>27</sup> For more on the importance of these personal connections to the fabric of contemporary Chinese society, see M.M.H. Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1994.



still offers to clean Roger's apartment to supplement her obviously inadequate wages. Fortunes may be rising in mainland China for businessmen like Yu Dong, but even professional women such as Ms. Choi struggle economically as they negotiate their economic prospects between the HKSAR and the PRC.

In *Bends*, too, the border exacerbates class divisions, and Fai struggles to find a maternity hospital for his wife because she does not have a Hong Kong resident's permit and he does not have the cash to pay her way into a private care facility. Fai spends considerable time in waiting rooms in hope of finding a clinic he can afford. One scene provides particularly poignant insight into the futility of his quest. It begins with a close-up of Fai in yet another reception area. He overhears a salesman speaking in Mandarin with a couple about having their baby in Hong Kong. Many agencies in the PRC profit not only from clients' desires to have a second child under the radar, but also market in the dream attached to the "anchor baby," whose legal residence in Hong Kong, or other territories outside mainland China, offers the possibility to relocate the entire family in the future.

The sales representative promises to "provide the full service" for the expectant couple, including a car to a hotel guaranteed to be five minutes from the maternity hospital. The father-to-be asks about the birth certificate, while Fai watches kids play in the waiting room, underscoring the fact that the children to be born in Hong Kong are not firstborn. The salesman tells the couple that Hong Kong associates will handle the birth certificate, ensuring that the child is legally registered. The young boy noisily playing in the waiting room does not care that he will soon be the only one in school with a younger sibling. As the embodiment of the spoiled "little emperors" created by China's One-Child Policy, he prefers to keep his parents exclusively to himself.<sup>28</sup> Shots of a manila envelope bulging with cash, and a currency machine noisily counting out the bills makes it clear that Fai cannot afford the cost, and he gets up to leave before he speaks to anyone on staff. Money determines the circumstances surrounding births as well as deaths in the cash economy, and economic class dictates access to private as well as subsidized facilities at beginning and end of life on both sides of the Chinese border.

## Gender Investments

Perhaps the most salient element uniting the families depicted in both films involves the characters' acceptance of the traditional Chinese gender hierarchy that favours males over females. As *A Simple Life* and *Bends* both point out, this investment sometimes pays off, but very often the rewards of favouring men over women do not compensate for the sacrifices involved in maintaining patriarchal privilege. Women depend on men and rely on male investment in the family, which puts women in a

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<sup>28</sup> See J. Steinfeld, *Little Emperors and Material Girls: Sex and Youth in Modern China*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2015.

particularly precarious position in an uncertain and volatile economy where men continue to earn more than women.

In *A Simple Life*, for example, the characters openly discuss the inequities of the system. Ah Tao would likely not have been abandoned as an infant and sent into domestic service as a youngster had she been male. The institution of the “black-and-white amah” has deep roots in Hong Kong’s colonial connections to Macau, India, and elsewhere in Asia where the term “amah” may connote a wet nurse in Portuguese or a “little mother” in Chinese.<sup>29</sup> Many of the women who went into domestic service wore “uniforms” of white Mandarin tunics over black trousers with their hair coiffed in braids. Some sworn spinsters known as “self-combed” women were escaping arranged marriages, and an unknown number cultivated lesbian relationships. Ah Tao wears plaid shirts, blue jackets, and oversized trousers that appear to be hand-me-downs from Roger. Moreover, she shuns Uncle Kin’s suggestion that she accompany him across the border to Shenzhen to check out a marriage market for senior citizens, and she appears to accept her spinsterhood with good humour when she compares her decision not to marry to Roger’s confirmed bachelorhood.

While enjoying certain liberties because of her unmarried status, it does not free her from economic dependence on others. As the film’s Chinese title indicates, Ah Tao can also be addressed as “elder sister,” and her fictive position in Roger’s family translates into a social position dependent on the fortunes of his family. Like all members of Roger’s large, extended, diasporic family, Ah Tao enjoys a valued place as an elder. Roger’s American-based relatives include her on their itinerary when they visit the former colony, as well as phone calls during the Lunar New Year holidays. When Ah Tao informs the nursing home residents that her family lives in the United States, she tells only a partial lie. When the colonial institution of servitude functions ideally, it does provide for these trusted female servants in perpetuity. Ah Tao may feel awkward when Roger’s nephew’s Korean-American wife hugs her, but she happily takes her place in the family photo with four generations, including the Asian American couple’s little boy dressed in traditional Korean clothing for his first birthday.

Ah Tao reaps the benefits of the two ethical-religious systems that determine her relationship with Roger – dynastic Chinese Confucianism and British colonial Christianity. Hong Kong provides a cultural melting pot in which various religious and philosophical positions overlap and reinforce each other. In the case of traditional beliefs associated with Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, Christian parallels can be found and have been encouraged by missionaries who came to Hong Kong to shore up the colonial system. When Roger’s sister rightly points out that Ah Tao favoured him as a boy during their childhood and connects it to his decision to take care of her in her old age, Roger counters that he feels an obligation to reward her for sticking by him during his heart attack. The Confucian sense of filial piety overlaps with a Christian duty to “love thy neighbour” and Ah Tao benefits as an elder. However, the coca colas, forbidden movie magazines, and scrupulous attention to Roger’s culinary

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<sup>29</sup> See L. Lim’s article, “Where Hong Kong got ‘amah’, old word for maidservant, from”, *Post Magazine*, 4 November 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/short-reads/article/2042648/where-hong-kong-got-amah-old-word-maidservant> (accessed 4 April 2021). Jacob Cheung’s *Intimates* (1997) also focuses on a Chinese woman in domestic service.

preferences ensured a closer connection between the amah and her male charge than with the young girls in her care.

Director Hui, however, carefully contrasts Ah Tao and Roger with another case in the elder care facility. Mrs. Kam clearly favours her son, who has abandoned her, while she shuns her filial daughter who dutifully visits. When the errant son neglects to pay his mother's bill, the daughter complains, but Mrs. Kam refuses to believe her son will not acknowledge his obligations. Later, the old woman refuses to go home with her daughter for the Lunar New Year because she deluded herself into believing her son plans to spend the holiday with her. When Mrs. Kam dies, only her daughter comes to the nursing home to pick up her effects, while the son clearly has no sentimental feelings about his mother's passing.

In fact, throughout the film, although women do support each other, their efforts appear to be in vain. For example, a young female resident of the nursing facility needs to be there in order to operate a kidney dialysis machine. Attended by her mother, the two women clearly lack the funds for better medical care, and they cry when a doctor orders them to leave the nursing home because the equipment seems to be inadequate. The young woman's empty room and elimination from the film's diegesis do not bode well, since the women seem unable to find the money for proper medical attention in a system subsidized inadequately by the city's government. Women without male patronage, in fact, suffer inordinately as a result, and this can be seen in both *A Simple Life* and *Bends*.

In *Bends*, patriarchal privilege dominates on both sides of the border. Fai and Ting Ting feel the need for a boy, since, presumably, they cannot count on Hai Hai's ability to care for them when they grow older. With neoliberal reforms, China's social safety net has weakened, and individuals can no longer depend on the commune or the state-run factory to provide pensions or retirement housing. Ting Ting risks arrest, injury, or even death to cross the border to give birth in Hong Kong. Fai nervously drives the Mercedes-Benz through the border checkpoint and, luckily, the car breaks down on the Hong Kong side. Miraculously, Ting Ting emerges from the trunk of the car in labour, and Fai manages to flag down a taxi to take her to the emergency room as planned.

While Fai and Ting Ting's fortunes may be on the rise at the end of *Bends*, Anna has pinned all her hopes on a man who has proven to be unreliable. No longer the pampered *tai tai* dependent on the fortunes of a prosperous spouse, Anna takes her bags out of the broken-down Mercedes-Benz and walks off towards an uncertain future. Anna as the Hong Kong socialite in *Bends*, as well as Ah Tao as the faithful amah in *A Simple Life*, both end up as fading relics of a patriarchal past. And yet, they do not point to a feminist future. Rather, as China's post-Reform Era neoliberal capitalism has created a new class structure based on global economic uncertainty, women's lives continue to be dependent on the class standing of their husbands, male relatives, or employers; their homes subject to the vicissitudes of the real estate market, and their prospects as wives, mothers, or employees subject still to patriarchal constraints. At opposite ends of the class divide, Ah Tao and Anna serve as reminders of the continuing perils of precarity in an uncertain economic order. The films thus speak to what Lauren Berlant has termed "new potential conditions of solidarity

emerging from subjects not with similar historical identities or social locations but with similar adjustment styles to the pressures of the emergent new ordinariness.”<sup>30</sup>

Seeing precarity through women’s eyes, Hui and Lau point to ways of comprehending the visual politics of the Chinese-speaking world from a perspective too often pushed to the margins of global cinema. For audiences watching their films beyond Hong Kong, Flora Lau and Ann Hui provide a way of experiencing a sense of “optimism” no matter how “cruel” life is at the cinematic borders of the Chinese-speaking world. While the international film festival circuit historically has marginalized female directors, Flora Lau’s debut of *Bends* at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival and the premiere of Ann Hui’s *A Simple Life* at the 68<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival in 2011 indicate that these films are making inroads into male-dominated screen culture. Indeed, *A Simple Life* was nominated for the Golden Lion in Venice; lead actress Deanie Ip won the Volpi Cup; and the film secured various other awards including the La Navicella Award (for “human values”), the Equal Opportunities Award, and Honorable Mention for the Roman Catholic SIGNIS award. In 2020, Hui became the first Chinese woman director to receive a lifetime achievement award from the Venice International Film Festival. While moving closer to the center of world cinema, female-directed films about women at the margins of the Chinese-speaking world remain at the borders of world cinema. However, they speak to gender and class hierarchies at the heart of contemporary global capitalism by acknowledging the precariousness of an existence that extends beyond the border between Hong Kong and the People’s Republic of China.

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<sup>30</sup> L.G. Berlant, *op.cit.*, pp. 201–202.

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# Chinese Women in Mexico City's Popular Markets: Building Trust Between *Guanxi* and *Comadrazgo*

Ximena Alba Villalever

## Introduction

Xialing<sup>1</sup> is sitting in the middle of her one-square-meter removable stand on the busy street leading to Metro San Cosme in Mexico City. While we talk, she attends to the passing clients of the commercial corridor, one of the city's many locations of the popular economy. Xialing is a 45-year-old woman from Taishan, in Guangdong province in China, and she arrived in Mexico in 2002. Her husband and their two young children joined her five years later; at the time of our interview, the two boys had already started their university studies in Mexico City, while the parents worked as petty vendors at their removable stand, where they sold spring rolls, fried rice, and assorted women's purses: "I make the food myself -she tells me- but the purses I buy from the Chinese in Tepito."<sup>2</sup>

Popular markets in Mexico –such as Tepito and the commercial corridor where Xialing and her husband work– are an important source of income for people who find themselves marginalized from formal employment; in Mexico City alone there are between 350,000 and 500,000 street vendors.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1990s, but especially during the last decade, a small but growing number of Chinese migrants have been working in these markets as peddlers or importers of commodities "Made in China" that are

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Xialing – Interview with the author (not recorded), May 29, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> C. Alba Vega, "La calle para quien la ocupa: Las condiciones sociopolíticas de la globalización no hegemónica en México DF", *Nueva sociedad*, 241, 2012, p. 82.

destined for those in Mexico with lower incomes.<sup>4</sup> Around 70% of these migrants are women<sup>5</sup>, and most of them -like Xialing- came to Mexico in a search for survival.

In this article I analyse this migration pattern, which has remained invisible -almost erased- within academic research on Chinese migration to Mexico. To do this, and in order to grasp the very specificities of what working within the popular economy entails for women and for migrants, I follow Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, which supports that women's experiences are "shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class".<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the experiences of Chinese women working within Mexico City's popular economy are shaped by the boundaries and discriminations tied to their gender, their condition as migrants, their class, and the intersection of all of these. What I examine in this article are some of said experiences and the strategies that these women develop to overcome the limits posed by such conditions. These strategies, however, are also closely related to the strategies of local women who face their own forms of discrimination and limitations because of gender, class, or (ethnic/national) background. I argue here that this pattern of migration and the economic activity carried out in popular markets is feminised; gender plays a role not only because the lack of opportunities for women in China is a reason for migration, but also because of the prominence of local women within the networks of Mexican popular economy. I focus specifically on the associations made among Chinese and Mexican women working as vendors in these markets; associations that were only made possible because of hybrid constructions of trust based on gender, a mixture between the constructs of *comadrazgo* and *guanxi*.

The article is divided in four parts: First, I provide a short overview of the research carried out on the migration of Chinese women to the Western Hemisphere, to obtain an idea of the different aspects that come into play within these dynamics, as well as to understand the lack of research on this topic, particularly in Mexico. Second, I retrace the arrival of the Chinese to the Tepito market, which is their most important anchor point within the popular economy. I briefly describe the features of the market and the people that work there; after which I focus on this new migration pattern from China and the strength and relevance of the presence of women in these networks. Third, I analyse the use of different idioms of trust for business. While the Chinese rely on *guanxi* to do business, in popular markets local women often rely on *comadrazgo*-like relationships, specifically with vendors' leaders. Last, I put special emphasis on the construction of new idioms of trust<sup>7</sup> -a mixture between *guanxi* and *comadrazgo*- among Chinese and Mexican women working as vendors in these markets. I argue that women have relied on the cultural attributions of their gender to create business associations and protection networks -resistances of a sort- against the vulnerabilities

<sup>4</sup> M. Braig and C. Alba Vega, „'Gut, Schön Und Billig'. Die Chinesisch-Mexikanischen Handelsbeziehungen“, in B. Gransow (ed.), *China's South-South Relations*, Berlin, Chinese History and Society, 2013, pp. 82–83.

<sup>5</sup> C. Alba Vega, "Local Politics and Globalization From Below: The Peddler Leaders of Mexico City's Historic Center Streets", in G. Mathews, G. Lins Ribeiro and C. Alba Vega (eds.), *Globalization from below, The world's other economy*, New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 206.

<sup>6</sup> K. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color", *Stanford Law Review*, 43/6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

<sup>7</sup> D. Yüskeker, "Trust and Gender in a Transnational Market: The Public Culture of Laleli, Istanbul", *Public Culture*, 16/1, 2004, pp. 47–65.



that result not only from being women, but also from being of foreign origin and having limited economic resources in the business world.

The article is based on seven months of ethnographic research in Mexico City between 2013 and 2014, during which I learned about the migration stories of 23 Chinese women from a variety of origins who arrived in Mexico in the last two decades. At the time of my research, they were working within various levels of Mexico City's popular economy. All data was drawn from semi-structured interviews with Chinese women between 24 and 55 years old who work either alone or with their families in popular markets, as well as with 3 Mexican vendors who grew up in Tepito and currently work there (two men and a woman, who is also leader of a street vendors' organisation)<sup>8</sup>. Observation was also carried out among several street markets in downtown Mexico City, particularly in Tepito. The people interviewed were contacted through a snowball effect that started with one of the leaders of Tepito's street-vendors, who has been working with Chinese businesses and petty vendors for years. After my first encounters, I would often be introduced by the women to their friends, co-workers, or neighbouring vendors.

## The Migration of Chinese Women to the Western Hemisphere

In order to provide context to and frame the specific case of Chinese women working in Mexican popular markets, I briefly review the most relevant works focusing on the migration of Chinese women to the Western Hemisphere, while acknowledging that there is a profound lack of studies on the participation of women in this migration process to Latin America and particularly to Mexico. Since China's political and economic watershed decisions of 1978, there has been a growing dynamism in the international mobility of Chinese women. However, there are still counted (albeit important) academic efforts to analyse the migration of Chinese women to American and European countries.<sup>9</sup> It was not until 1989, for instance, that -for the

<sup>8</sup> Before each interview, I asked my interlocutors if our interviews could be recorded; although not all wished to be recorded, they all agreed that I take notes during our conversations, which I then reconstructed into narratives. All interviews with Chinese took place at the women's workplace, while business was slow so as not to interrupt their livelihood. Depending on the interviewee's desires and capacities, interviews were carried out in Spanish, English or Mandarin. The excerpts used for this chapter were translated by the author into English. All interviews carried out with Mexicans were recorded. For more information about the methodological aspect of these research, see X. Alba Villalver, *The Migration of Chinese Women to Mexico City*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 1-4; 14-20; 265-271.

<sup>9</sup> Among these few existing studies, we find publications regarding migration to the United States: M. Zhou and JR Logan, "Returns on Human Capital in Ethnic Enclaves: New York City's Chinatown", *American Sociological Review*, 54/5, 1989, pp. 809-820; M. Zhou and R. Nordquist, "Work and Its Place in the Lives of Immigrant Women: Garment Workers in New York City's Chinatown", *Applied Behavioral Science Review*, 2/2, 1994, pp. 187-211; Y. Zhou, "The Fall of 'the Other Half of the Sky'? Chinese Immigrant Women in the New York Area", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 23/4, 2000, pp. 445-459; S. Mazumdar, "Localities of the Global: Asian Migrations Between Slavery and Citizenship", *International Review of Social History*, 52/1, 2007, pp. 124-133. The

first time on the American continent- the need of analysing women's labour market as independent from that of men was stated: in Min Zhou and Logan's analysis on New York's Chinese<sup>10</sup>. Since then, scholars have determined specific research axes for understanding the experiences of Chinese women in migration and the impact they can have on social structures. Baxter and Raw<sup>11</sup>, for instance, set out to analyse the changing role of Chinese women within symbolic and social constructions; the increase in the female Chinese migrant population; and the importance of networks in migration. Within this frame, the intersection of categories of gender, class, and race was analysed to understand power relations, but also understood as propellers of social struggle. Ryan calls for the need to highlight the diversity of ways in which women "negotiate, adapt, and sometimes rework the texture of their lives"<sup>12</sup> instead of enclosing their experiences in submissive positions or as victims of family interests. In the case analysed in this paper, I argue that gender is also used to their advantage as binding processes in which, in situations where all the odds might seem to be against the most dispossessed or vulnerable, subtle, almost imperceptible forms of resistance come into play.

Few efforts have been made in Latin America to shed light on the experiences, activities and impacts of Chinese women who have migrated. Lausent-Herrera<sup>13</sup> focused on Chinese women in Peru from a historical perspective, trying to remedy the absolute absence of women in historical accounts. The author uses a mirror-like approach to understand contemporary migrations of women by looking at migrations in the past. In addition to this, the author addresses the different reasons for migrations and decries the existence of forced migrations as the result of economic, social, and political constraints in China's post-reform era. Lok Siu, in her work among the Chinese in Central America, and particularly in Panama, considers the ideas of "diasporic citizenship" and "idealized diasporic subjectivity" and suggests that gender

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case of Canada has also been well-covered: G. Man, "Gender, Work and Migration: Deskillling Chinese Immigrant Women in Canada", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 27, 2004, pp. 135–148; J.W. Salaff and A. Greve "Can Women's Social Networks Migrate?", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 27/2, 2004, pp. 49–62. On the United Kingdom, see S. Baxter and G. Raw, "Fast Food, Fettered Work: Chinese Women in the Ethnic Catering Industry", in P. Bhachu and S. Westwood (eds.), *Enterprising Women: Ethnicity, Economy and Gender Relations*, New York, Routledge, [1988] 2004, pp. 47–60; M. Song, "Between 'the Front' and 'the Back': Chinese Women's Work in Family Businesses", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 18/3, 1995, pp. 285–298; M. Lee, A. Chan, H. Bradby and G. Green, "Chinese Migrant Women and Families in Britain", *Women's Studies International Forum* 25/6, 2002, pp. 607–618. On France, see F. Lévy, «Les femmes du nord, une migration au profil atypique», *Hommes & Migrations*, 1254, 2005, pp. 45–57; F. Lévy and M. Lieber, «La sexualité comme ressource migratoire», *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 50/4, 2009, pp. 719–746; F. Lévy and M. Lieber, «Le faire sans 'en être', le dilemme identitaire des prostituées chinoises à Paris», in M. Lieber, J. Dahinden and H. Hertz (eds.), *Cachez ce travail que je ne saurais voir. Ethnographies du travail du sexe*, Lausanne, Antipodes, 2010, pp. 61–81. On Peru, see I. Lausent-Herrera, «Paroles de femmes dans l'immigration chinoise au Pérou», *Diasporas, Histoire et Sociétés*, 11, 2007, pp. 37–56. On the Caribbean and Central America, see L.C.D. Siu, "Diasporic Cultural Citizenship: Chineseness and Belonging in Central America and Panama", *Social Text*, 19/4, 2001, pp. 7–28; L.C.D. Siu, *Memories of a Future Home: Cultural Citizenship of Diasporic Chinese in Panama*. Palo Alto, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005 and L.C.D Siu, "Queen of the Chinese Colony: Gender, Nation, and Belonging in Diaspora", *Anthropological Quarterly*, 78/3, 2005, pp. 511–542.

<sup>10</sup> M. Zhou and J.R. Logan, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> S. Baxter and G. Raw, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> J. Ryan, "Chinese Women as Transnational Migrants: Gender and Class in Global Migration Narratives", *International Migration*, 40/2, 2002, p. 98.

<sup>13</sup> I. Lausent-Herrera, *op. cit.*

itself is what challenges, forges, and reaffirms these identities. To this end, she plays with the interconnections between the negotiation of differences and perceptions of collectivity throughout the process of community formation, thereby giving relevance not only to gender differences but also to ethnicity, national difference (of the country of settlement), migration generations, and racial background<sup>14</sup>.

Within the existing research on Chinese migrations to Mexico, women have often been considered as part of the migration processes which "Chinese people" go through, generally considering the experiences of Chinese men and women as the same, thus rendering women's participation invisible or reducing it to their roles in households and family reproduction. Furthermore, most of the research conducted on Chinese migration to Mexico has focused for years on the first waves of migration, which occurred during the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. These studies centre mainly on the economic, political, or social contexts that culminated in, or resulted from, Mexico's anti-Chinese movements. In fact, until today, very little research on Chinese migrations to Mexico have focused on contemporary migrations or on Chinese in Mexico nowadays,<sup>15</sup> and even fewer have focused on the Chinese population living in Mexico City, with the most important work having been carried out by Cinco.

As in most American and European countries, Chinese women in Mexico were neither part of the usual circuits of Chinese migrations, nor of the pre-set dynamics of local Chinese settlements until the end of the 1970s. Within this traditional system, already established Chinese employ newcomer migrants that could be either neighbors, friends or relatives. Transportation costs as well as room and board would be offered to the new employee in way of salaries or to reimburse the costs taken care of by the employer. A growing presence of women among Chinese migrants was to be noticed particularly within the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> A large majority of the women who emigrated from China at the time did so in order to join their (often male) relatives who were already established in Mexico. While Chinese men went out to work in the fields, in construction, or in their own businesses, the presence of women was important because it allowed the reproduction of the male labour force while they took care of other aspects of life, such as food, shelter and health, or children. At this time, therefore, the conditions under which Chinese women found themselves afforded them few possibilities for economic growth or empowerment. The presence of women in migratory patterns has not only grown but has also been gaining importance in the economic networks of migration, despite the continued presence

<sup>14</sup> L.C.D. Siu, "Queen of the Chinese Colony...", *op. cit.*, p. 512.

<sup>15</sup> M. Cinco, *Mas Allá De Las Fronteras: Los Chinos en La Ciudad De México*, Bachelor's Thesis, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Iztapalapa, 1999; E. Martínez, *Border Chinese: Making Space and Forging Identity in Mexicali, Mexico*, PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2008; X. Alba Villaléver, *Fronteras de Mercancía: El Barrio Chino de Mexicali, Fachada de un Barrio Transnacional*. Bachelor's Thesis, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Iztapalapa, 2008; L.H. Rodríguez Tapia, *'Irse al Otro Lado del Mundo'. Continuidades y Rupturas de la Inmigración China en México*, Bachelor's Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> E. Hu-DeHart, "On Coolies and Shopkeepers. The Chinese as Huangong (Laborers) and Huashang (Merchants) in Latin America/ Caribbean", in W. Anderson and R. Lee (eds.), *Displacements and Diasporas*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2005, pp. 78–112; E. Hu-DeHart, "Latin America in Asia-Pacific Perspective", in R. Salazar Parreñas and L.C.D. Siu (eds.), *Asian Diasporas New Formations, New Conceptions*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, pp.29–62; M. Cinco, *Mas Allá De Las Frontera...*, *op. cit.*

of social constructions of differentiation that have often kept women's participation in a place of subordination. Popular markets in Mexico City are an important context in which women have been able to build their own networks and create their own strategies of survival and growth.

## Chinese Women in the Tepito Market

Located within the limits of Delegación Cuauhtémoc and still part of the city's historical centre, Tepito has been for decades the main centre of distribution of low and medium quality commodities to the rest of the city and the country. From the 1970s and until the NAFTA agreement took effect in 1994, Tepito flourished as a market due to *fayuca* networks consisting of trade in a variety of commodities -new and used- bought in the United States and smuggled into Mexico to be sold at retail to populations with low economic capacities.<sup>17</sup> After the implementation of NAFTA, which lifted tariffs on most commodities sold in these markets, the *fayuca* networks lost their appeal. Slowly, Chinese commodities replaced these obsolete networks and increasingly appeared on the street and in the stalls of popular markets.<sup>18</sup> Today, commodities are imported in massive quantities and then distributed downward until they arrive at very small-scale vendors like Xialing. In a parallel process, Chinese men and women began arriving at the market, eager to participate in the construction of this new commercial network between Mexico and China. This was a process that was built "from below",<sup>19</sup> among people of little economic capacities, just like the *fayuca* networks. Chinese migrants started to arrive in these markets, where they settled as vendors and importers of low-priced merchandise that could be sold to a population with low economic capacities. To be able to do this, they had to learn how to work closely with a local population of traders who were eager to find new commercial networks and partners to supply their clients' demands.

This migration pattern anchored in the Mexican popular economy is new, and the role played by women is significant in many respects. First, the migrants who belong to this pattern come from a variety of regions beyond the traditional migration hubs feeding Chinese migration to Mexico and, for that matter, the rest of America and other parts of the world. Traditional migration patterns have involved Fujian, Zhejiang

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<sup>17</sup> M. Gauthier, *The Fayuca Hormiga of Used Clothing and the Fabric of the Mexico-US Border*, PhD Dissertation, Concordia University, 2009; M. Gauthier, "Mexican 'Ant Traders' in the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez Border Region", in G. Mathews, G. Lins Ribeiro and C. Alba Vega (eds.), *Globalization from Below: The World's Other Economy*, New York, Routledge, 2012, pp.138-153; J.C. Aguiar, "Smugglers, Fayuqueros, Piratas: Transitory Commodities and Illegality in the Trade of Pirated CDs in Mexico", *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 36/2, 2013, pp. 249-265; J. Maerk, "Desde Acá - Tepito, Barrio en La Ciudad De México", *Revista Del CESLA*, 13/2, 2010, pp. 531-542.

<sup>18</sup> C. Alba Vega, "Local Politics and Globalization from Below...", *op. cit.*, p. 206.

<sup>19</sup> G. Lins Ribeiro, "Economic Globalization from Below", *Etnográfica*, 10/2, 2006, pp. 233-249; G. Mathews, G. Lins Ribeiro and C. Alba Vega, "Introduction: What is Globalization from Below?", in G. Mathews, G. Lins Ribeiro and C. Alba Vega (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 11-26.

and, most prominently, Guangdong<sup>20</sup> - Xialing's province of origin. In recent decades, migrants from parts of China with less traditional migration have become noticeably present within Mexican popular markets as well, a phenomenon that has not been detected in migration patterns not anchored in popular markets. During my own fieldwork in Mexico, I talked to women from Zhejiang, Hubei, Guangdong, Henan, Hebei, Anhui, and Shaanxi, as well as from Beijing.

Second, the migration process itself is heavily feminised, the inverse of traditional patterns, with an increasing number of women moving on their own to Mexico or arriving as "pioneer migrants" -as did Xialing. Among the 23 women I interviewed, only 4 came to Mexico to reunite with their husband: the majority migrated on their own, either before marriage, or with a plan for their husband to join them after they had established a business. Most importantly, however, the participation of women within these economic activities has been prominent because of the unique dynamics of popular markets and because of the ways in which women have forged their path into the seemingly hermetic world of popular economy. Women make up half the working population in Mexico City's popular markets, and their presence is significant not only in terms of numbers, but also in terms of organization and street leadership.<sup>21</sup> The popular economy is an essential source of income for women, particularly when they are the head of the household and are deprived of formal employment opportunities because of gender-based unequal access to employment.<sup>22</sup>

In the last two decades, working in popular markets has become a strategy of subsistence for Chinese women who, like their Mexican counterparts, have also faced limited employment opportunities. In China, as in Mexico, structural inequalities faced by the female population still prevail. Wei Guoying claims that, despite various state policies and government initiatives launched with great fanfare since the 1990s<sup>23</sup> to minimize gender inequalities in China, in certain fields employment conditions have actually worsened for women<sup>24</sup> and substantial wage gaps between men and women persist due to gender bias. Even with higher education, women have significantly fewer employment opportunities after graduation, as well as significantly lower starting salaries. Indeed, studies unanimously report lower job satisfaction for

<sup>20</sup> A. McKeown, "Transnational Chinese Families and Chinese Exclusion, 1875-1943", *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 18/2, 1999, pp. 73-110; R. Skeldon, "Migration from China", *Journal of International Affairs*, 49/2, 1996, pp. 434-455.

<sup>21</sup> Mexican popular markets are organized in a kind of unionised group. They have representatives that maintain order within each group. Leaders function as intermediaries between local governments, representatives, and vendors. G.G. Castro Nieto, "Intermediarismo Político y Sector Informal: El Comercio Ambulante en Tepito", *Nueva Antropología. Revista De Ciencias Sociales*, 37, 1990, pp. 59-69; C. Stamm, "La Democratización de la Gestión de las Plazas de Comercio Popular en el Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México", in *Trace. Travaux et recherches dans les Amériques du Centre*, 51, 2007, pp. 83-93; C. Alba Vega, "La calle para quien la ocupa: Las condiciones sociopolíticas de la globalización no hegemónica en México DF", *Nueva sociedad*, 241, 2012, pp. 79-92; C.E. Alba Villalever, *Los Territorios Tepiteños: Territorialización, Informalidad Y Globalización*. Master's Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2013; C. Alba Vega, "Local politics and globalization from below...", *op. cit.*, pp. 208-209.

<sup>22</sup> F.E. Babb, "Women's Work: Engendering Economic Anthropology", *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 19/3, 1990, p. 286.

<sup>23</sup> I. Attané, "Being a Woman in China Today: A Demography of Gender", *China Perspectives*, 4, 2012, pp. 5-15.

<sup>24</sup> Wei's analysis utilizes the data from two studies by the College of Pedagogics of Peking University in 2003 and 2009. Attané, in turn, cites three successive programs for the development of women (中国妇女发展纲要 - Zhongguo funu'fazhan gangyao) beginning in 1995.

women.<sup>25</sup> Most of the women with whom I spoke also described these conditions. Many stated that they had a job back in China, but that these were often jobs they did not like and in which they saw no future. Moreover, in many cases those jobs did not pay them enough to live and care for their families, and their working conditions were difficult.

Rosario, a Chinese merchant who arrived in Tepito in 2005, talked about the low salaries in China that prompted her to leave. The income that she earned as a high school teacher - a profession that she neither liked nor had chosen - was increasingly insufficient because of China's accelerated growth and rising cost of living. Her salary in Hubei, her province of origin, was 800 Yuan, or about 100 dollars, per month. She claimed that in Mexico she earned much more than that - although she would not specify her income.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, a few of the women I interviewed did not consider their employment conditions in China to be particularly bad. Instead, they wanted to come to Mexico to increase their options. Among these women were Yun, a translator; An Lan, a doctor; and Cristina, an employee in a big tourism office. Prior to migrating, they all worked in Beijing, a factor that also determined their access to better salaries than those available to women in smaller cities.

The continuous reproduction of traditional "female" industries in China is another aspect of uncanny importance here. It brings us back to a differentiated construction of gender and the roles that are to be performed, determined by symbolic and social differentiations. The most common fields of employment for women in China are health care, education, the hospitality industry, wholesale, retail, and -in recent years- finance.<sup>27</sup> This is rather interesting when we consider the previous jobs of the women now working in Mexico's popular markets: most were teachers, hostesses in hotels or in office lobbies, wholesalers and retailers, manufacturing workers, and, finally, doctors, as in the case of An Lan. It is also interesting to note that in Mexico, the activity in which the women who are the focus of this study work (i.e. wholesale and retail) can be categorized as a traditionally "female" industry.

One last element that intersects with the different limitations and possibilities that Chinese women have found on their paths is related to their regional origins. The economic and social dimensions of these women's realities are dependent on their country's social, economic, and political development. In 2010, "the average annual income of employed urban women [was] just 67.3 percent of the average annual income of men, while the average annual income of employed rural women [was] 56 percent of men's annual income"<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, in the larger cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin) and in other urbanized regions with characteristics that differ from those on the coast, the gap between average annual income for men and women is closer to the second figure than to the first. While the general problem lies in large part in the paradox of development (changes that should improve living conditions for the populations most in need rarely reach the people furthest away from the 'centres'), regional origins

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<sup>25</sup> G. Wei, "Analysis of Progress and Issues of Gender Equality in China", in J. Cho (ed.), *East Asian Gender in Transition*, Daegu, Keimyung University Press, 2013, p. 56.

<sup>26</sup> Rosario - Interview with the author (not recorded), March 4, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> G. Wei, "Analysis of Progress...", *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61

(even from a urban point of view) thus remain an important element with a profound impact on the already unequal opportunities for women in China.

As Wei claims, "we should not only pay close attention to the number and proportion of women employed, but also focus on the quality and benefit of the employment so as to promote the levels of actual equality in the pursuit of quantitative equality"<sup>29</sup>. There have indeed been state efforts to widen both education and labour markets for women in the country. However, working opportunities for women are still mostly limited to the areas of health care, education, hotels, wholesale, and retail despite their level of education or selected careers.

Finally, the gap between urban and rural life in China, which has pushed thousands of people to migrate to the cities, is exhausting the capacity of urban structures to absorb the influx of internal migration. Additionally, state-owned enterprises, which are less efficient and less able to generate profits, are rapidly losing importance as employment hubs.<sup>30</sup> In 1986, the system of lifelong employment and government security known as the "iron rice bowl" began to drastically diminish.<sup>31</sup> China's aging population is left with limited possibilities and must rely on the younger generation. Today, many young people in China -both men and women- with low social and cultural capital feel a great weight of responsibility on their shoulders and see little future within their country. Migration, then, has become an advantageous decision, at least within the social imaginaries made through communication networks between prospective migrants and those who are already established.

The increasing participation of Chinese women in migration is related to their possibilities of incorporation into wage labour abroad. Other economic and social conditions also represent incentives to complete their pattern of migration. Therefore, migration becomes the only alternative for many to improve their families' economic situation, and incorporation into popular markets becomes an increasingly interesting employment option. At the same time, their incorporation into these networks resulted in (and was fostered by) the growing economic agency of Chinese women. Their mobility and incorporation into the networks of popular economy is the result of their agency; the decision to migrate was often made in search of better opportunities for growth and survival. Moreover, in the process of migration women started to move away from the traditional activities often carried out by Chinese migrants in Mexico, such as working in restaurants, ethnic shops, and grocery stores.<sup>32</sup> Becoming businesswomen in Mexican popular markets, either as importers for those with greater capital or as vendors for those with fewer means -as was the case for Xialing- has become a strategy of growth for many Chinese women.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62.

<sup>30</sup> Z. Sun, *Explaining Regional Disparities of China's Economic Growth: Geography, Policy and Infrastructure*, Master Thesis, University of California-Berkeley, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> J. Benson and Y. Zhu, "Markets, Firms and Workers in Chinese State-Owned Enterprises", *Human Resource Management Journal*, 9/4, 1999, pp. 58-74.

<sup>32</sup> E. Hu-DeHart, *op. cit.*

## Chinese Migration, Gender, and Business

Vendors in popular markets, as well as residents of the neighbourhoods where markets are located, often come from underprivileged populations. Through commerce outside hegemonic chains, they constantly search and fight for their means of subsistence. To thrive, they must rely on themselves and their peers while running the risk of doing business with vendors who, like themselves, have few resources. Doing business with the Chinese has been a strategy for Mexican vendors and leaders of popular organisations to stay afloat and participate in global commodity chains in-the-making. This migrant population would not have been able to establish itself and thrive within the networks of Mexico City's popular markets without the latter. With the Chinese, Mexican vendors found an opportunity to replenish their commodity supply after the steep setback caused by the decline of their *fayuca* trade. For their part, the Chinese found the perfect clientele: it responded to the new import businesses they were setting up with their country of origin, but did not ask for massive amounts of merchandise, which they were still unable to acquire as small-scale importers.<sup>33</sup>

I was often told by my Mexican interlocutors in the market that there are more possibilities of transacting business when the assets and obligations of all parties -as well as the risks- are equivalent. Vendors with higher economic capacity cannot rely on trade with peddlers who lack economic or social capital; vendors with less capital are often unable to commit to more substantial business transactions that they fear they will be unable to complete. In this sense, within the business transactions and associations between Mexican and Chinese vendors, each party had to rely on the reciprocal need of the other. Moreover, starting as vendors with low economic capacities, they had to rely on a certain amount of mutual trust. For Tilly, "(t)rust consists of placing valued outcomes at risk to others' malfeasance, mistakes, or failures"<sup>34</sup>; Granovetter<sup>35</sup> even considers it to be one of the main elements for the reproduction and consolidation of stronger networks within determined groups. Trust, I also argue is one of the main components of the organisation of a popular economy, it is part of the market's core.

In Mexican popular markets, trust defines to a great extent the kind of networks that a vendor may build, which also depend on the vendor's capital. In addition, trust is mouldable and flexible. In the case observed here, I posit that in order for the Chinese, and specifically Chinese women, to develop such an important role within the networks of the popular economy -the role of importers of the commodities to be sold by Mexican vendors to the local clientele- these two populations had to mould their conceptions of trade and of trust to do business, and hence grow together. In the context of Mexican popular markets, the gender variable implicitly created bonds in the form of business associations among women -Mexican and Chinese- that grew

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<sup>33</sup> During interviews, some of the women with bigger economic capital told me that they first tried to do business with big stores in the Mexican capital. However, the requirements of these stores (larger quantities of products, shorter periods between contracts and supply, no guarantee of purchase) did not fit to the women's capabilities. This pushed them to look elsewhere for clients, namely among popular networks.

<sup>34</sup> Ch. Tilly, "Trust Networks in Transnational Migration", *Sociological forum*, 22/1, 2007, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> M. Granovetter, *op. cit.*



stronger because of shared intersectional disadvantages to which women in Mexican popular markets are also subject. Although most vendors within this economy are exposed to economic marginalisation, in the case of women the variable of class intersects with that of gender and, in the case of the Chinese, with that of race. Forming business associations with local women, particularly with women leaders of vendors' organisations, is a strategy that has proven both helpful and necessary for Chinese women to stay afloat. For Mexicans, doing business with the Chinese is also a strategy for growth. However, these associations have been possible precisely because the cultural constructs of trade and of trust held by both parties were flexible.

On the one hand, trust among women vendors in Mexico is itself endorsed by social contracts such as *comadrazgo*. In many Latin American countries and particularly among groups of lower socioeconomic class, *comadrazgo* is a specific kind of relationship among women that entails trust and reciprocity<sup>36</sup>. It is a social contract that can be "horizontal" (i.e. among people of the same class) or "vertical" (i.e. among people of different classes) that originally involved a form of kinship among the parents and god-parents of a child.<sup>37</sup> Within the popular economy, *comadrazgo* goes beyond kinship within the market, it becomes a business relationship that works as a sort of "protection" for vendors with lower capacities offered by the leaders of the popular organizations<sup>38</sup> that rule in specific territories. Although not all members of specific organizations are linked to their leaders through actual *comadrazgo* relationships, most vendor-leader relationships often operate in a similar way in which trust, reciprocity and allegiance are a must.

For their part, what the Chinese brought to these markets was the notion of *guanxi*, a Chinese idiom that expresses "relationship" as well as the trust and reciprocity entailed within this relationship. The characteristics of *guanxi* depend on the contexts in which this relationship is held (family-based, political, business).<sup>39</sup> *Guanxi* also involves "personal relationships and networks of mutual dependence; and the creation of obligation and indebtedness".<sup>40</sup> In the context of popular markets, *guanxi* materialised in trust dynamics in the form of credits for the value of the imported goods. María Rosete, a Mexican vendor and vendors' leader in Tepito, explained to me that in one of her first interactions with a Chinese vendor -a woman- she was offered a business transaction that went a little beyond her capabilities. While María asked for the quantity that she thought she could afford, the Chinese woman -An Lan- offered her double that amount, and told her to pay after she had sold the goods. "She didn't even know me -María told me- that was not normal in Tepito, not even among Mexicans. It would have been very difficult, very difficult. The Chinese came

<sup>36</sup> C. Herrera, "Comadres: Female Friendship in Denise Chavez's 'Loving Pedro Infante' ", *Confluencia*, 27/1, 2011, pp. 51–62.

<sup>37</sup> S. Mintz and E.R. Wolf, "An Analysis of Ritual Co-Parenthood (compadrazgo)", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 6/4, 1950, p. 341.

<sup>38</sup> C. Alba Vega, "Local Politics and Globalization from Below...", *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> J. Moraga Reyes and G. Invernón Ducongé, "Relaciones 'particularistas' (*guanxi* 关系) en el 'imperio de Comerciantes transnacionales chinos en la zona franca de Iquique-Chile (zofri) la ley' ", *Rumbos TS*, 14/20, 2019, pp. 210-211.

<sup>40</sup> A. Ledeneva, " 'Blat' and 'Guanxi': Informal Practices in Russia and China", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50/1, 2008, p. 120.

to open up that possibility. That also explains their growth...<sup>41</sup> Today An Lan is María's associate in a transnational business between Mexico and China that moves hundreds of thousands of dollars in commodities per year. This flexibility in form of credit, which the Mexican leader considered to be the foundation for the growth of Chinese businesspeople such as An Lan, is built on trust, on business-related *guanxi*. It is granted to vendors who lack the means to make a direct payment but have a "clean record" with other sellers and leaders. Trust -in this sense- also travels by word-of-mouth. If vendors fail to pay their debts, they are branded as untrustworthy, which will bring down their businesses and thus their livelihood.

Because Mexican vendors often do not possess the necessary contacts or knowledge to import from a country and a market with which they are not familiar, they depend on Chinese importers to acquire commodities for them. Likewise, the Chinese need their clients in Mexico to grow as importers, to establish ties with manufacturers in China, and to extend their networks of trade in Mexico. To do this they likewise need to prove to local merchants that they can provide commodities at the prices and volumes agreed upon. The Chinese also know the situation of their Mexican counterparts and are aware that without credit, without a finite period of trust that they will eventually pay their debts, Mexican vendors would not have the means to pay up front and business would not go forward. Much like *comadrazgo*, these *guanxi*-relationships function here as non-written agreements. Each party gains if the bond of trust is kept; each one loses if it is broken. For these commercial bonds to form in the first place, both parties have to accept a relationship based on flexibility and, above all, trust.

## Translocal Ways of Doing Business, between *guanxi* and *comadrazgo*

The growing Chinese population that works today in public marketplaces like Tepito is highly heterogeneous. Most of the Chinese women interviewed during field research arrived in Mexico with very few resources; many of them never finished high school. Of the 23 women I interviewed, only two had experience in commerce before leaving China. Two others had spent several years in Europe working in factories and shops run by other Chinese before coming to Mexico. Many had decided to go to the Latin American country because they had heard from friends or relatives about the opportunities that were offered there; but most had no clear idea where they were going or what they were going to do. Most had no networks in Mexico, as they lacked ties to previously established migration networks, a rare feature within Chinese migration. Additionally, very few could speak Spanish; instead, they communicated with clients with the few words they had learned through daily work in the market.

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<sup>41</sup> María Rosete – Recorded interview with the author, May 21, 2014.

The economic capacities and social capital of these women before and after migration also defined their experiences. Those with more money to invest or with more solid networks in China and in Mexico were able to build stronger businesses and build them faster. They did this by using *guanxi* business relationships in China, asking manufacturing firms for flexibility in paying for their purchases and extending that courtesy to their clients in Mexico, a flexibility that relied on trust and was not common within the popular economy in Mexico. Some could rely on support from their families back home or in other parts of Mexico, but others had no social or economic capitals and could only rely on themselves to help their families survive. In this migration pattern, class and gender, as well as the intersection<sup>42</sup> of the social and cultural dimensions allocated to these categories in the country of origin, have not only been incentives for migration, but have also determined the insertion of women into the labour market in the locality of arrival and the working conditions they experienced.

Despite their lack of knowledge of the environment they were joining, many were able to establish their trade and to build their own businesses from scratch, even if this meant working in a one-square-meter stall under the hard sun of Mexico City, as Xialing did every day. As many of the women expressed during our conversations, the hardest part of their decision to leave China was that they had to leave their families behind; many had children who stayed in China and were cared for by their partners or grandparents. This was the hardest part, but it was not the only difficulty. The food, the language, the hardship of living in what they consider to be a dangerous city, of working in a dangerous neighbourhood, being apart from what they know and from their social networks: these were all among the main negative perceptions of their experiences in Mexico. However, most women expressed that these difficulties were easier to overcome because of the “ease” with which they were able to set up their own businesses in Mexico and trade with Mexicans.

Evidently, the capabilities and experiences of migrants with different economic capital, for instance, An Lan and Xialing, stood in sharp contrast. While some women were able to build commercial bridges between China and Mexico through their import businesses, others found themselves in difficult conditions and with little possibility of either returning home or achieving economic growth. Their ability to participate in these markets depends on the capital that they possess upon arrival and on their capacity to transcend the adversity they face as vendors in Mexican popular markets, as well as on their strategies to overcome these obstacles. In addition, not all Mexican vendors agreed to the role and presence of the Chinese in the markets,<sup>43</sup> which made the migrant population a target of discrimination.

Most women working in popular markets find themselves at an intersection of multiple conditions of inequality: as foreigners, as members of a lower socioeconomic class, as women, and as workers in an economy considered as “informal.” Because of these conditions, Chinese women working in Mexican popular markets have had to

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<sup>42</sup> K. Crenshaw, *op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> A.H. Hearn, *Diaspora and Trust: Cuba, Mexico, and the rise of China*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 180–182.

adjust their businesses and their lives, make themselves more flexible to be able to get ahead, or at times, to stay afloat. They have had to overcome obstacles and discrimination; they have had to search for ways of protecting themselves while trying to grow economically. One way they have found to manage this is to stay in close contact with the vendors' leaders, to work with them by creating new commercial networks built on trust. It is through these daily actions which often seem inconsequential that they create –in their interactions with the locals– hybrid cultural idioms and new ways of doing business.

María Rosete, leader of one of the three most important popular fronts of Tepito with around 5,000 vendors under her wing, has the most Chinese vendors working under her protection and maintains close relations with Chinese businesspeople in this popular market, particularly with those who work as importers of commodities made in China, such as An Lan. An Lan was one of the first Chinese migrants to arrive at the market and today she imports more commodities made in China than any other entrepreneur in Tepito. Through their association, both women not only created a highly profitable import emporium, but they also had the resourcefulness and creativity to create a “tutorial” to show other Mexican merchants how to do business with and in China. Through their respective knowledge of the Chinese and Mexican ways of conducting business, they have built a bridge between both countries and shown other vendors how to embark on this new commercial route. They encouraged, for instance, the proliferation of “Marco Polos”<sup>44</sup> in Tepito: Mexican vendors who travel to China to do business and bring back the commodities sold every day in the market. In this sense, the construction of translocal ways of doing business implied the transformation of local dynamics and the construction of links between different territories and cultures.

But there is another level at which the business carried out among women in popular markets has impacted local dynamics. Mexican and Chinese women have built a tacit trust and mutual feeling of security in conducting business among themselves, thereby avoiding other –often sexualized– intentions that might develop in business relationships between men and women. Their condition as women – based on a set of conditions of vulnerability in which women have been positioned because of social and cultural elements of gender differentiation – has become a process of identification that has allowed for the creation of hybrid idioms of trust<sup>45</sup> among Chinese and Mexican vendors. Their condition as women on the margins of the economy provides them common ground, which allows them to share a sense of belonging and build relationships based on trust.

Being part of a popular organisation entails the continuous transaction of daily fees in exchange for protection and the opportunity to work in the market. But a relationship between leaders and their vendors goes far beyond this rigid conception of unidimensional exchange. Among Mexican women within popular economy networks today, leadership and ritual kinship are two closely related social structures that often materialise as *comadrazgo*. Among the Chinese, there are other ways of doing

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<sup>44</sup> C.E. Alba Villalever, *op. cit.*; J. Maerk, *op. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> D. Yürkseker, *op. cit.*

business and reproducing social relations that, although different from *comadrazgo*, share aspects of the relationship; this is the case of *guanxi*. Laura, a Chinese woman working in Tepito who had previous business experience in France, stated:

*I am much more comfortable here in Mexico than I ever was in Europe. Mexicans are very nice and considerate; they are like the Chinese... their ways of doing business... the trust networks that they can create. Here, I have had much better relations (guanxi) with Mexicans (这里关系更好, zheli guanxi genghao). This is something that was not possible in European countries.<sup>46</sup>*

Many Chinese women in Tepito claimed that the possibility of building *guanxi* with Mexican vendors had been an indispensable element for their insertion and growth as vendors and importers in the popular economy.

However, *guanxi* actually goes far beyond trust. It has overtones of relationships, personal contact, kinship, and experiences. It “forms an intricate, pervasive relational network which the Chinese cultivate energetically, subtly, and imaginatively. It contains mutual obligations, assurances, and understanding, and governs Chinese attitudes toward long-term social and business relationships.”<sup>47</sup> In order for Chinese businesswomen to grow, they have had to rely on their *trust* of Mexican peddlers, start building *guanxi* and incorporating it into the ways of doing business in Mexican street markets. To do this, reciprocity was fundamental, but so was innovation in the way of doing business. For the popular classes in Mexico, *comadrazgo* plays a similar role. Social relations between Mexicans and Chinese are not expressed in the same ways as they are between co-nationals, but trust is a fundamental element that determines the participation of each actor in these networks. The vulnerability to which women are subject on the streets or in business transactions, for instance, is a reason to seek out trustworthy associations. Insecurity is common in popular markets; for women, harassment of a sexual nature is an everyday issue that ranges from unpleasant insinuations to violence and rape. Business associations among women work as a strategy to protect them from vulnerable situations. These exchanges start with a tacit trust: business partnerships in which sexual discrimination or insinuations are one less adversity to think about.

Cultural constructions of both *comadrazgo* and *guanxi* are strategies of belonging and doing business that have come together in Mexico's spaces of popular economy. Over the years and through their interactions, Chinese and Mexican vendors and entrepreneurs have embodied each other's conceptions of trust and protection. In this context, new idioms of trust arise from alliances among people of different origins and from the combination of the cultural elements that each brings to the relationship. In this respect, *guanxi* and *comadrazgo* are two distinctive and localised cultural constructions of trust that have merged within the business transactions of vendors in Mexican popular markets. The Mexicans have incorporated *guanxi* into their ways

<sup>46</sup> Laura – Interview with the author (not recorded), February 22, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> M. Nitsch and F. Diebel, “Guañxi Economics: Confucius Meets Lenin, Keynes, and Schumpeter in Contemporary China”, in *Intervention. Journal of Economics*, 5/1, 2008, pp. 77–104.

of doing business, as they also try to work with credit and abide by these unspoken relationships built on trust.

Meanwhile, the Chinese have embodied ways of interacting similar to *comadrazgo* in their relationships with other Mexican women in the markets: these relationships extend beyond business and have created stronger bonds. For instance, María Rosete is now rarely seen without An Lan, her Chinese counterpart. Now that Rosete has entered politics, she has support not only from An Lan, but also from all the Chinese who do business with her. Through a new form of *comadrazgo* that has merged with the concept of *guanxi*, these women have created new social spaces with cultural and symbolic elements that emanate from different places and contexts. Gender was not only a variable that allowed Chinese women to enter into an already too politicised and closed, albeit diversified space, it was also a variable that allowed residents of Tepito, particularly those in power or with influence such as María Rosete, to open doors for the migrant population.

Chinese women working in Mexican popular markets are today part of a much wider constellation through which not only people, but also commodities and information transit, and where ways of bonding and of understanding are enmeshed. The contribution of Chinese women to these dynamics has changed the ways of doing business in markets like Tepito; they have added transnational connections to their commercial networks, and through participation and collaboration with Mexican colleagues and clients they have brought new cultural traits to the local dynamics.

In the case presented here, these new forms of interaction depend to a large degree on gender, for instance the construction of networks of trust among women in the market. Moreover, as Chinese and Mexican women increasingly form associations, either as small businesswomen or as importers<sup>48</sup>, they not only expand their possibilities for individual growth, but also transform the dynamics of both the migrant and local communities as well as the systems of hierarchies that structure them. In this sense, the associations that women have created are effective sources of growth and socio-economic integration.

## Conclusion

Public marketplaces like Tepito, where formal and informal exchanges take place, thrive against all odds because of the everyday struggles of residents and vendors. In the first two decades of the 2000s, part of their population included migrants from China whose contribution to business dynamics allowed local vendors to stay afloat. Chinese women came to these markets in search of opportunities which they managed to create for themselves by weaving their activities into those of Mexicans in similar positions. The inclusion of Chinese women in the local dynamics of Mexican street markets was the product of soft skills that allowed them to build networks

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<sup>48</sup> M. Braig and C. Alba Vega, *op. cit.*, pp. 87–89.

of trust, combined with the aspirations of the Mexican lower-class to access global consumption.

In this sense, Chinese women working as traders in Mexican street markets have added new ways of doing business to these localities through their interactions with clients, with other vendors, and with vendor leaders. Their daily practices and decisions as importers, businesswomen, or petty vendors have changed the social landscape of these localities and their trade dynamics, just as they have transformed the specific conceptions of business and trust of local vendors. But they have also affected Chinese migration patterns to Mexico and dynamics in their localities upon arrival. By embedding in and contributing to these spaces, Chinese women have produced translocal dynamics and created commercial networks based on trust that offer entry and business opportunities for individuals with lesser capitals. The association, for instance, of women with higher economic and social capital like María Rosete and An Lan, became anchor strategies for many other women who were able to make do with weaker ties that nevertheless linked them to the market's growth. This, for instance was the case of Xialing, who bought a limited number of purses from other Chinese in Tepito to try and make her way in this new business. Between Chinese and Mexican women in the market of Tepito there was an initial business relationship based on a mixture of trust and need –the belief that they needed one another in order to grow and protect themselves- a belief that eventually became a much stronger translocal commercial network built on *guanxi* and *comadrazgo*.

The participation of these women plays an important role in the economic networks articulated between Mexico and China, and effectively transforms the dynamics of migration and commerce. By introducing their own ways of trade and trust into local dynamics and commercial practises, they have created new ways of conducting business. As I have shown here, the opportunities that Chinese women found in Tepito depended on the need of local vendors to build a beneficial commercial route to replace the trade in *fayuca* from the United States. But, as I also argued here, Chinese women within Mexican popular markets must constantly move between different social codes that allow them to integrate into their local dynamics. Places such as Tepito –spaces of constant struggle– provide elements that forge people's interactions and build opportunities from the margins. Sharing specific conditions, such as gender and class, can also represent firm grounds of identification. Mexican popular markets are spaces intended to supply work opportunities and consumption capacities to actors that are dispossessed of economic support; they constitute a collection of bridges created among groups with different characteristics. In the case of Chinese women, the conditions of inequality faced both before and after migration, which were caused by social constructions of gender differentiation, are shared in many respects with local women. Therefore, the mutual understanding of vulnerabilities and strengths became a propeller of new idioms of trust that allowed the creation of new associations, and in that sense also a source of empowerment. This shared condition of gender has become an essential tool in building survival strategies that cross borders and build translocal spaces. The transformation of these women's lives and the creation of new ways of doing business that rely on hybrid idioms of trust both result from and propel new survival strategies that extend to and transform production and consumption chains.

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# Strong Women in an Online Matriarchal World

Fang Wan

## Introduction

What would life under female rule be like? What would families be like when every woman could have multiple male partners? What would a world be like where women are superior to men in all aspects? These are some questions raised by matriarchal fiction (*nüzun*, 女尊),<sup>1</sup> a genre that first emerged in China on the literary website Jinjiang (晋江) Literature City (hereafter referred to as Jinjiang). Matriarchal novels are generally characterized by strong female protagonists and storyworlds exhibiting a reversal of gendered hierarchies and traditional gender roles. According to Josephine Donovan, there are two different definitions of a matriarchy: one considers a matriarchy as a female-dominated society, the other interprets a matriarchy as a value system that forms an alternative to the patriarchy – i.e. a matriarchy would value cooperation, peace, and equity, while a patriarchy values competition, war, and hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> Matriarchal fiction as published on Jinjiang mainly fits within the first framework. On this platform, stories typically describe a woman's ascent to power in the public arena and her success at establishing and heading a happy family that includes one or more male sexual partners. As such, matriarchal fiction brings to the fore the entanglements of gender, sexuality, pleasure, power, and the specific socio-historical circumstances of literary production in post-socialist China.

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mainland China's post-socialist reforms and the former one-child policy have led to many urban women achieving success

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<sup>1</sup> There are currently two different translations of *nüzun* fiction available. One is 'matriarchal fiction' by Jin Feng in her ground-breaking treatise *Romancing the Internet* (J. Feng, *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance*, Leiden, Brill, 2013). Another one is 'superior women' (as suggested in L. Yang and Y. Xu, "Queer Texts, Gendered Imagination, and Grassroots Feminism in Chinese Web Literature", in E. Engebretsen, W. Schroeder W. and H. Bao H. (eds.), *Queer/Tongzhi China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism, and Media Cultures*, Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2015). 'Superior women' emphasizes women's dominant status in this fictional space, but other elements such as the social and gender system of a matriarchal world may be ignored. Thus, I apply Jin Feng's translation of *nüzun* fiction in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> J. Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions*, London, New York, Continuum, 2000, pp. 145–157.

in their careers.<sup>3</sup> Compared with their mothers' generation, these women of the one-child generation have access to unprecedented resources from their families and enjoy more opportunities at work.<sup>4</sup> However, the tension between the role of a professionally successful woman and the traditional roles of daughters, wives, and mothers has resurfaced, thereby causing new dilemmas for Chinese women to articulate their subjectivities. According to some sociological studies, many urban men would not marry a woman more successful than them because she is perceived as being too powerful and aggressive.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, a case study conducted among women in Beijing suggests that urban women usually find themselves constrained by traditional gender norms, making it difficult for them to articulate their preferences and desires in their intimate relationships.<sup>6</sup> In such a context, many works of fiction featuring women in positions of power have emerged in post-2000 China, arguably as a response to these urban women yearning for new narratives to represent themselves in the face of societal norms. For instance, around 2005, a series of so-called "white collar" fiction (*bailing xiaoshuo*, 白领小说) featuring women's growth and success in the workplace emerged, including *Go Lala, Go* (*Du Lala shengzhi ji*, 杜拉拉升职记) by Li Ke (李可) and *The Lady in Cubicle* (*Gezijian nüren*, 格子间女人) by Shu Yi (舒仪). These novels highlight women protagonists who are strong yet still retain conventionally feminine traits, and who lead successful careers. By contrast, matriarchal fiction partakes in this cultural flow by providing several nonconformist images of strong women that completely subvert traditional femininity, thereby opening a new chapter in Chinese strong female narratives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cyberspace.

With more than 800 million Internet users in China as of 2018,<sup>7</sup> Internet literature has been flourishing for the past two decades.<sup>8</sup> Budding scholarly attention to Chinese Internet literature has initially hypothesised that the Internet would play a crucial role in transforming the literary and cultural landscape of China from an enclosed, self-perpetuating elite circle into a diverse and democratic space.<sup>9</sup> Especially online

<sup>3</sup> See G. Wei, "Gender Comparison of Employment and Career Development in China", *Asian Women*, 27/1, 2011, pp. 95–113.

<sup>4</sup> J. Liu, *Gender, Sexuality and Power in Chinese Companies: Beauties at Work*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> See I. Attané, "Being a Woman in China Today: A Demography of Gender", *China Perspectives*, 4, 2012, pp. 5–15; H. Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> H. Evans, "Sexed Bodies, Sexualized Identities, and the Limits of Gender", *China Information*, 22/2, 2008, p. 375.

<sup>7</sup> China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), *China Internet Network Information Center Report*, 42<sup>nd</sup>, August 2018, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> For the discussions on the definition of Chinese Internet literature, see M. Hockx, *Internet Literature in China*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Such as M. Hockx, *op.cit.*. See also H. Inwood, "What's in a Game? Transmedia Storytelling and the Web Game Genre of Online Chinese Popular Fiction", *Asia Pacific: Perspectives*, 11/2, 2014, pp. 6–29 and Id., "Screening the In-Between: Intermediality and Digital Dystopianism in Contemporary Chinese Film and Fiction", *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 43/2, 2017, pp. 193–219; H. Gong and X. Yang, *Reconfiguring Class, Gender, Ethnicity and Ethics in Chinese Internet Culture: Caught on the Web*, New York, Routledge, 2017; O. Youquan, "The Rise of Chinese Internet Literature (中国网络文学的时代隆起, Zhongguo wangluo wenxue de shidai longqi)", *Internet Literature Review*, 6, 2018, pp. 5–13; S. Yanjun "The 'Dynastic History' of Internet Literature and the Canonization of 'Traditional Internet Literature' (网络文学的“断代史”与“传统网文”的经典化, Wangluo wenxue de duandaishi yu chuantong wangwen de jingdianhua)", *Modern Chinese Literature Studies*, 2, 2019, pp. 10–18; G. Hanning, "Digital Humanities in the Research on Internet Literature (网络文学研究中的数字人文视野, Wangluo wenxue zhong de shuzi renwen shiye)", *Modern Chinese Literature Studies*, 8, 2020, pp. 201–212.

women's literature has attracted an increasing amount of attention. Scholars have highlighted that the low threshold to online publishing has provided some traditionally marginalised groups, including women, with a relatively free platform to express their thoughts and start writing creatively.<sup>10</sup> Building on such approaches, this essay focuses on the vital role that online literature plays in the development of Chinese women's writing, discussing how producers of matriarchal fiction published on the literary website Jinjiang negotiate with the dual pressure of the ever-escalating capitalising of the media and ever-tightening state regulations, to ultimately produce strong female narratives that speak to the interests of contemporary young Chinese women.

The first matriarchal novel ever published on Jinjiang was *My Disease* (*Guaren zhi ji*, 寡人之疾), a serialised novel launched by Mei'er (媚儿) in 2005. However, this novel still lacked what are generally considered fundamental generic features of matriarchal fiction, most notably all-powerful female images, time-travelling to a matriarchal world, as well as romantic and sexual relationships between the female protagonist and multiple men.<sup>11</sup> The first serialised novel to fully establish these features was *Flowers of Four Seasons* (*Sishi huakai*, 四时花开) by Gongteng Shenxiu (宫藤深秀), published on Jinjiang the next year in 2006.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, *Flowers of Four Seasons* will be the focus of the discussion of this article. I will first provide a brief introduction to Jinjiang and contextualise matriarchal fiction within the larger context of the matriarchal imagination in Chinese literary history and some female-related genres outside of China. In the next three sections, I will then turn to close readings of *Flowers of Four Seasons*, contextualising them against their online reception to explore the fantasy that matriarchal fiction constructs, how this matriarchal fantasy challenges or reinforces patriarchal ideology, and how the women's spaces constructed by the production and consumption of matriarchal fiction intersect with social, political, cultural, and commercial factors. In the second section, this essay discusses how the strong female narrative created in *Flowers of Four Seasons* has blurred the boundaries between what has traditionally been considered as male and female spheres, and how this narrative comes into play with readers' participation and the state's intervention. The third section further analyses how this narrative has generated the image of a strong woman who confounds the essentialist view of defining gendered roles in social culture and reveals the performative nature of gender. In the last section, this essay discusses how *Flowers of Four Seasons* changes traditional gender roles through the pleasure that the female author and her readers derive from their communal enjoyment of

<sup>10</sup> Such as J. Feng, *op.cit.*; L. Yang and Y. Xu, *op.cit.*; T. Xiaofei, "Slashing Three Kingdoms: A Case Study in Fan Production on the Chinese Web", *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 27/1, 2015; L. Minrui, "Consumer Culture and the Change of Women's Internet Literature (消费文化与女性网络文学的变奏, Xiaofei wenhua yu nüxing wangluo wenxue de bianzou)", *Social Scientist*, 9, 2019; J. Tao, "Rethinking the Value of Feminist Writing on the Internet (网络女性主义创作的价值商榷, Wangluo nüxingzhuyi chuanguozuo de jiazhi shangque)", *Literary Controversy*, 11, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> J. Feng, *op.cit.*, pp. 91–95.

<sup>12</sup> On Jinjiang, the boundary between two genres is always blurred. For instance, one novel can be categorised as time-travel fiction and matriarchal fiction simultaneously. As time travelling to a matriarchal world is a fundamental generic feature of matriarchal fiction, matriarchal fiction can be classified as a subgenre of time-travel fiction. The female images, social system, and female/male relationships in matriarchal fiction distinguish it from other subgenres of time-travel fiction. This essay will discuss the variation of female-centred time-travel fiction added by matriarchal fiction in the second section.

erotic fantasies, thereby offering some general observations on the complex economy of lustful gazing in post-socialist China. Together, these analyses of *Flowers of Four Seasons* show how the interactions between authors and readers of matriarchal fiction contribute to forge alternative women's spaces characterized by strong female narratives where writers and readers can discuss their desires, imagine alternative gender relations, and blur traditional gender boundaries. However, rather than constituting spaces sheltered from state and market interventions, their subversive potential exists in constant negotiation between the authors' intentions, the readers' expectations, economic factors, state censorship, and national and transnational gender norms.

## Matriarchal Fiction on Jinjiang

Founded in 2003, Jinjiang is the most influential female-oriented literature website in mainland China, on which most literary works are published by female authors for female readers. By the end of April 2021, Jinjiang hosted more than 4 million Internet novels, 1.7 million registered writers, and more than 46 million registered readers.<sup>13</sup> Most users (authors and readers) on Jinjiang are young urban women. According to Jinjiang's self-introduction, 84% of users are women in the 18-35 age range, 67% of which reside in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and other well-developed big cities in mainland China.<sup>14</sup> By 2020, Jinjiang had developed into a sophisticated online platform consisting of a video game centre, a publishing and adaptation centre, a library of finished works, a discussion forum, as well as four sections dedicated to "work-in-progress", which feature "romance" (*yanqing*, 言情) for heterosexual romantic stories, "pure love" (*chun'ai*, 纯爱) for homosexual romantic stories,<sup>15</sup> "fanfiction" (*yansheng*, 衍生) for derivative works by fans of other cultural products, and "original novel" (*yuanchuang xiaoshuo*, 原创小说) for genres that do not fit the other three sections. Most matriarchal novels are published in the "original novel" section.

After an investment by Shanghai Shengda Internet Development Company in 2007, Jinjiang was formalised and commercialised based on a freemium business model, offering access to initial chapters free-of-charge and access to the following

<sup>13</sup> *About Us* (关于我们, Guanyu Women), Jinjiang Literature City, available at <https://www.jjwxc.net/aboutus/> (accessed 1 May 2021).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Although Jinjiang does not require users to indicate their genders during registration, users have to provide their cell-phone numbers. In mainland China, every cell-phone number is linked to an ID containing several personal information items including real name, gender, and hometown.

<sup>15</sup> Before 2014, Jinjiang used *danmei*, a word borrowed from Japanese literature, to represent homosexual romantic stories between male characters. In 2014, the Chinese government launched a nationwide Campaign to Eliminate Pornographic and Illegal Publications on the Internet. In May, Zhangzhe chibang de dahuilang (长着翅膀的大灰狼), a *danmei* writer of Jinjiang, was arrested for distributing obscene materials. In response to this incident, Jinjiang renamed the entire *danmei* section as "pure love".

chapters for a small fee.<sup>16</sup> This business model represents a shift from a scattered area composed of many small and non-profit literary websites, towards a concentrated sector made up of a small number of thoroughly commercialised corporations competing for the attention and purchasing capacity of their readers.<sup>17</sup> Jinjiang joins this competition and places increasing importance on profit. In order to compete with other big literary websites such as Qidian (起点) Literature Website, Jinjiang employs a strategy based on its advantages – it exclusively caters to contemporary Chinese women’s interests and concerns,<sup>18</sup> which profoundly influence literary production and consumption on this digital platform. For instance, on Jinjiang, there are more boys’ love (hereafter BL) novels that cater primarily to a fanbase of women readers than on other literary websites. Matriarchal fiction is another popular and well-known genre on Jinjiang, targeting young urban women and contributing to Jinjiang’s great impact in online female writing.

Although there were no works of matriarchal fiction in 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese literature prior to Internet literature, matriarchal fiction published on Jinjiang does not constitute the first construction of a matriarchal space in the history of Chinese literature. *The Journey to the West* (Xiyou ji, 西游记), a 16<sup>th</sup>-century classic, describes a “Women’s Kingdom of Western Liang” where all residents are women. The 18<sup>th</sup>-century novel, *Flowers in the Mirror* (Jinghua yuan, 镜花缘), also presents a fictional matriarchal kingdom where women handle public duties while men stay home, bind their feet, wear cosmetics, and generally assume women’s roles as traditionally dictated by the patriarchy. This unusual conception has attracted many scholars’ attention. Hu Shi proclaimed that *Flowers in the Mirror* is first and foremost feminist, at least on the subject of advocating education and state examinations for women and opposing footbinding.<sup>19</sup> Zhang Xun and Wolfram Eberhard have also described this novel as a treatise in defence of women’s rights in the traditional patriarchal society.<sup>20</sup> However, many other scholars question the feminist nature of *Flowers in the Mirror*. C. T. Hsia has pointed out that this novel’s feminist themes, such as the hundred heroines’ unbound feet and the state examinations for women, are all nullified at the end of the story.<sup>21</sup> Stephen J. Roddy has also argued that, rather than being a novel paying attention to gendered issues, this work was aligned with other mid-to-late Qing scholar novels which used women as a metaphor for the plight of intellectuals during

<sup>16</sup> M. Tse and M. Gong, “Online Communities and Commercialization of Chinese Internet Literature”, *Journal of Internet Commerce*, 11/2, 2012, p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> R. Xiang and L. Montgomery, “Chinese Online Literature: Creative Consumers and Evolving Business Models”, *Arts Marketing*, 2/2, 2012, p. 126.

<sup>18</sup> J. Feng, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> Shi Hu 胡适, “Introduction on *Flowers in the Mirror*” (《镜花缘》的引论, Jinghua yuan de yin lun), in Shi Hu, *The Collected Works of Hu Shi 2* (胡适文存2, Hu Shi wencun2), Taipei, Yuandong tushu gongsi, 1953.

<sup>20</sup> Xun Zhang 张训, “*Flowers in the Mirror and Dream of the Red Chamber*” (《镜花缘》和《红楼梦》), Jinghua yuan he Honglou meng, *Huaiyin shizhuan xuebao: zhe she ban*, 4, 1988, pp. 62–66; W. Eberhard, “Ideas about Social Reforms in the Novel Ching-hua yuan”, in E. Haberland, M. Schuster and H. Straube (eds.), *Festschrift für Ad. E. Jensen*, Munich, Rinner, 1964, p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> C.T. Hsia, “The Scholar-Novelist and Chinese Culture: A Reappraisal of Ching-hua yuan”, in C.T. Hsia, *C. T. Hsia on Chinese Literature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 188–222.

that time.<sup>22</sup> In *The Beauty and the Book*, Ellen Widmer discusses furthermore that, even though this novel raises the question whether women's potential could be better realised, *Flowers in the Mirror* is above all a novel of erudition.<sup>23</sup>

The matriarchal fiction published on Jinjiang features some similarities to these pioneering works, although it does so with a heightened gender consciousness. Unlike *Flowers in the Mirror* where the causative and rationalizing moral principle of female characters' struggle is loyalty (*Zhong*, 忠), women in matriarchal fiction assume the role of the aggressor as a way of furthering their own particular goals and ambitions in life. In that regard, matriarchal fiction is similar to the "military maids and Amazons" in the Western women-warriors narratives described by Julie Wheelwright, as it reveals women's desire for privilege and a longing for escape from powerlessness.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, *Flowers in the Mirror* was written by a male writer, and its apparent target audience was also one of male readers.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, the matriarchal fiction published on Jinjiang is told from a female perspective and primarily aimed at female readers. It imagines what life under female rule would be like, and how women would feel and act if they were to live in a society where women were superior to men in all aspects: physically, psychologically, economically, socially, and politically.

Emerging in an era of globalisation in 21<sup>st</sup>-century China, matriarchal fiction unavoidably interacts with literary genres originating not only from inside but also from outside of China, just like any other popular cultural product would do. The popularity of a "masculinized" image of women in literary and cultural works is, for instance, a global phenomenon. Lillian Robinson observes that there is a long tradition of physically strong and supernaturally enhanced images of women in American popular culture: one only needs to think back to the Wonder Woman series that first appeared in DC's *All Star Comics* published on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October 1941.<sup>26</sup> Recent years have witnessed an explosion in frequency of what could be described as women with more traditionally masculine traits in the popular media in the United States and the United Kingdom, including in films, television programmes, comic books and video games, such as Xena, Lara Croft, Black Widow, and Captain Marvel. These characters offer a powerful vision of womanhood; the female characters are depicted as physically aggressive and they assume heroic roles that have traditionally been assumed by male figures in the media.<sup>27</sup> Although the female protagonists in Chinese matriarchal fiction share many similar features with these characters, they

<sup>22</sup> S. Roddy, *Literati Identity and Its Fictional Representations in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, pp. 171–206.

<sup>23</sup> E. Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book: Women and Fiction in Nineteenth-Century China*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 33–68.

<sup>24</sup> J. Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in the Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness*, London, Pandora, 1989, p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> In *The Beauty and the Book*, Ellen Widmer notes that four women wrote endorsements for *Flowers in the Mirror*, illustrating that this novel did not mean to exclude female readers. However, in general, this novel is targeted at male readers. E. Widmer, *op.cit.*

<sup>26</sup> L. Robinson, *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 34.

<sup>27</sup> For detailed research on these "masculine" images of women in American and British popular media, see S. Inness (ed.), *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, London-New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; L. Robinson, *op. cit.*; J. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2011.



cannot be simply regarded as Chinese versions of Wonder Woman. Indeed, while tough, the images of womanhood in American and British pop culture tend to be compromised while catering to a general public that contains a large number of male audience members.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, matriarchal fiction published on Jinjiang can boldly, sometimes even radically, highlight the superior status of the female characters over the male characters as this genre is written by female writers for a secluded group of primarily like-minded women readers.

In terms of readership, Chinese matriarchal fiction is quite similar to homoerotic fan fiction in Western fan culture and Japanese BL manga, novels, and chick literature in catering primarily to a fanbase of women readers. Strictly speaking, the origin of homoerotic fan fiction in Western fan culture can be traced back to the rise of Star Trek media fandom in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>29</sup> In Japan, a similar homoerotic genre called yaoi emerged in the 1970s.<sup>30</sup> These homoerotic cultural works are primarily created by female writers for female readers, characterised as female fantasies about idealised romantic relationships between men. Chinese female-oriented popular culture is deeply influenced by these popular homoerotic works, especially Japanese BL manga and fiction.<sup>31</sup> Although matriarchal fiction published on Jinjiang still fits within heterosexual narratives, it has, like homoerotic works, subverted heterosexual conventions and constructed a space for women to express suppressed desires by creating alternative gendered narratives and boldly using the female gaze. However, different from reading homoerotic writing, female readers of matriarchal fiction do not need to project themselves onto male characters.

By contrast, chick literature is a by-women, for-women, and about-women genre.<sup>32</sup> To Lauren Berlant, chick literature “operates by enacting a fantasy that a woman’s life is not just her own, but an experience understood by other women”.<sup>33</sup> This shared experience and emotional connection can also be found in the production and consumption of matriarchal fiction. However, while originally expected to be “the bright light of postfeminist writing”,<sup>34</sup> chick lit was soon repackaged into a bourgeois

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<sup>28</sup> It is true that in American and British pop culture, there are some cultural works mainly created for young girls (such as *She-Ra: Princess of Power*). However, matriarchal fiction is still distinct from these works. On the one hand, instead of being created by female writers for female readers to establish a virtual sisterhood, these cultural works are produced by profit-driven cultural industries. On the other hand, the female protagonists of these cultural works all live in a male-dominated world, while matriarchal fiction describes female protagonists’ living situation in a female-dominated world.

<sup>29</sup> K. Hellekson and K. Busse (eds.), *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2014, p. 6. For research on homoerotic fan fiction, see also C. Harris and A. Alexander (eds.), *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*, New York, Hampton Press, 1998; K. Hellekson and K. Busse (eds.), *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> For research on Japanese homoerotic genres, see K. Nagaike, “Perverse Sexualities, Perverse Desires: Representations of Female Fantasies and ‘Yaoi Manga’ as Pornography Directed at Women”, *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal*, 25, 2003, pp. 76–103; A. Wood, “‘Straight’ Women, Queer Texts: Boy-Love Manga and the Rise of a Global Counterpublic”, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 34/1, 2006, pp. 394–414; A. Wood, “Boys’ Love Anime and Queer Desires in Convergence Culture: Transnational Fandom, Censorship and Resistance”, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 4/1, 2013, pp. 44–63.

<sup>31</sup> J. Feng, *op. cit.*, pp. 55–56.

<sup>32</sup> S. Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2011, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> L. Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2008, p. x.

<sup>34</sup> A. Weinberg, “She’s Come Undone”, *Book*, July/August 2003, p. 47.

commodity via the fetishization of consumerist culture.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, matriarchal fiction, although unavoidably influenced by the commercial trends in the production of Internet literature, reveals the efforts of female writers and readers to resist the bourgeois urban consumerist fantasy prevailing in other strong female narratives in post-socialist China.

## Matriarchal Fantasy: The Blurred Boundary Between the Male and Female Spheres

*Flowers of Four Seasons* tells the story of a young woman whose soul comes to inhabit the body of the Empress's sister, Rui Zhu, in an ancient women's kingdom called the "Habitat of Phoenix" after she dies in an accident in the modern world. The protagonist in the modern world is a poor and ordinary looking woman suffering a miserable life, but she seems to possess all the advantages that the matriarchal society can offer once her soul travels to the other world. Not only is she born into the royal family and is she protected by her older sister, the Empress, but she is also physically strong. While the protagonist has absolute power over men both in the public world and in her household, the men in her "harem" are disadvantaged in terms of education and social status, and they must compete with one another for her favour. As a princess, Rui Zhu makes a great contribution to the political stability, economic development, and prosperity of the kingdom.

*Flowers of Four Seasons* sets its story in a women-dominated society where women hold the central roles of moral authority, political leadership, social privilege, and control of property. In this novel, women are superior to men in every way. Not only do they have the absolute power over men in both public and private spheres, but they also possess all the qualities which are essential to human growth and social development; thus they are in full command of the narrative, entering the spheres that have usually been reserved for male protagonists. For instance, when her kingdom is invaded, the protagonist Rui Zhu takes command of the army, which is fully comprised of female soldiers, to defeat the invaders from neighbouring kingdoms. On the way to the battlefield, the author describes Rui Zhu's inner world:

*Flags are flaunting in the wind, and the hooves of war horses are raising dust. Rui Zhu is very nervous but also very excited now. When she was a miserable wretch bullied by those mean men (in the modern world), she could not imagine that one day she would lead an army of thousands of soldiers and take control of their lives and this kingdom's future. She believes that in that world no woman has ever experienced what she is experiencing now.*<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> S. Harzewski, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Gongteng Shenxiu 宫藤深秀, *Flowers of Four Seasons* (四时花开, Sishi Huakai), Jinjiang Literature City, available at [www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=91786](http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=91786) (accessed 23 April 2019).

Normally, leading an army or protecting the motherland is an honour reserved for men in a patriarchal society. But it is also true that the image of the woman warrior continuously resurfaces in Chinese culture, such as Hua Mulan, Mu Guiying, and Liang Hongyu, and that many readers of *Flowers of Four Seasons* relate Rui Zhu to Hua Mulan. However, as Louise Edward argues, the narratives of Hua Mulan and other woman warriors in traditional Chinese culture function as a way of consolidating the existing Confucian social and moral order, including filial piety (*xiao*, 孝) and loyalty.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, Rui Zhu assumes the role of a warrior in response to her own political ambitions, rather than following patriarchal moral values. Through highlighting Rui Zhu's claim to autonomy in social, economic, and political senses, *Flowers of Four Seasons* creates a matriarchal fantasy that is not for serving the patriarchal order but for a woman's own self-actualization. This matriarchal fantasy also provides female characters the opportunity to enter those spheres that are normally reserved for men. When analysing cross-dressing in Chinese opera, Dorothy Ko points out that these cross-dressing heroines "began to blur the centuries-old boundary between inner and outer and between the male and female spheres".<sup>38</sup> Her insight applies quite well to this case. By mirroring the patriarchal structure, this matriarchal fantasy, to some extent, blurs the boundary of being powerful and being men. However, it also provides a fictional space for women to enter traditionally male spheres such as the battlefield. In this light, this matriarchal fantasy produces a complex re-imagination of gender roles that could simultaneously confirm and challenge traditional gender norms.

In *Flowers of Four Seasons*, the contradiction between conventional and alternative gender systems is further dramatised through time travel. Time-travel fiction (*chuanyue*, 穿越) is also not a new genre in the history of Chinese literature. This form of imagination spans a history of nearly 18 centuries from the Three Kingdoms period (220-280 AD) to the Qing dynasty (1636-1912 AD).<sup>39</sup> The proliferation of time-travel novels in contemporary China also ascribe to the emergence and popularity of *Tale of Seeking Qin* (*Xun qin ji*, 寻秦记) by Huang Yi (黄易) in 1991. Soon after the publication of *Tale of Seeking Qin*, Xi Juan (席娟) published *Love that Crosses Time* (*Jiaocuo shiguang de ailian*, 交错时光的爱恋) in 1993, which depicts a young woman who travels back to the Song Dynasty (961-1279 AD) and experiences several romantic adventures. This type of time-travel plot, in which a woman or a woman's soul travels back to the past and enjoys ardent romantic interest from powerful male characters, dominated the early stage of online female-centred time-travel novels.<sup>40</sup> Authors of matriarchal fiction on Jinjiang have recently come to add some new generic features to the well-established conventions of online time-travel fiction. Instead of merely focusing on female protagonists' romantic adventures with multiple male partners, matriarchal fiction celebrates the growth of the female protagonist from a mediocre person in modern society to a dominant public figure in a matriarchal world.

<sup>37</sup> L. Edwards, *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 17-39.

<sup>38</sup> D. Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 140.

<sup>39</sup> J. Lu, "Chinese Historical Fan Fiction: Internet Writers and Internet Literature", *Pacific Coast Philology*, 51/2, 2016, p. 162.

<sup>40</sup> J. Feng, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

Through time travelling, female protagonists in matriarchal fiction gain a double consciousness. In *Flowers of Four Seasons*, Rui Zhu is a woman from modern society. She dies in an accident, and her soul then travels back to a matriarchal society. She is not only the Empress's sister in a matriarchal society, but also a woman growing up in the patriarchal reality. Through the lens of her life story, the contrast between the patriarchal reality and the matriarchal fantasy is amplified and made more natural for readers to understand. In the first fifty chapters of this novel, Rui Zhu, as an outsider, is always bewildered by this matriarchal world as it stands opposite to the reality which she is familiar with. When Rui Zhu wakes up in the princess's body for the first time, it takes her a long time to understand that this kingdom is ruled by an Empress: "The ruler of this kingdom is my elder sister. Yes! My sister! Not my brother as I supposed before".<sup>41</sup>

After getting used to her new body, Rui Zhu perfectly adjusts to her elevated social position and starts to comment on almost everything she encounters. When she meets one of her concubines, she states that "this world is quite different. Men in this world are even more fragrant than women! Very weird! It is fairly difficult to get used to".<sup>42</sup> Although she thinks that many customs of this society are odd, she enjoys living in this new reality. She praises the phenomenon that all the women in this world have more than one male partner, while men must stay loyal to their wife-master and compete among each other to curry her favour: "in my world, it is always the case that a man can have many concubines. Here, as a woman, I can have a lot of male lovers as well. It seems fair enough".<sup>43</sup> Through the protagonist's eyes, it is easier for readers to grasp the characteristics of this matriarchal world and enjoy reading about her adventures. A reader expressed her support for Rui Zhu's viewpoint on male concubines: "the protagonist is correct. I really enjoy the plot about one woman having romantic relationships with more than one male partner. In traditional literature, a male protagonist always falls in love with countless women. It is time to have something different".<sup>44</sup>

Besides dramatising the conflict between traditional and alternative gender orders, describing Rui Zhu as a miserable modern woman reveals contemporary Chinese women's living conditions. While young urban women play an essential role in consumerism, their economic and social status is no more stable in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century than it was for urban women in the 1980s and 1990s. According to three surveys on the social status of women carried out jointly by the Federation of Chinese Women and the National Office of Statistics in 1990, 2000, and 2010, the labour market for urban women has become increasingly insecure. In the 1980s, the average income of urban women had reached 77.5% of men's salaries. Twenty years later, however, this percentage had decreased to only 67.3%.<sup>45</sup> Young and college-educated, Rui Zhu

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<sup>41</sup> Gongteng Shenxiu, *Flowers of Four Seasons*, *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Jinjiang Literature City, available at <https://www.jjwxc.net/oneauthor.php?authorid=51913> (accessed 10 August 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Federation of Chinese Women and the National Office of Statistics. *The Second Report on Chinese Women's Social Status* (第二期中国妇女社会地位抽样调查主要数据报告, Di er qi Zhongguo funü shehui diwei chouyang diaocha zhuyao shuju baogao), 2000; Federation of Chinese Women and the National Office of Statistics. *The*

embodies the socio-economic situation of a large number of the readers of *Flowers of Four Seasons*, while her unattractive appearance and stunted career echo with their own growing sense of powerlessness. In this light, Feng views Rui Zhu's success in the matriarchal world as an attempt by women to wrestle with the patriarchy and the unsatisfactory situation of their real lives.<sup>46</sup> Although this playful literary work may not contain any radically rebellious standpoint, at the very least its readers may have gained some pleasure from the illusion of empowerment in a fictional space.

This illusion of empowerment, one may argue, is further reinforced by another characteristic of the webnovel. As touched upon earlier, interactivity is a distinctive feature of Internet literature. In this regard, Gongteng may be the author of *Flowers of Four Seasons*, but the matriarchal fantasy of the novel was not solely created by her. Readers' feedback also plays an important role in the process. For instance, in the first forty chapters, Rui Zhu mainly stays in a domestic environment and builds romantic or sexual relationships with several men in her household. In the forty-ninth chapter, the Empress persuades her to take on more responsibilities instead of staying at home and doing nothing all day. This conversation sparked a heated discussion among readers. Many of them expressed their expectations for the plot in that Rui Zhu should become a heroine called to save the kingdom. A fan stated that "now the 'Habitat of the Phoenix' is under threat from neighbouring countries, I really want to see Rui Zhu going to the military battlefield in order to protect her kingdom. Just like Hua Mulan".<sup>47</sup> In the section "Author's Words" in the ninety-eighth chapter, Gongteng replies to the readers' enthusiastic comments on this issue. She states that since "many readers say so",<sup>48</sup> she will write several chapters on Rui Zhu's experience in leading the army. In the light of this, the readers effectively contribute to the creation of this matriarchal fantasy. Similar to the idea of "produsage" as defined by Axel Bruns, this type of user-led content takes place in various online environments<sup>49</sup> where the boundary between active production and passive consumption in the creation of matriarchal fiction equally becomes blurry. The interactions between writers and readers, especially the increasingly encouraged feedbacks from readers, allow for "more consumer influence over the production of goods,<sup>50</sup> which, in this case, are the matriarchal fantasies.

The intricate interplay between writer and readers within the production of this matriarchal fantasy is further complicated by the ever-watchful Chinese state, which remains a powerful force in mainland China's popular culture. In order to deal with the annual anti-porn campaign of the National Office Against Pornographic and Illegal Publications, which aims to keep a "pure" Internet environment and advocates

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*Third Report on Chinese Women's Social Status* (第三期中国妇女社会地位抽样调查主要数据报告, Di san qi Zhongguo funü shehui diwei chouyang diaocha zhuyao shuju baogao), 2010.

<sup>46</sup> J. Feng, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>47</sup> Jinjiang Literature City, available at <https://www.jjwxc.net/oneauthor.php?authorid=51913> (accessed 15 July 2019).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> A. Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*, New York, Peter Lang, 2008, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> V. Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture*, London, SAGE, 2011, p. 87.

positive and harmonious representations of the nation, Jinjiang has established a self-censorship system. After publishing fifty chapters, Gongteng was issued a warning by Jinjiang, due to her novel featuring what was deemed to be too much explicit pornographic content.<sup>51</sup> So to avoid being blocked, Gongteng shifted the scene in *Flowers of Four Seasons* from domestic life to political struggles and wars. Political and military accomplishments rather than romantic love have now become the focus of this novel. What we have here, then, is not only an example of state suppression of a voracious female sexual appetite, but also an instance of how online literary production is influenced simultaneously by the interactions between readers and writers, as well as the state's direct intervention.

## The Myth of the 'Strong Woman'

In the previous section, this essay discussed how the matriarchal fantasy created by *Flowers of Four Seasons* has blurred the boundary between traditionally male and female spheres. This section, in turn, will further analyse how this matriarchal fantasy has created a strong women-narrative which confounds the essentialism defining gendered roles in social culture and reveals the performative nature of gender. As touched upon earlier, many strong female narratives have emerged in post-2000 China as a way of articulating young urban women's voices. *Flowers of Four Seasons*, to some extent, makes this cultural flow more answerable to the interests of Chinese women of the younger generation by appreciating the charm and attractiveness of strong female figures. In so doing, it demonstrates an attempt by a group of young Chinese women to resist, or at least negotiate with, the dominant patriarchy and market ideology in post-2000 China.

In *Flowers of Four Seasons*, women are physically stronger than men. Gongteng frequently uses the phrase "strong as a bear in the hips and with a back supple as a tiger's" (hubei xiongyao, 虎背熊腰) and "muscle-packed arms and straight thick waist" (bangda yaoyuan, 膀大腰圆) to describe female characters. The hardbody is one of the most obvious characteristics of the image of the strong woman in this novel. Traditionally, physical strength has been treated as a masculine norm.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, it seems that the image of the strong woman in *Flowers of Four Seasons* is more an image of a transformed man rather than an empowered woman in her own right. This confirms what Carol Clover defines as "symbolic phallicization", which blurs the boundary between being a powerful woman and being a man.<sup>53</sup> However, reading strong women as symbolically male still lies, to some extent, within the binaristic framework

<sup>51</sup> Jinjiang Literature City, available at <https://bbs.jjwxc.net/worker.php?board=13> (accessed 23 October 2019).

<sup>52</sup> S. Brownell and J. Wasserstrom, "Introduction: Theorizing Femininities and Masculinities", in S. Brownell and J. Wasserstrom (eds), *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, pp. 28–29.

<sup>53</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 60.

of gender. In *Flowers of Four Seasons*, the muscular body of female characters is not simply used to parody male bodies or to please men. It is described as first and foremost a functional body which can be used as weapon to maintain women's privileged social status and the matriarchal social structure:

*Rui Zhu guesses that people in this world immigrated from patriarchal society at the very beginning. However, after several generations, women started growing stronger while men were getting weaker, laying a foundation for a matriarchal society. This is why she always feels this world is quite familiar. The whole social system of this world mirrors the world she comes from.*<sup>54</sup>

In this novel, strong bodies constitute the basis of women's superior social status. This masculinisation of the female body is most visible through her usurpation of one of the most prominent male icons: muscles. Instead of imitating men, the strong women in this novel seize this traditionally male marker to fulfil their narrative functions. This is resonant with what Jeffrey A. Brown defines as "the circular logic of gender/role identification" that the heroine in action movies "wields the guns and the muscles because of the role and is identifiable in the heroic role because of the guns and muscles".<sup>55</sup> Similar to those action heroines, the hardbody of female characters in this novel questions the symbolic link between muscles and masculine power, as well as the naturalness of muscles as indicators of sexual difference.<sup>56</sup> In this sense, these female characters' muscular bodies can be seen to empower women in ways that have, until recently, been solely reserved for men, breaking the essential link between muscularity and the superior status of men in power relations. The muscular body of these female characters provides a pleasure in the same ways that the action heroines mastering guns could represent: "the female subject masters with utter competence a "masculine" practise, attitude and/or domain".<sup>57</sup>

The image of strong women in *Flowers of Four Seasons* has also hampered the deterministic linkage between masculinity and biological maleness. In this novel, female characters are depicted as rational, independent, ambitious, aggressive, and assertive, all attributes traditionally seen as masculine, and here regarded as ideal.<sup>58</sup> Conversely, the characteristics attributed to the male characters in the novel, (e.g. compassionate, gentle, sensitive, and caring) have traditionally been cited as feminine,<sup>59</sup> and are here charged with negative connotations. It seems that these female characters can be regarded as symbolic males who are biologically female but perform certain characteristics that are traditionally considered as belonging to men. In this

<sup>54</sup> Gongteng Shenxiu, *op. cit.*

<sup>55</sup> J. Brown, "Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the 'Point of No Return' ", *Cinema Journal*, 35/3, 1996, p. 60.

<sup>56</sup> S. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 193.

<sup>57</sup> K. Lentz, "The Popular Pleasure of Female Revenge (or Rage Bursting in a Blaze of Gunfire)", *Culture Studies*, 7/3, 1993, p. 374.

<sup>58</sup> R. Levant, *Masculinity Reconstructed: Changing the Rules of Manhood--At Work, in Relationships, and in Family Life*, New York, Plume, 1996, pp. 15–18.

<sup>59</sup> M. Vetterling-Braggin, 'Femininity,' 'Masculinity,' and 'Androgyny': *A Modern Philosophical Discussion*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 1982, p. 25.

sense, this strong woman narrative is still, to some extent, situated within a patriarchal framework, because it values and devalues characteristics according to patriarchal value system. Under this system, ambition and aggressivity are praised while compassion and sensitivity are devalued as negative traits. However, the symbolic male narrative shows the limitations of a discussion of masculinity that interprets masculinity as a synonym for maleness. In *Boys: Masculinities in Contemporary Culture*, Paul Smith suggests that masculinity must always be thought as multiple masculinities “defined and cut through by differences and contradictions of all sorts”.<sup>60</sup> The plurality of masculinities contains not only the dominant white masculinity, but also black, Asian, Latino, gay, bisexual, and female masculinities.<sup>61</sup> The message here is clear: rather than several features reserved for biological maleness, masculinity is determined by one’s ability to perform certain culturally recognisable traits.<sup>62</sup> In this regard, masculinity has little to do with male bodies and often indicates a series of performative acts.

In this novel, Rui Zhu moves easily back and forth between various roles. In the battlefield, she is an aggressive general; in the royal court, she is a decisive policy maker; in diplomatic occasions, she is a wily diplomat. In each of these personae, it is apparent that she is a person with a female body playing each role and that her gender identity is comprised of these roles. Her ability to function favourably in what is coded as masculine roles confounds the essentialism which define “appropriate” gendered behaviours in social culture. In this sense, gender is shown as a bundle of characteristics, conforming Judith Butler’s primary postmodernist claim that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts”.<sup>63</sup> Instead of being symbolic males, strong women in this novel are female-bodied people who perform some roles which are traditionally considered belonging to male-bodied people. Through the performance of these roles, they have transformed the mechanisms of masculinities and multiplied forms of masculinities.

The image of strong women distinguishes matriarchal fiction from other strong female narratives in contemporary China. In *Flowers of Four Seasons*, strong women are neither women who are smart, curious, active but not sexually attractive nor a woman with feminine beauty and a sexy appearance.<sup>64</sup> Rui Zhu is described as a mighty and dominating woman without feminine makeup and curves. However, she is extremely sexually attractive, popular, and develops romantic relationships with many different men. Her tremendous power and decisiveness, instead of decreasing

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<sup>60</sup> P. Smith, “Introduction”, in P. Smith (ed.), *Boys: Masculinities in Contemporary Culture*, Boulder, Colo., Westview Press, 1996, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> J. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>63</sup> J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 137.

<sup>64</sup> The image of a strong woman, usually, has two different types. One type, as described by Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, is smart, curious, active, but not sexually attractive. In *Tough Girls*, Sherrie Inness analyses many powerful women. Although they have different types of toughness, they share one similarity that they are depicted as beautiful and sexy. This is another type of tough woman. See C. Clover, *op. cit.* and S. Inness, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.



her charm, are even partly the source of her attractiveness. Appreciating the charm and attractiveness of masculine female images distinguishes matriarchal fiction from “white collar” fiction as discussed in this article’s introduction. In the white-collar novels *Go Lala, Go* and *The Lady in Cubicle*, the female protagonists gain a successful career and a romantic relationship. These strong women combine features such as aggressivity, toughness, and determination with a young, feminine, and sexy appearance. Good educational backgrounds, successful careers, diligence, and smartness, just like brand-new fashion, elegant appearances, and good body shapes, are all attributes of an idealised image of the modern lady. As Anne Allison argues in relation to fads amongst Japanese teenagers, “given that powerful women cause such discomfort for men and society in general, they can only be tolerated by being assigned, or by themselves adopting, a (traditionally) “feminine” masquerade: inept, sexy, pretty”.<sup>65</sup> Similar to their Japanese counterparts, the female protagonists in “white collar” fiction also adopt young, fashionable, and beautiful appearances to mute their power.

By contrast, the nonconformist image of the “strong woman” created by *Flowers of Four Seasons* can be regarded as subversive because it causes, to some extent, displeasure for men and society. For instance, in a post on Baidu Post Bar, one user, who describes himself as a male, passionately denounces matriarchal fiction as “the most perverse” (*zui biantai*, 最变态) genre of Internet literature.<sup>66</sup> He calls the female characters in matriarchal fiction “ladyboys” (*renyao*, 人妖) and argues that it is absurd for this genre to demand more rights for women because Chinese women have already achieved an equal or even superior status to men.<sup>67</sup>

Back in 2006, Rui Zhu in *Flowers of Four Seasons* was not the only masculine female image causing discomfort to men and society in popular culture. Li Yuchun (李宇春), the champion of a Chinese reality show *Super Girl* in 2005, triggered a fierce debate due to her masculine look. While a prominent woman writer Cheng Naishan (程乃珊) viewed Li’s beauty as a “feminist beauty” because it reflected women’s views rather than male desires,<sup>68</sup> some critics revealed anxiety derived from the potential implications of the masculine female image. For instance, in “From ‘Iron Girl’ to ‘Super Girl’,” Lu Mingjun (鲁明军) lined Li Yuchun with the “Iron Girl” from the Maoist era and highlighted the political implications behind these two images.<sup>69</sup> Obviously, these critics find an undesirable link between masculine women and Maoist ideology. In the context of economic and cultural globalisation, sexualised bodies, which can help liberate women’s sexual desires, are widely regarded as the foundation for the establishment of an individual identity.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, masculine female images sometimes may remind people of the suppression of individuals’ agency

<sup>65</sup> A. Allison, “The Japan Fad in Global Youth Culture and Millennial Capitalism”, *Mechademia*, 1, 2006, p. 14.

<sup>66</sup> Baidu Post Bar is the largest Chinese communication platform hosted by Chinese search engine company Baidu.

<sup>67</sup> Baidu Tieba, available at <https://tieba.baidu.com/p/5847597411?pn=1> (accessed 1 February 2020).

<sup>68</sup> Naishan Cheng 程乃珊, “Androgynous Beauty Is a Purely Women’s View of Beauty (中性美是纯粹女性心理的审美, Zhongxingmei shi chuncui nuxing xinli de shenmei)”, available at [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4aba2161010005mq.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4aba2161010005mq.html) (accessed 8 February 2020).

<sup>69</sup> Mingjun Lu 鲁明军, “From ‘Iron Girl’ to ‘Super Girl’ (从铁姑娘到超女, Cong tieguniang dao chaonü)”, available at <https://www.2002n.com/paper/politics/006/7551.html> (accessed 8 February 2020).

<sup>70</sup> M. Mei-hui Yang, “Introduction”, in M. Mei-hui Yang (ed.), *Spaces of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 17.

during the Maoist revolution. In this sense, the emergence of masculine women in post-2000 China raises some people's anxiety that the state will intervene in women's spaces again.

It is noticeable that although the image of Rui Zhu shares a lot of essential similarities with Li Yuchun's,<sup>71</sup> the Maoist models of the "Iron Girl" or the "Red Guards" were never mentioned by readers of *Flowers of Four Seasons*. Born in the 1980s and 1990s and residing in big cities, the readers of matriarchal fiction grew up in a totally different gender culture. While their mothers' generation established an individual identity and carved out women's spaces separate from state intervention by subscribing to the display of "erased" gender differences between sexualised bodies,<sup>72</sup> the younger generation has had to deal with the prevalence of consumable feminine images. As noted by Dai Jinhua (戴锦华), the backdrop of the market economy and commercial popular culture led to the rise of a new dominating force on women's culture in post-socialist China: commercialisation.<sup>73</sup> Although this statement may, to some extent, overshadow the invisible but lasting existence of the state's influence in Chinese culture, it is true that the female image in post-socialist Chinese popular culture is highly commercialised. For instance, the beauty writers who emerged on the Chinese literary scene in the late 1990s and the turn of the twenty-first century boldly and unabashedly foregrounded female sexuality in their writings. Although their works have inspired other female writers to explore their own sexuality and then enabled Chinese women to create a public sphere for themselves, they have also commodified the female body and turned it into an object of the male gaze.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, unlike other masculine women discourses which always return to masculine women's endangered femininity to avoid confounding culturally recognizable gendered traits,<sup>75</sup> writers and readers of matriarchal fiction highly praise these masculine female characters' self-reliance and self-determination. For them, the femininity of female characters in other popular discourses is a consumable commodity. Accordingly, the image of the strong woman in *Flowers of Four Seasons* becomes a form of resistance to the commercialisation and objectification of women's bodies and sexuality.

<sup>71</sup> It is true that there are several differences between the images of Rui Zhu and Li Yuchun in the construction of their androgyny. However, these two images share some significant similarities such as rebelling against traditional gender norms, providing alternative gender roles, and not pleasing men with sex.

<sup>72</sup> M. Mei-hui Yang, "From Gender Eraser to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women's Public Sphere in China", in M. Mei-hui Yang (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 60–63.

<sup>73</sup> Jinhua Dai 戴锦华, "Strange Encounter and Breakthrough: Woman's Culture and Woman's Writing in the Nineties (奇遇与突围: 九十年代的女性文化与女性写作, Qiyu yu tuwei: jiushi niandai de nuxing wenhua yu nuxing xiezu)", in Jinhua Dai (ed.), *The Door to the New Century: Selected Contemporary Women's Novels* (世纪之门: 当代女性小说精品, Shijizhimen: dangdai nuxing xiaoshuo jingpin), Beijing, shehui kexue wenzhai chubanshe, 2000, p. 7.

<sup>74</sup> S. Lu, "Popular Culture and Body Politics: Beauty Writers in Contemporary China", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 69/1, 2008, pp. 167–185.

<sup>75</sup> J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1998, p. 270.

## Power and Pleasure: On the Complexity of Gazing

One final subversive element featured prominently in *Flowers of Four Seasons* is the pleasure female author and readers alike derive from constructing and, more importantly, sharing their enjoyment of erotic fantasies. In this novel, the author freely indulges in descriptions of eroticised male beauty. When Rui Zhu meets Su Lan, one of her male partners, this novel describes his body in detail through Rui Zhu's eyes, rendering it the stationary object of her lustful gaze:

*Eyes like autumn water; a soft, jade-like neck; broad, beautiful shoulders; flat, smooth chest; the delicate Adam's apple. That face blushes slowly under Rui Zhu's prolonged gaze; full of seductive charm in the light of red candles.*<sup>76</sup>

The author uses much of the vocabulary traditionally used to describe female beauty in the description of Su Lan's body – for example, “a soft, jade-like neck” and “eyes like autumn water.” It constitutes an appropriation of expressions typically used in male-created literary texts to describe female beauty that reserves the pleasure of erotic gazing exclusively for women.

The interest in the suppleness, fragility, and softness of the male body in matriarchal fiction has created androgynous male figures, thus rewriting the definition of masculinity as normally defined by modern macho guys.<sup>77</sup> Some scholars, such as Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu, highly praise these effeminate male images. They argue that this male image rejects, blurs, and diffuses the binary associations of heteronormativity, thus liberating readers not just from the patriarchy but from conventional gender distinctions as well.<sup>78</sup> However, in the context of the traditional Chinese gender discourse, the application of the contemporary Western paradigms of the “macho man” to the Chinese case is largely inappropriate, because there has never been a predominant macho culture in China. In *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*, Kam Louie claims: “The Chinese tradition of the macho hero represented in terms such as yingxiong (outstanding male) and haohan (good fellow) is counterbalanced by a softer, cerebral male tradition – the caizi (the talented scholar) and the wenren (the cultured man). This is not found to the same degree in contemporary Western conceptions of maleness.”<sup>79</sup>

Although the androgynous male figure cannot be regarded as subversive in China, eroticised male beauty for female pleasure such as seen in matriarchal fiction

<sup>76</sup> Gongteng Shenxiu, *op. cit.*

<sup>77</sup> See S. Chao, “Cosplay, Cuteness, and Weiniang: The Queered Ke'ai of Male Cosplayers as 'Fake Girls'”, in M. Lavin, L. Yang and J. Jamie Zhao (eds.), *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2017, pp. 20–44.

<sup>78</sup> L. Yang and Y. Xu, “Queer Texts, Gendered Imagination”, in E. Engebretsen, W. Schroeder and H. Bao (eds.), *Queer/Tongzhi China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism, and Media Cultures*, Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2015, p. 146.

<sup>79</sup> K. Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 8.

is nonetheless something new in the Chinese literary and cultural tradition. It is true that in the Qing Dynasty, the frail and effeminate man was described as an object of desire among the male literati.<sup>80</sup> However, as Xiaofei Tian claims, it is highly unlikely to demonstrate that this type of fiction was written by female authors for a community of like-minded female readers.<sup>81</sup>

In contrast, *Flowers of Four Seasons* portrays Rui Zhu's male partners as femme fatales with meticulous and unambiguous erotica for female readers' pleasure. In a scene where Rui Zhu is having sex with Chun Hang:

*Chun Hang's body is smooth and pearlescent, and his skin is like silk. These stir Rui Zhu's heart. She bends Chun Hang's two jade-like legs. Chun Hang groans softly; the red buds on his chest bulge out in a display of intense erotic colour. From inside to outside, it exudes such a graceful and coquettish charm.*<sup>82</sup>

In this scene, Chun Hang is highlighted as the central object of Rui Zhu's desire and readers can also feel his sex appeal through Rui Zhu's eyes. This eroticised description turns the male body into an object of the female gaze, thereby distinguishing matriarchal fiction from the traditional male/female discourse. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger argues that watching is men's absolute power and being watched is a characteristic particular to women.<sup>83</sup> This is certainly true in traditional Chinese discourse. According to Kam Louie, in traditional Chinese society, femininity is associated with passivity and submissiveness in relation to sexual desires, whereas masculinity is informed by ideologies of mastery, control, and moderating sexual desires.<sup>84</sup> In this context, the pleasure of gazing gives women a sense of empowerment by undermining the dominant view of love and sexuality that always envision a woman's body as the passive object of male desire.

In this light, the sexual desire that binds female authors and readers together plays a powerful role in the evaluation of matriarchal fiction as a positive cultural force for women's empowerment. Moreover, the erotic fantasies about the love between beautiful men and powerful women, as depicted in *Flowers of Four Seasons*, transgress what women are supposedly expected to fantasise about. These fantasies which display raw sexuality challenge the traditional gender stereotype that women prefer emotional bonding to sexual pleasure.<sup>85</sup> When discussing homoerotic fan fiction, Constance Penley characterises it as embodying the impulse 'to transform the public sphere by

<sup>80</sup> See C. Wu, "Beautiful Boys Made up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China", in K. Louie and M. Low (eds.), *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*, London-New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 19–34.

<sup>81</sup> X. Tian, "Slashing Three Kingdoms: A Case Study in Fan Production on the Chinese Web", *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 27/1, 2015, p. 253.

<sup>82</sup> Gongteng Shenxiu, *op. cit.*

<sup>83</sup> J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London, Penguin UK, 2008, p. 47.

<sup>84</sup> K. Louie, "Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities", in K. Louie and M. Low (eds.), *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*, New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 6–8.

<sup>85</sup> In *Feminist Media Studies*, Liesbet Van Zoonen points out that *Playgirl*, a pornographic magazine designed for women, does not exhibit naked male bodies as sexual objects, but turns them into ideal and affectionate lovers with romantic characteristics. Instead of providing women with a flexible open tunnel to appreciate the male body and acquire erotic pleasure, it pays more attention to offering women emotional fulfilment. See L. Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, London, SAGE, 1994, p. 117.

imaginatively demonstrating how it could be improved by making it more answerable to women's interests'.<sup>86</sup> This insightful statement also fits with the case of *Flowers of Four Seasons*. Similar to homoerotic fan fiction, this novel also features the erotically scrutinised male body, and so providing a space more accountable to women's desires. However, in homoerotic fan fiction women are excluded from the romantic and sexual relationships while in matriarchal fiction female protagonists are actively the agent of sexual desire. It is for this reason that one can indeed proclaim the originality of matriarchal fiction in the Chinese cultural tradition.

Just as crucial as the sexual fantasies described in *Flowers of Four Seasons* are the many discussions of the objectified male beauty by female readers in the comments. In the online forum, readers closely analyse and evaluate the heterosexual attractiveness of Rui Zhu's different male partners such as Chun Hang and Su Lan in terms of appearance, body shapes, and manners as depicted in the novel. Besides discussing these beautiful male figures, many readers actively participate in the production of erotic pleasure. For instance, after Gongteng posted the scene of Rui Zhu having sex with Su Lan, some readers suggested in the comments that the author should write more about sexual activities. One reader named He Wei commented that reading this erotic scene was very exciting and she hopes the author can write more erotic scenes of Rui Zhu having sex with her favourite male character Chun Hang.<sup>87</sup> These comments have apparently influenced Gongteng's writing. In the next twenty chapters, she writes lengthy bedroom scenes between Rui Zhu and Chun Hang, Ru Ye, and Zhan Qing. Compared with previous chapters, these sexual descriptions become more and more unabashed. For instance, in contrast with the scene with Su Lan, descriptions such as "she bends Chun Hang's two jade-like legs" and "Chun Hang groans softly" appear in the scene between Rui Zhu and Chun Hang. Rather than depicting the beautiful male body as a static object, these descriptions present the protagonists' sexual experiences vividly, thus inviting a more erotic reading.

These online activities may not fundamentally subvert gender stereotypes, but the public platform on Jinjiang does provide women with a space where they can freely express their sexual desires and share their erotic fantasies. Unlike the exposure of female sexual desires in Chinese female writing of the 1990s, which simultaneously enabled Chinese women to create a public space for themselves and turned the female body into a commodity and an object of the male gaze,<sup>88</sup> the expression of nonmainstream cultural, literary, emotional, and sexual needs is here in a generally compassionate and supportive environment being created by a group of congenial women. Jinjiang, as a new digital platform, indeed plays a crucial role in the formation of an online women's community to explore various ways of consuming male bodies and male beauty for female members' pleasure.

While the pleasure of gazing can provide women with a sense of empowerment, it can also be used as a strategy to attract more readers and achieve commercial

<sup>86</sup> C. Penley, *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America*, New York-London, Verso, 1997, p. 134.

<sup>87</sup> Jinjiang Literature City, available at <https://www.jjwxc.net/oneauthor.php?authorid=51913> (accessed 10 August 2019).

<sup>88</sup> M. Ferry, "Marketing Chinese Women Writers in the 1990s, or the Politics of Self-Fashioning", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 37, 2003, p. 670.

success. Indeed, sex occupies a privileged place in China's postmillennial ideology of private opportunity, commercial competition, and individual expression.<sup>89</sup> In this light, sex not only masquerades as a significant component of individual identity but also becomes "a monopoly commodity determined by society".<sup>90</sup> That is, despite it being a seemingly liberating moment, when similar sexual experiences are retold sex acquires a high market value. As discussed earlier, Jinjiang has adopted a freemium business model. It implies that attracting enough attention can gain sufficient financial revenue.<sup>91</sup> For instance, on Jinjiang, there are several ranking lists of published works, including rankings on the basis of the number of views by day, week, month, quarter, half year, year, or "all-time/total hits" (*zongdianji*, 总点击); the number of times the novel has been "collected" (*shoucang*, 收藏); the number of recommendations by day, week, month, quarter, half year, year, or "all-time" (*zongtuijian*, 总推荐); or the number of received votes by week, month, quarter, half year, year, or "all-time/total votes" (*zongbawangpiao*, 总霸王票). Through these rankings, a reader not only has the opportunity to participate by providing ideas in the comments sections, but also by reading, recommending, and voting for their favourite novels. Readers' attention has thus become a crucial factor in gaining substantial financial income.

In this context, it is reasonable to assume that the sex scenes in *Flowers of Four Seasons* are at least partly driven by economic profit. In the first twenty chapters, *Flowers of Four Seasons* dwells at length on the fruitful emotional and sexual tension of the bedroom scenes. Many readers expressed their satisfaction with the love and fun between the female and male characters. The male characters' beautiful physiques seduced not only the more powerful gender in the novel, but also the female readers, whose comments, hits, and recommendations can determine the author's income. Given that many readers suggest in the comments to add sex scenes between Rui Zhu and their favourite male characters, Gongteng unabashedly includes more sex scenes based on their requests, including a playful threesome. She even states in the "Author's Words" section that writing erotic scenes as much as possible is one of her main motivations for creating this novel.<sup>92</sup> By the end of February of 2019, the novel had received 347,526,368 hits, making it the most popular example of matriarchal fiction on Jinjiang.<sup>93</sup> Gazing has therefore turned out to be, at least partly, a successful strategy to attract readers' attention. It is noticeable that, while some women try to use the image of the "strong woman" in this novel to resist against market forces, the same group of women participate in the commercialisation of gazing either consciously or unconsciously. Regarding gazing in *Flowers of Four Seasons*, its subversiveness and market value both play a prominent part and are inseparably intertwined.

<sup>89</sup> H. Evans, *op.cit.*, pp. 361–362.

<sup>90</sup> T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, "The Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", in S. During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 41.

<sup>91</sup> M. Goldhaber, "The Attention Economy and the Net", *First Monday*, 4, 1997, available at <https://firstmonday.org> (accessed 1 February 2019).

<sup>92</sup> Jinjiang Literature City, available at <https://www.jjwxc.net/oneauthor.php?authorid=51913> (accessed 10 August 2019).

<sup>93</sup> Jinjiang Literature City, available at <https://www.jjwxc.net/topten.php?orderstr=7&t=2> (accessed 28 September 2019).

## Conclusion

The matriarchal fiction discussed in this essay has created a new strong female narrative, revealing a reimagining of gender by a group of like-minded women in post-2000 China. *Flowers of Four Seasons* offers alternative gender roles by creating powerful female protagonists and subverting female/male relationships in the fictional world. Although its gendered imagination is, to some extent, still rooted in patriarchal ideology in which only masculinity is highly valued and the social hierarchy determined by physical strength, *Flowers of Four Seasons* still blurs the boundary between the female and male spheres by providing an imagined space for women to gain achievements in traditionally male spheres such as politics and battlefield. The strong female narrative created by this novel confounds the essentialism that traditionally defines gendered roles in social culture and discloses the socially constructed nature of gender. This particular narrative also reveals an attempt by some young urban women to resist, or at least negotiate with the prevalent market ideology in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century China. Moreover, although being partially limited by the ever-watchful eyes of Internet censors, this novel offers a communal space where women can discuss their sexual desires and tastes. Matriarchal fiction as a whole, then, can be seen as a complex convergence of market individualism, alternative sexuality, gender norms, commercial demands, and state regulation.

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# Phenomenology and Affect: Qiu Jiongjiong's *Madame*

Yilong Liu

## Introduction

Qiu Jiongjiong's *Madame* (Gu Nai Nai 姑奶奶, 2010) portrays the character Fan Qihui (樊其辉) who works as a professional tailor during the day, and as a cross-dressing (yizhuang 易装) performer named Bilang de Linphél in a local pub in Sanlitun, Beijing, at night.<sup>1</sup> This relatively low-budget production (which is rather emblematic of independent documentary and queer filmmaking in China) deploys techniques such as the adaptation of a black-and-white aesthetic (*heibai*, 黑白), which has also been practised in Qiu's six other documentaries, in conjunction with a directorial decision to only include one character in the film as well as the integration of real-time location (*xianchang* 现场) shooting. The black and white rendering, as noted by Qiu, "creates a distance between reality and the film, and allows more imagination and creativity for it".<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Yu Juan in her essay on performative documentary filmmaking, Qiu expresses that "the camera I use is very mediocre, quite boring rather, but once the film is rendered black and white, you enter a scene because it has distanced itself from reality".<sup>3</sup> This black and white aesthetic moulds an "unfamiliar cinematic world that

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, the distinction between terms like 'cross-dressing,' 'transvestite,' or what Fan Qihui claims as 'yizhuang/易装' are nuanced in their own ways. These nuances, particularly for 'transvestite' and 'yizhuang,' deserve careful analysis extending beyond medical and psychiatric definitions in the context of China, such as how they are *performed* and embodied differently. For now, Bao Hongwei's 2018 article offers a recent contextualisation on the idea of drag and cross-dressing (H. Bao, "Shanghai Is Burning: Extravaganza, Transgender Representation and Transnational Cinema", *Global Media and China*, 3/4, 2018, pp. 233–255).

<sup>2</sup> "Shi nian huishou: Qiu Jiongjiong dianying wanquan zhanyin 十年回首：邱炯炯电影完全展映" [A ten-year retrospective: Qiu Jiongjiong's films fully screened], 31 November 2017, <https://freewechat.com/a/MzlzODYyNjEyNw==/2247485729/1> (accessed 20 March 2020).

<sup>3</sup> "Wo yong de jizi yiban, feichang fawei, zhuan heibai yihou, ni zhen de jiu jinru yi ge qingjing le, ta gen xianshi shuli le ma 我用的片子一般，非常乏味，转黑白以后，你真的就进入一个情境了，它跟现实疏离了嘛", March 2018, quoted by Yu J., "Qian yi jilupian zhong de biao'yan fengge—yi Qiu Jiongjiong jilupian wei li 浅议纪录片中的表演风格—以邱炯炯纪录片为例" [A brief discussion on performative documentaries: the case of Qiu Jiongjiong's documentaries], *Jilupian yanjiu* 纪录片研究 [Documentary Studies], 2018, p.56. URL: <https://www.>

could allow more objective and deeper contemplation and thoughts (from the viewers mostly)<sup>4</sup>. That said, performative documentaries (*biaoyan fengge jilupian* 表演风格纪录片) such as *Madame*,<sup>5</sup> can immerse the viewers into the cinematic world through affect. Performative documentary filmmakers believe that “only through subjective experiences and affect can one truly understand the world”<sup>6</sup>; the combination of a disconnect (allowed through black and white images) from the world in *Madame*, simultaneously with the subjective and affective capturing thereof, renders the film instrumental for investigating potential and varying queer experiences and precarity in contemporary China.

It is this idea of perceiving the world through experiences and affect, as well as the body’s sedimented histories as illuminated in *Madame* that this article seeks to explore. Embodiment in relation to experimental documentary filmmaking has been explored by Wang Qi through careful examinations of Shi Tou and Cui Zi’en’s works. Qi has carefully demonstrated the value in the shift from “observational to personal and performative” in documentary filmmaking.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Qi argues that Cui and Shi’s works provide “not a passive body or subjectivity but the concrete embodiment of histories, realities, and identities that are negotiated and performed in the writing, filming, and media-making process”.<sup>8</sup> In particular, for Shi, the body is the “powerful tool with which to ridicule official historiography”; for Cui, the body constitutes both the inscribed flesh of histories and that which extends “physical and conventional barriers of identities and cultural meanings”.<sup>9</sup> Given Qiu’s own interest towards a subjective portrayal of Fan and Bilang’s performances on stage, I want to further this inquiry of affect and meaning-making in the world in relation to the sense of queerness elicited through *Madame*. To do so, I will look at how the body perceives its totality and being-in-the-world through affective experiences. Furthermore, queer phenomenology provides a pivotal toolkit for unpacking Fan’s perception of *happiness*. Echoing their<sup>10</sup>

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ixueshu.com/document/22cde1e97521595b180e914049ead9b6318947a18e7f9386.html (accessed 20 March 2020). <https://www.ixueshu.com/document/22cde1e97521595b180e914049ead9b6318947a18e7f9386.html> (accessed 20 March 2020).

<sup>4</sup> “Zai mosheng de yingxiang zhong rang ren geng wei lengjing keguan de sikao yingpian 在陌生的影像中让人更为冷静客观地思考影片”, Yu J., *loc. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> ‘Madame’ in this case is a direct translation from *Gu Nai Nai* (姑奶奶). Qiu’s decision to use *Madame* as opposed to ‘Madam’ (the English version) can be due to the specific aspects of and similarities between the French and the Chinese connotation (a woman who works in the sex industry; a girl with quite an attitude and (edgy and prideful) personality).

<sup>6</sup> “ (...) tongguo ge ren zhuguan de jingyan he qinggan biaoda, cai neng geng sheng ke de renshi shijie. . . . 通过个人主观的经验和情感表达, 才能更深刻地认识世界”, Yu J., *op.cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Q. Wang, “Embodied Visions: Chinese Queer Experimental Documentaries by Shi Tou and Cui Zi’en”, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 21/3, 2013, p. 661.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 675.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 672.

<sup>10</sup> I utilise the pronoun ‘them/they/their’ for my discussion on Fan and their cross-dressing performance as Bilang, for I view both ‘persons’ or/and ‘performed identities’ within their bodily totality in their world-being. I also want to note that by focusing on the totality of the body and its world-being does not automatically erase the differences between Fan and Bilang in terms of their appearances, the politics of the performative, (dis)identification, and various potential subversiveness against and/or reaffirmation of norms and structures. Rather, this essay maps out an overview on how Fan’s body is affected by different structures and norms in its world-being.

own perceptions of happiness (“(money + health) x sex = happiness”<sup>11</sup>), my analysis is organised into three intersecting sections on the issues raised throughout Fan’s life in the margins: first, beauty and sex; second, money; and third, happiness. I see Bilang as part of Fan’s bodily totality, in that Fan struggles with beauty, sex, financial stability as well as their conception and pursuit of happiness – all elements that make up Fan’s affective life as that of a tailor and a performer.

First and foremost, I want to stress that my decision to use the term “queer” is not to neglect the significance of other vernaculars with specific cultural as well as intra-regional specificities in the context of China. Sub-cultural terms such as *tongxinglian*, *tongzhi*, *queer*, *lala*, *LGBT*, *duanbei*, or *gaymi* have been used amongst various demographics and groups, sometimes interchangeably. One might find that many of the idioms used are already emblematic of a cross-cultural and transnational evolution, either as a direct import or sometimes in the shape of hybridised expressions. For instance, Bao has noted that terms such as *tongzhi* (a translation from the Soviet communist word “comrade”) is not merely a linguistic differentiation from other terms – like, say, queer – but also an indicator of “different types of subjectivity created by different power relations and governmentalities”, from “socialism to post-socialism” in China.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the languages used in referencing same-sex relationships and various sexualities, as well as their cultural and political significance are indicative of a need for discourses to be more expansive or transnational – thereby not risking what both Bao and Chiang have described as “re-orientalising” China.<sup>13</sup> My deployment of queer is, firstly, resonant with the fact that many of the film festivals or events where *Madame* was screened are queer-themed (such as the “Shanghai Pride Film Festival: Queer Film Exhibition” (2010), “Beijing Queer Film Festival” (2011), and “June Pride Month: Queer Films Exhibitions” (2013, Sun-Yat Sen University)). These festivals are incremental in the queer visual and cultural development in China, with for instance queer university (the word *queer* and its Chinese translation “ku’er” being used for “pragmatic political reasons” in the organization of film screenings, activism, and so forth).<sup>14</sup> Secondly, this essay takes a transnational positionality (for queer discourses) which “challenges and problematises the reification of China and the West”, and thus invites to expand queer theory.<sup>15</sup> In a way, queer critiques under the arch of neoliberal developments have found incredible usefulness in post-socialist China and its participation in global capitalism. And, last but not least, I argue that

<sup>11</sup> This seems to be a formula for happiness given by Fan in an interview with the magazine 时尚cosmo / *Fashion Cosmo*, which I briefly translated.

“著名时装设计师樊其辉自杀 曾为国家领导人设计服装 Zhu ming shi zhuang shejishi Fan Qihui zisha”, *Boxun Xinwen Wang* 博讯新闻网 [Boxun News Network], 2010, URL: [www.bnn.com/cgi-bin/news/gb\\_display/print\\_version.cgi?art=/gb/misc/2010/10&link=201010142143.shtml](http://www.bnn.com/cgi-bin/news/gb_display/print_version.cgi?art=/gb/misc/2010/10&link=201010142143.shtml) (accessed 20 March 2020).

<sup>12</sup> H. Bao, *Queer comrades. Gay identity and Tongzhi activism in postsocialist China*, Copenhagen, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2018, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> H. Chiang, “(De)Provincializing China: Queer Historicism and Sinophone Postcolonial Critique”, in H. Chiang and A. Larissa (eds.), *Queer Sinophone Cultures*, New York, Routledge, 2014, pp. 19–51 and H. Bao, 2018, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> J. Tan, “Beijing Meets Hawai’i: Reflections on Ku’er, Indigeneity, and Queer Theory”, *GLQ. A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 23/1, 2017, p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> M. Yeh, “International Theory and the Transnational Critic: China in the Age of Multiculturalism”, in R. Chow (ed.), *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2000, p. 217.

Fan's experiences as a sex worker and their perception of money, sex, and happiness – see e.g. their deep scepticism towards the “happy promise” of family – often render them precarious and marginal within gay communities in urban China. However, it is precisely through said sense of queer precarity that I could retrieve rich information on Fan and Fan's affective life.

There are many ways one can analyse Qiu's *Madame*, and similarly, one could be affected in different ways while viewing this film. For instance, one can focus on the film's aesthetics as situated within Qiu's own oeuvre or in relation to queer filmmaking in China, or from the angle of the performativity of Fan's cross-dressing, as well as via the prism of various issues concerning (gender) identities that all deserve careful analysis on their own.<sup>16</sup> My reading of the film, then, along interviews with and articles about Fan published online before and after their suicide in 2010, aspires to illustrate a phenomenological mapping of structural affect through Fan and Bilang. Recent scholarship has revitalised a Marxist approach to queer studies in China, one that affords invaluable tools to unpack the structural disenfranchisement of queerness and issues intrinsic in various systemic workings of power. Filmmakers such as Cui Zi'en have provided incredible representations and emphasis on the continuing economic struggles of *tongzhi* in China.<sup>17</sup> Thereafter I want to investigate further what we can learn from the bodies affected by these structures. Little attention has been given to how affect theory and phenomenology could supplement discourses around queer narratives intersecting the terrain of film studies in China.<sup>18</sup> This analysis will attempt to shed some light on how *Madame* brings to the fore these sedimented histories of the body—the sex worker and performer who perceives and is perceived to be “not beautiful”, the economic struggles, and queerness immersed in melancholy and precarity.

## Beauty and Sex

Whilst Qiu's *Madame* is assembled by a prologue (*xumu* 序幕), an epilogue (*weisheng* 尾声), and eight scenes (evoking a resonance with theatre performances), the entanglement of Fan's perception of beauty and sex is one of the critical aspects of the affected body. In *Madame*, Fan makes explicit comments on the ways in which Bilang is dressed, often in relation to what is considered as beautiful and otherwise. In the prologue, Qiu cuts the scene of Bilang's bar performance and replaces it with a medium shot of Fan in what appears to be a dressing room packed with dresses. In this scene, Fan is caught in the process of dressing down as Bilang, with their blouse open

<sup>16</sup> Fan sometimes sees herself as “a female tailor” (*nü caifeng* 女裁缝), simultaneously expressing disassociation from being ‘female’ due to its biological demands.

<sup>17</sup> H. Bao, 2018, *op.cit.* and P. Liu, *Queer Marxism in two Chinas*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> See A. K. Wong, “Towards A Queer Affective Economy of Boys' Love in Contemporary Chinese Media”, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 34/4, 2020. Also see W. F. Schroeder, “On Cowboys and Aliens, Affective History and Queer Becoming in Contemporary China”, *GLQ*, 18/4, Duke University Press, 2012, pp. 425–452.



exposing part of the torso. Follows then the self-conscious disclosure of why people come to see Bilang at the bar in the performance earlier on: “many of you came to see me for this particular part of the performance”—the part in which Bilang says “no one cares...where you are from...whether you are a SHE with a cock”<sup>19</sup>— Fan begins their remarks on their physical appearance. In a rather depleted yet accepting manner of self-expression, Fan says: “Have I got the look? No... a good body? No...” In one of the intertitles that attempts to describe Bilang, it reads: “a massive wig and a pair of twenty-inch-tall high heels, in addition to the height of the tailor... (which makes Bilang almost 2 meters in height)”. Without further explaining why Fan “gives” Bilang such physical exteriority in the intertitle, Qiu subsequently provides an explanation through Fan’s own commentaries on this matter. With a touch of self-deprecating humour, Fan notes: “my face is big!”, as their hands begin to move toward the face to frame it as a means of measuring the size of their head; “without a wig, how can I cover my huge face? And with the big wig, and if I don’t wear twenty-inch-tall high heels, how can I make my appearance proportionate, people will think I’m a dwarf.” Fan’s own descriptions of the body are therefore important in understanding the doubleness of the body in its perception.

The physical appearance of Fan and Bilang alludes to the doubleness of the sensible body. In other words, Fan and Bilang’s perception of their face and beauty is filtered in a way through the ideological (social and cultural) constructs of an East Asian beauty standard. In this sense, the body becomes both the object of perception and the perceptible subject to the standard itself. Edward S. Kwak points out that lower facial contouring remains one of the most popular surgeries for Asian women after procedures on parts such as eyelids and noses.<sup>20</sup> As a result of the proliferation and development of social media, as well as the increasing economic affluence since the economic reforms (which brought about a broader middle class), the desire for advertisement and pursuit of ideal beauty exponentially increased – e.g. through the consumption of cosmetic products, surgical corrections, and so on. As previously argued, Fan is acutely aware of the ways in which Bilang appears on stage, particularly from the neck up. This self-conscious emphasis on particular parts of the body echoes an overall construction of beauty aesthetics in East Asia. Katherine Frith, Ping Shaw, and Hong Cheng show that it is “possible that the beauty ideal in the U.S. is more related to the body, whereas the Asia beauty ideal is more related to the face.”<sup>21</sup> That said, this is not a sweeping statement that attempts to simplify the connection between “ideal beauty” and (un)desirability, nor is it an attempt to hone the binary between perception of beauty and ugliness. Rather, I hope to draw attention to the affect of beauty ideals at the intersection of sexual desirability and perception of self-worth. Fan’s bodily engagement with these ideal constructions is embodied also through Bilang. This is clarified in the scenes in which Fan puts up their hands to “frame and measure” their “big face,” or with Fan’s confession explaining their aesthetic decision

<sup>19</sup> ‘SHE’ is the translated pronoun used in the film’s own subtitles, the origin text is: “有谁在乎， 你是谁家的， 是不是一个张了鸡巴的女郎 (you shui zaihu, ni shi shui jia de, shi bu shi yi ge zhang le jiba de nülang)”.

<sup>20</sup> E. Kwak, “Asian Cosmetic Facial Surgery”, *Facial Plastic Surgery*, 26/2, 2010, pp. 102–109.

<sup>21</sup> K. Frith, P. Shaw, and H. Cheng, “The Construction of Beauty: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Women’s Magazine Advertising”, *Journal of Communication*, 55/1, 2005, p. 66.

to wear big wigs that would hide and “readjust” the proportion of the head and the face. Moreover, Fan’s self-deprecation in insisting that they own their cheaply made-up look as Bilang (signalling an inability to live the fantasy life of objective luxury in China’s neoliberal development) is an indication of the doubleness of the sensible body, even in cross-dressing.

Fan’s lived experiences predispose the body to its own perception of the world in relation to beauty. Returning to the self-deprecating confession made in an interview clip in the documentary about Bilang’s overall aesthetic, Fan announces “it is not that I decide to take ugliness for beauty. But my style of make-up does not fit into mainstream aesthetic standards. But to me, I feel content, and because it could appear strange and unworldly, or it might even make you feel sick, but this is how I want to be, this is it, if you want to see me (Bilang), this is it!” (i.e. a madame who is cheaply “made-up”). On the one hand, Fan and Bilang’s statement can be read as subversive and defiant of beauty ideals and their affects. More precisely, Fan’s conscious reiteration of beauty through Bilang indicates how the affected body can consciously subvert these norms and structures of beauty through various objects, or by temporarily pulling the subject out of the precarious position that is not “in line” with said standards. On the other hand, despite this self-enunciated sense of self-contentment, what becomes extremely crucial for my analysis lies in the ways in which the structural power of beauty standards nonetheless affects the subject’s own perception of self-worth. In this vein, it is the subject’s conscious awareness of their body’s (in)ability to attain the more normatively desirable object of beauty in which affect emerges. Perception of self-worth is thus intersected with the economic precarity of the affective body.

## Money

The film evokes the issue of being economically impoverished both through the interviews conducted in Fan’s dressing room and through Bilang’s performance on stage. In particular, Fan’s experiences with poverty are sedimented in the body in its perception towards capital and money. Namely, even if one obtains economic improvement, one remains nonetheless conditioned within the structure of the capital. In this sense, the affect of the capital is not merely a matter of change in quantity of one’s economic comfort through labour, spending, or other forms of loss in a capitalist system. Instead, the subject is portrayed as economically precarious in their constant and often-inevitable orientation around money. However, this is not to suggest that such precarity is actively brought upon themselves, nor is it my attempt to unequivocally lodge queerness within the frames of neoliberalism in the context of China.<sup>22</sup> Rather, my analysis seeks to shed light on how neoliberalism in post-socialist China can in ways affectively condition modes of living. For Fan, this is largely reflected

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<sup>22</sup> See also L. Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007.

through their “self-determined” means of being-in-the-world: “(money + health) x sex = happiness.” By attuning to the money part of the equation, this section further illustrates the intersection between beauty, sex, and self-worth through the economic value of the body within modes of neoliberal development in post-socialist China. Indicated in the film, Fan has worked as a sex worker in addition to their job as a tailor. For instance, in scene six, the tailor speaks of their experiences as a prostitute in Guangzhou, China. Digging into the past, the tailor’s facial and bodily gestures change accordingly throughout the story. When speaking of their accidental and almost comical dialogue with another friend (Su Zhoupo) who also worked as a sex worker, Fan uncontrollably laughs and smiles at the irony in a lie to their friend when being asked about how much the client David paid them. Namely, Fan tells the friend that they do not want the money because of their genuine affection towards David. Subsequently, Fan discloses their undeniable desire for wanting to be paid. As the narrative continues, Fan makes a final remark in the scene on their experience as a sex worker by turning directly to the interviewers: “you rather be fucked by a cock (of a man, a donkey, a dog), but not by poverty”.<sup>23</sup>

Issues around prostitution or what many call “money boys” have already been discussed to a large extent elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> Money boys are often referred to as male sex workers who have moved to urban areas from rural China out of financial necessity, as well as for finding opportunities to explore their sexuality. Money boys are therefore often marginalised and stigmatised within gay communities as a direct result of “neoliberalism’s differentiating effects in defining legitimate and illegitimate desires”.<sup>25</sup> The filmmaker Cui Zi’en has given representation to “money boys” in his films such as *Money Boy Diaries* (2003).<sup>26</sup> If queer desires are nevertheless pushed to the peripheries of sexual normativity, and bodies are likewise subjected to increasing economic precarity in China, then my particular attention will centre round the question: How does capital or the lack thereof affect the bodies’ relations to differential structures of power? Particularly, how does the body elicit analyses on these matters?

Fan’s attitude towards money and capital can be witnessed from the performance of Bilang. For instance, in scene two, Bilang sings Yao Ming’s *Want to Come Upstairs* (*Xiang shang loutai* 想上楼台), wherein the lyrics metaphorically and poetically engage with the relationship between love and money. Visually, Bilang is seen in a very big light-coloured wig and dress (the specific colours cannot be distinguished as the documentary is in black-and-white), with their eye makeup lightly smudged and parts of the face smeared in eyeliner. Bilang leans dramatically towards the audience in the room, with their eyes wide-open intently staring into the distance; simultaneously, Bilang’s voice suddenly increases in volume at the part of the song: “you say that you want to come upstairs, I ask you how much you can pay for (my love)?”. Bilang then

<sup>23</sup> In *Madame*, translation of my own: 你可以被鸡巴操，但是害怕被穷操。。。什么驴操狗操都无所谓 (ni keyi bei jiba cao, dan shi haipa bei qiong cao... shenme lv cao gou cao dou wusuowei).

<sup>24</sup> Among the rich scholarship on the topic, my understanding of ‘money boys’ has been most critically shaped by the works of Hongwei Bao, Lisa Rofel, Eileen Yuk-ha Tsang, Anthony Huynh, and others who have all been working from perspectives as varied as health care, social anthropology, and visual cultural studies.

<sup>25</sup> H. Bao, 2018, *op.cit.*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>26</sup> *Loc. cit.*

quickly readjusts their body and starts to move from left to right in small motions, accompanied by cheerful finger snapping. This sudden shift in Bilang's bodily movements is indicative of their own experience with love and romance. The interchanging of playfulness and movements of the face and body visually reflects a bodily affect of their past experience, which reaches its apex when Bilang sings: "If you can pay for love then you will have no obstacles to get it, but if you can't, please don't think you can pick the flower" (a metaphor for taking them home for sex and perhaps love).

It is important to point out that I read Fan's sex work, work as a tailor, as occasional lecturer at Tsinghua University, or their performance at the bar not simply as objective "solutions" to one's economic subjugation in neoliberal development. Self-employment, contractual work, and moonlighting are on one hand exemplary of economic precarity. On the other hand, such precarity can also be seen as a form of flexibility and of a consciously tactical mobilisation within neoliberal structures. In the case of Fan, I argue that the various jobs they have undertaken exemplify the ways in which money, or the lack thereof, affects Fan's bodily totality. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology has argued that the body is the totality through which perceptions and meaning are potentialized. Namely, the body is foregrounded as "a common vector for acquiring a world of perception--the potential for enacting a world of meaning" (i.e. being affective).<sup>27</sup> Thus the body is neither a "collection of passive reactions to external stimuli, nor the projection of actions prompted by the cognitive or conceptual act of a disembodied mind."<sup>28</sup> Instead, the body is both perceptual and perceptible. Capital thereby functions as an embodied affect through which Fan perceives the world. In scene four, Bilang is casually giving a speech to the crowd during their performance. Again, with a cigarette in one hand and a microphone in the other, Bilang slowly, and in an impassive manner, says: "every time my mother tried to take her own life, she would write some words on a blank piece of newspaper, and say: everything in the world can be thrown away except for money".<sup>29</sup> The criticality of money is subsequently shown in Bilang's reaction to new audience members joining the performance. Namely, Bilang turns to the newcomers, and says: "Hi, come in... I'm very cheap!". At this particular moment, money becomes more than an object that one gravitates toward, but rather an embodiment. The queer body not only perceives the world as made of capital exchange, but as the very capital itself. More specifically, such embodiment of capital is perceptible to Fan, as their self-annunciation of "I am cheap" marks the cross point of Fan's affective ontology as a sex capital, entertainer/performer, knock-off dress tailor, lecturer, and designer. As a result, Fan's affective participation in China's neoliberal development exposes both one's economic vulnerability and precarity, as well as the subject's ability to circumvent differential subjugations through various means in pursuit of happiness.

Thus far, this essay has shown the ways in which beauty and sex (prostitution, and the perception of the self through capital) are part of Fan's perception of happiness:

<sup>27</sup> Cited in T. Roald, K. Levin, and S. Køppe, "Affective Incarnations: Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Challenge to Bodily Theories of Emotion", *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 38/4, 2018, p. 209.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>29</sup> In *Madame*, original Chinese reads: "她说, 世上万物皆可抛, 唯有金钱才是忘不了"(Ta shuo, shishang wanwu jie ke pao, wei you jinqian cai shi wang buliao).

“(money + health) x sex = happiness”. And the health factor and its relation to “sex” is seen through Fan’s painful, yet slightly self-deprecating humorous narration of their experience of contracting syphilis from a stranger in a park in Beijing. This encounter is then followed by the dreadful needle injection of penicillin during their hospital visits. Despite the pain of syphilis and needle injections that affected the body in its perceptions toward sex and pleasure/pain, Fan nonetheless speaks fondly of the orgasm they achieved in that happenstance. As such, the remaining element of the equation that urges further exploration is happiness.

## Happiness

The notion of “happiness” functions as a critical site of social critique. When I refer to this idea of being-in-the-world with regard to one’s happiness, I place specific emphasis on the queer body and its navigation through the deep waters of normative living. In her essay *Happy Object* (2010), Ahmed argues that happiness “functions as a promise that directs us toward certain objects”,<sup>30</sup> through the body’s tendency to perceive “an object as the cause of an affect”.<sup>31</sup> We arrive in a space (physical and social) already with a position that affects what our bodies can do and how we perceive the space and the world; the body, in other words, arrives with its own dispositions. In this way, our bodily horizon is conditioned upon the vicinities of objects to the body. It is crucial for me then to articulate what I mean by “horizon” in relation to the significance of objects. Namely, the horizon is a structure that encapsulates all points of time and places of objects. Merleau-Ponty has given an excellent example in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), that

...the house surely has its own age and its own changes; however, even if it collapses tomorrow, it will always remain true that it existed today. Each moment of time gives itself as a witness to all the others. It shows, by taking place, ‘how this was bound to happen’ and ‘how it will have ended’. Each represent definitively establishes a point of time that solicits the recognition of all others. Thus, the object is seen from all times just as it is seen from all places, and by the same means, namely, the horizon structure.<sup>32</sup>

In this sense, the object, for instance, a wig, or the dress of Fan and Bilang, is perceptible to the subject in relation to other objects (e.g. cigarettes, a door, gym equipment, whiskey, etc.) on the horizon in the space that the body inhabits. More importantly, the subject’s orientation towards the/an object, even if it’s “lost”, is one that has been sedimented in depths of history (of and in relation to the object), and one

<sup>30</sup> S. Ahmed, “Happy Objects”, in M. Gregg and G. Seigworth (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, New York, Routledge, 2012 [1945], p. 71.

that affects and has affected the subject's world of meaning-making in a double-facedness of perception.

Fan's closeness to and orientation towards "happy" objects are visually seen in most of the interview clips filmed in their dressing room. Namely, the dressing room, similar to their study, is filled with objects that constitute the subject's bodily horizon: dresses, tables, chairs, flowers, cigarettes, etc. When entering the dressing room, the viewer realises how much the objects are rich in histories for the affected subject, in this case, Fan and Bilang. In short, the horizon is constitutive of the subject's perception of an object/objective, as opposed to being merely supplementary. To pull an object/objective in close proximity to the subject can be seen as an orientation towards that which generates or can be anticipated to produce an affect. Moreover, Fan's affective orientation towards these happy objects is indicative of the agency of the subject in its ability to evade precarious living conditions.

Certain objects that *bring* happiness could also be suggestive of what Ahmed highlights as "anticipatory causality."<sup>33</sup> Namely, that there are many objects in the world which are already "attributed as the cause of happiness" before our encounter with them. This reaffirms her stance on how the family "sustains its place as a "happy object" by identifying those who do not reproduce its line as the cause of unhappiness".<sup>34</sup> The family line functions both horizontally (between brothers and sisters, or husbands and wives) and vertically (parents, children, and grandchildren), similar to that of a family tree. Through the concept of anticipatory causality, then, one can see how marriage and reproduction are often already anticipated to be the objects that promise us happiness. Astray from these lines we find *queered*, subsequently rendered as "unhappy" in the way that Ahmed contends "unhappy queer is made unhappy by the world that reads queer as unhappy".<sup>35</sup> What is critical in Ahmed's essay on happiness, are the remarks at the end of the essay *Happy Objects* (2010) where she argues that the "experience of being alienated from the affective promise of happy objects gets us somewhere", and hurt "is not then a backward orientation: to move on, you must make this return" (to hurt, or pain).<sup>36</sup> But what is so important about the objects (temporarily) in the background of our bodily horizon? In this specific case, Fan barely speaks to their family, and they comically admit that they "wish" that their mother would move to the moon or somewhere that has more expensive long-distance calls so she would not have to call them all the time. However, family is always part of one's bodily horizon, of that which affects Fan's life (either in the immediate front or the background). This prompts a more suitable question: Where does the body *orient to* when the family functions not entirely as the "happy object"? And more importantly, how does an object that is experienced as familiar with both "injury" and happiness function affectively?

Fan's perception of happiness does not warrant them an exemption from the affect of the injury of the family object. In an interview conducted by Li Mengxia for an

<sup>33</sup> S. Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> S. Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

anthology entitled *Stories in Beijing* (*Beijing gushi—Fan Qihui/北京故事—樊其辉*), Fan stated: “In fact, happiness needs to be painful, and to me, however painful I am, then however happy I am”.<sup>37</sup> This co-existence of pain and happiness affects the body’s capabilities of perception and orientation in the world of objects and objectives. For Fan, to obtain happiness is to also be affected by pain. One particular example of this is given in an interview clip in scene three, where Fan is reminiscing the afternoon when they went to Miyun district in Beijing as a child with their father. Fan then makes a rather visceral remark on this event during which their skin was peeling off all across their body due to the long exposure out in the sun. This painful experience or “injury” incurred in that particular location was, nevertheless, remembered as a happy one, as Fan continues to say: “that afternoon was one that I would love to reminisce, there was no worries, no anxiety, no fear”. Despite the bodily pain they had to endure, Fan associates the place of Miyun with happiness, or an object of happiness they orient toward for an affective promise: a state of having no worries, no anxiety, and no fear. “I’m still thinking about having a house there”, says Fan. Yet, these lapses of joyful moments and Fan’s recollection of them are often trumped by a sense of melancholy that the family object generates. Melancholy emerges in the subject’s inability to mourn such “loss” in that the family object is never completely absent from the subject’s consciousness.

The inseparability of melancholy and happiness is further seen in Fan’s own discussions on the family object. Fan perceives the way their parents live as less fortunate, in that Fan already knew what they wanted could not be provided by their parents, yet what they did not desire was constantly given by the family – such as life itself. They feel sorry for their parents who constantly struggled to fit in (with society) economically, culturally, and/or socially. Fan in particular feels great remorse for their mother who still fails to find financial or other forms of security despite toying the line and anticipating the happy promise of having a family and raising offspring. In the context of China, on the one hand, “the ideology of the family” functions as a pivotal mechanism in neoliberal development as that which is supposed to “solve the actual economic contradictions of capitalism for the capitalists, as familialism can explain and justify exploitation, crisis, and suffering in private terms that absolve the industrial capitalist of blame”.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, the social and cultural norms of family-making and reproduction are often intertwined with the political realm wherein family constitutes “the sociological unit of Chinese culture”<sup>39</sup> and the affective site of the “Great Rejuvenation of Chinese Nation”. In this vein, national development concerns not merely that of an individual, but of the “family” too. All these conceptions and perceptions of the family in fact manifest unquantifiable affect on how the family object can often be perceived to warrant happiness in China, as a force of orientation as it were.

<sup>37</sup> “我觉得对我来说，我有多痛苦，我就有多快乐” (Wo juede dui wo lai shuo, wo you duo tongku, wo jiu duo kuaile), 13 October 2010, <https://cul.sohu.com/20101013/n275592065.shtml> (accessed 20 March 2020).

<sup>38</sup> D. Cloud, “Queer Theory and Family Values”, in M. Zavarzadeh, T. L. Ebert and D. Morton (eds), *Marxism, Queer Theory, Gender*, New York, The Red Factory, 2001, p. 77.

<sup>39</sup> W-S. Chou, *Houzhiming Tongzhi*, Hong Kong, xianggang tongzhi chubanshe, 1997, discussed by Liu in “Why Does Queer Theory Need China?”, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critiques*, 18/2, 2010, p. 296.

Fan's perception towards the less-than-happy "family" is demonstrative of how the family object constitutes the bodily horizon of the subject, even when it is temporarily shoved into the background due to the injury it represents. Fan's father has disclosed to Fan that his primary reason for having children was "future proofing"—i.e. so the child could take care of the parents when they are older. In witnessing the life of their mother, Fan becomes acutely aware of her inability to live the fantasy promise of happiness through family-making and reproduction. "Future proofing" often entails financial as well as emotional support. Economic precarity of the individual intersects with familial obligations, injury, or happiness. Fan has expressed that their happiness does not depend on having a family or children. In a way, Fan disrupts the structure of "reproductive futurism" so meticulously illustrated by Lee Edelman. For Edelman, the child has become the emblem of futurity for American society.<sup>40</sup> Although China is governed under a different political system than the US, contingent upon its own cultural norms and histories, reproduction and family constitute just as much the bedrock of Chinese society and China's economic development, while familialism often functions as the centre of orientation and affective living for citizenries.<sup>41</sup> Fan's decision neither to form a family, nor to reproduce is exemplary of how one's past experience affects the body and its being-in-the-world; yet it is precisely in "the willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here"<sup>42</sup> that Fan's life becomes an embodiment of *queerness* via their own paths of happiness in-and-through precarity.

## Concluding Remarks

Qiu's *Madame* as a film could be seen as part of the New Documentary Movement's legacy. This movement emerged in the 1990s as a response to the Special Topics Programme (*zhuantopian* 专题片) endorsed by the state. Prior to it, as Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel have pointed out, "all documentaries were state-produced and took the form of illustrated lectures".<sup>43</sup> Current sixth generation Chinese filmmakers since the movement often face the reality of lack of funding and official support for certain themes and subjects represented in films. Many film scholars have meticulously demonstrated the stylistic or aesthetic negotiations at play in the New Movement with regard to previous modes of (documentary) filmmaking, the need to rethink what contemporary digital cinema culture in China is, and the socio-political contexts that motivated and influenced this movement. The New Documentary Movement places particular emphasis on the experiences of marginalisation after the economic reform

<sup>40</sup> L. Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 1–31.

<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the recent shift in the Family Planning Policy in 2015 is in a way indicative of the continuing governmental emphasis on reproduction and familialism and its vital role in economic development and social harmony.

<sup>42</sup> L. Edelman, *op.cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>43</sup> C. Berry and L. Rofel, "Introduction", in C. Berry, X. Lu and L. Rofel (eds.), *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2010, p. 4.



in 1978.<sup>44</sup> Queerness, for instance, has seen an increase in representation in works produced within the PRC. Works of Fan Popo, Cui Zi'en, Shi Tou, Wei Xiaogang, just to name a few, have been incremental in the development of queer visual culture, often with financial help from foreign film studios, NGOs, or through crowdfunding. Qiu's unique portrayal of Fan in a way then contributes to the "alternative archive"—documenting various disenfranchised groups and issues surrounding them.<sup>45</sup>

*Madame* gives us a unique queer representation that creates a distance between Fan's world and reality through the *heibai* aesthetic of leaving more room for "objective" contemplation during the viewing process. Conversely, by attuning the viewer to the subjective and embodied experiences, as to a partly intimate portrayal of Fan, *Madame* allows us to think about queerness through Fan's often precarious being-in-the-world. Admittedly, queerness and queer precarity in the context of China need additional work from various fields of studies. *Madame* as a filmic work is however more than capable of eliciting further enquiries on matters such as queer resistance, subversion, gender performativity, and the like; the queer self and its entanglement with the family object can also benefit from further analysis by focussing more specifically on China's national and neoliberal development. That said, this essay has attempted to bring to the fore how the queer body is at once affected and affective, attuning to Fan's own *ontology* of being-in-the-world.

My reading of *Madame* contributes to queer phenomenology and affect discourses within and in relation to film studies. Scholars such as Sobchack, Lindner, Plantinga, Smith, Shaviro, and more, have paid great attention to how film can elicit emotions and affect from spectators. This article nonetheless shied away from a viewer-centred approach by reorienting its focus on the body in the filmic work as vehicle for social and cultural critique. Phenomenology and affect receive limited attention in queer studies in China, particularly in relation to cinema. This is in a way partially resonant with what Liu has argued, i.e. that despite an affective turn in queer studies, new queer studies' emphasis on "subjective meanings of pleasure, play, and desire...give insufficient attention to the impersonal structures and conditions of social change".<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, what I have attempted to show in this article is how both the affected body and the notion of embodiment could yield some value when considering the various structural powers that condition one's being-in-the-world. Indeed, the affect of beauty ideals is not merely witnessed in their every-day appearance but also in cross-dressing. Mobilising at the peripheries of standards and ideals of what is supposed to constitute beauty, Fan's appearances and desirability also affect Fan's own perception of their (sexual and capital) value. Economic disenfranchisement could push various bodies to the margins of the socialist market economy (SME), and this could then prompt further investigation on the politics of "queer happiness": who is promised to

<sup>44</sup> X. Lu, "West of the Tracks: History and Class-Consciousness", in C. Berry, X. Lu and L. Rofel (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 57–76.

<sup>45</sup> Z. Zhang and A. Zito (eds.), *DV-Made China: Digital Subjects and Social Transformations after Independent Film*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2015 and C. Berry and L. Rofel, "Alternative Archive: China's Independent Documentary Culture", in C. Berry, X. Lu and L. Rofel (eds.), *op. cit.*, 2010, pp. 135–154.

<sup>46</sup> P. Liu, 2015, *op. cit.* p. 10.

happiness and through what means in contemporary China?<sup>47</sup> In many ways, one's orientation towards "happy" objects such as the family object is more indicative of its affective conditioning of subjects through which happiness often is only perceptible as a temporary deviation from melancholy. Yet the subversiveness of Fan's being-in-the-world can be contended in their refusal of reproduction and familialism. In a way, this also makes Fan a comrade, a *tongzhi*, who fought the battle of the precarious life in post-socialist China before committing suicide.

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<sup>47</sup> See anthology: G. Wielander. & D. Hird. (eds), *Chinese Discourses on Happiness*, 2018, Hong Kong University Press.

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# Gender, Ethnicity, and Collectivisation in the Frontier Regions of the People's Republic of China

Steven Pieragastini

## Introduction

From the first days of the People's Republic, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials, study groups, and ethnographers visited communities in the frontier regions of China to undertake extensive investigations of non-Han societies.<sup>1</sup> However, unlike the predominantly Han interior, dramatic social, economic, and cultural changes were generally not attempted in ethnic minority<sup>2</sup> and frontier regions during the first years of the new regime for fear of instigating revolts. This careful approach was abandoned starting in the mid-1950s with the early stages of collectivisation, and then jettisoned altogether with the onset of the Great Leap Forward in 1958 as frontier communities were suddenly thrown into turmoil. As Gail Hershatler demonstrated in her book *The Gender of Memory*, the experience of rural revolution affected women in particular and sometimes unexpected ways; while the language of liberation provided opportunities, the state management of labour imposed new and onerous demands on women.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article originated as a paper for a panel at the 2018 Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies on new gender norms in mid-twentieth century China. I would like to thank Yidi Wu, the organizer of that panel, and Ying Hu, who served as discussant and provided helpful comments. I would also like to thank the editors of this special issue and the two anonymous reviewers for their feedback on various drafts of the article, as well as the partnership of academic and research institutions behind the Hathitrust Digital Library that expanded access to their collections in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, I use the term 'ethnic minority' to translate the Chinese term *shaoshu minzu*, although in some cases I leave the term untranslated in pinyin. *Shaoshu minzu* is a problematic term in Chinese, and becomes more so when translated into English as 'ethnic minority' or 'minority nationality'. Thus, my use of the term 'ethnic minority' is purely for the sake of expediency and not reflective of any ideological commitment. I use the term 'communities' or 'groups' more often than 'societies' or 'cultures' as a means of challenging the gross simplifications imposed by China's official *minzu* classifications.

<sup>3</sup> G. Hershatler, *The Gender of Memory: rural women and China's collective past*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011.

There have been limited studies discussing the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and the socialist revolution in the Maoist era.<sup>4</sup> Most research that discuss collectivisation and the Great Leap Forward in *shaoshu minzu* areas are anthropological studies that talk about the collective memory of the traumatic years of the late 1950s-early 1960s. However, historians have been slow to make use of available sources to examine the implementation of collectivisation policies and their effects on gender relations of *shaoshu minzu*.

Whereas the process of revolution, collectivisation, and famine could lead to similar issues in both Han and non-Han areas, other policies played out in distinct ways in ethnic minority regions, in part because of the complex and sometimes fraught historical relationships between different ethnic groups (both Han/non-Han relations and relations between non-Han communities).<sup>5</sup> Focusing on Guizhou Province, and in particular the Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture (黔东南苗族侗族自治州) and Qiannan Bouyei and Miao Autonomous Prefecture (黔南布依族苗族自治州), this article draws on evidence from archival sources to show that, despite sensitivity to the possibility that collectivisation would instigate local opposition, the transition to socialism ultimately led to a disruption of cultural mores and social relations, which became an all-out-attack during the Great Leap Forward, in ethnic minority regions of southern China. The ultimate cause for this failure of the Party's "minzu work" was an embedded drive to increase production, even at the expense of other political objectives. In other words, a party-state ostensibly committed to women's liberation and unity of various nationalities sought to curtail the autonomous spaces for women that existed in certain minority cultures simply because those cultures were deemed to be an impediment to the Party-State's schemes to increase (grain) production. Combined with other factors, such as general disrespect of ethnic minority customs and disregard for ethnic minority cadres and elites, the modifications of women's economic roles contributed to a broader dissatisfaction in ethnic minority regions in the mid-late 1950s, which manifested in flight, unrest, and even rebellion. Compared to Han areas, the most critical differences in *shaoshu minzu* women's experience of collectivisation were related to property and labour, with less obvious but still significant differences in terms of marriage and health.

## Categorizing Ethnicity, Gender, Family, and Property Relations

Before even contemplating a revolution in social and economic relations in ethnic minority regions, the CCP had to gain a better understanding of communities with

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<sup>4</sup> An important study that also incorporates a study of environmental changes is E. Yeh, *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of Han/non-Han relations, it is important to note that the Han were not always in the dominant social, economic, or political position in the pre-1949 period, depending on the locality.

which it previously had limited to no interaction. As Thomas Mullaney showed in his book *Coming to Terms with the Nation*, the process of ethnic classification (*minzu shibie*) in the early 1950s was rushed, often arbitrary, and, despite efforts to include the voices of those being classified, an ultimately top-down effort that settled on purported linguistic similarities between various groups as the easiest means of aggregating the hundreds of distinct communities that existed in Yunnan and elsewhere in southern China.<sup>6</sup> The *minzu shibie* project examined by Mullaney overlapped with and was succeeded by other projects that defined the CCP's discourse of ethnicity in the 1950s, including the establishment of *minzu* research institutes (*minzu xueyuan*) and the compilation of in-depth local "social historical investigations" (*shehui lishi diaocha*) of the now-categorized *shaoshu minzu*.

These "social historical investigations" recognized the incredible diversity of family structure, religious practice, property systems, and gender relations in southern China, even if the raw data of ethnographic investigations were shoehorned into Marxist conceptualisations of those issues. Many of the *shaoshu minzu* in southern China had systems of marriage that were very complex and could not be easily labelled as patriarchal or matriarchal. In some communities, women had autonomy in sexual relationships and domicile, most famously with the Moso (Mosuo in pinyin, also known as Na) of Yunnan known for their *tisese* system of sexual visitation (known in Chinese as *zouhun* 'walking marriages')<sup>7</sup>, or divided labour and resources equally with their husbands.<sup>8</sup> Courtships could be drawn out and easily broken off, as with the *yaomalang* practice (摇马郎 known by other names locally, and officially as *youfang* 游方) in Miao communities in Qiandongnan, vexing bureaucrats seeking to register and manage marriage, residence, property, and labour.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that the post-1949 discourse of ethnicity in China was influenced by terms and concepts dating back to the imperial era, and was more directly influenced by studies and terminology from Republican-era ethnographers. Marxist concepts of staged historical development, which Stalin had explicitly linked with ethnicity (or nationality) in his influential essay on the topic, were later added to this framework.<sup>10</sup> This model relegated most frontier societies to a "feudal" or even "primitive communist" stage of development, while older cultural conceits led to the interpretation of the "backward" customs of *shaoshu minzu* as similar to ancient practices of Han Chinese. Similarly, ethnographers in the 1950s-60s borrowed Engels's materialist and teleological understanding of marriage as progressing towards

<sup>6</sup> T. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> C. Hua, *A Society Without Fathers or Husbands: The Na of China*, New York, Zone Books, 2010; C. Shih, *Quest for Harmony: The Moso Traditions of Sexual Union and Family Life*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> S. Du, *Chopsticks Only Work in Pairs: Gender Unity and Gender Equality Among the Lahu of Southwest China*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Qiandongnan Miaozu Dongzu Zizhizhou difang zhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Qiandongnan Miaozu Dongzu Zizhizhouzhi. Minzu zhi* (Guiyang: Guizhou ren min chu ban she, 2000), 130.

<sup>10</sup> J. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03.htm> (accessed 21 June 2021). However, the application of Stalin's ideas in a Chinese context led to some debate within the CCP when it was still a revolutionary force. On this, see J. Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and Its Indigenes became Chinese*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

monogamy, and thus consigned the sexual and marriage practices of various minority communities to a lower stage of social evolution.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the intersection of gender and ethnicity, there was a historical tendency among Han literati to symbolically feminize the communities on China's southern frontier in late imperial times.<sup>12</sup> In the twentieth century, these conceptions were given form through ethnography and mass media, both of which associated non-Han ethnicities with particular body parts, clothing, hairstyles, and distinctive accoutrements (earrings, necklaces, tattoos). As the anthropologist Ralph Litzinger put it, "ethnic subjectivity is differently inscribed, and contested, at the site of the gendered body."<sup>13</sup>

## Early Campaigns' Effects on Marriage and Health

As with *shaoshu minzu* policy in general, in the early 1950s the Party leadership advocated a cautious and flexible approach regarding issues relating to gender relations and customs in *shaoshu minzu* communities. The presence of the Party at the grassroots of society was initially quite limited, and training locally-recruited cadres, especially *shaoshu minzu* cadres, was a slow and messy process. Above all, the aim was to avoid instigating ethnic tensions or opposition to the policies of the new regime that could easily become a conduit for ethnic tensions, which could in turn be taken advantage of by remnant Guomindang forces.<sup>14</sup> Within these general guidelines (or sometimes in opposition to them), there were nevertheless some significant changes in gender relations in southern China's ethnic minority communities by the mid-1950s, particularly as a result of the Marriage Law of 1950. In his thorough study of the Marriage Law in Yunnan, Neil Diamant shows that this situation could be beneficial to both Han and non-Han women in unhappy marriages, as cadres were inclined to quickly grant divorces and move on to more pressing matters.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, in particularly remote regions or those along China's frontiers with neighbouring countries, the Marriage Law did not arrive on schedule or at all in the early 1950s. In the following years, instructions to local Party-State and All-China Women's Federation

<sup>11</sup> F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm> (accessed 21 June 2021); C. Hua, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> S. Harrell, "Introduction: Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them", in S. Harrell (ed.), *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1995, pp. 10–13.

<sup>13</sup> R. Litzinger, *Other Chinas: The Yao and the Politics of National Belonging*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2000, p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> There were a number of conflicts with 'bandits' in southern China in the months and years after Liberation, including the Bouyei bandit leader Cheng Lianzhen (程莲珍) who was captured by PLA in 1950 and pardoned by Mao as an effort to win over *shaoshu minzu*. She later worked with PLA to get other armed groups to surrender, and by 1960 was a member of the Changshun County (Qiannan) *zhengxie*. Her biography is the basis for the popular book and 2010 television show *Daxinan jiaofei ji*.

<sup>15</sup> N. Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949-1968*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000, pp. 167–170.



(ACWF) cadres regularly carved out exceptions from general orders and guidelines for registering marriages, intervening in marriage disputes, or granting divorces.<sup>16</sup> In Guizhou, the property relations (discussed below) and extended courtship rituals among ethnic minorities were likely contributors to a significantly lower divorce rate compared to Han communities, although an equally important element was that, in divorce cases, judges in ethnic minority regions could develop a “mediation system” that incorporated elements of customary law and partially deferred decisions to local society.<sup>17</sup>

Beginning in the mid-1950s, “democratic reforms” (*minzhu gaige*) directly challenged the customary practices of ethnic minority communities. The exact timing of these reforms varied from place to place; they had been implemented throughout much of China during the original land reform campaign in the early 1950s, but for many *shaoshu minzu* areas, the process was delayed until 1956, or in some cases until 1958 or 1959. The experience of “democratic reforms” and collectivisation marked a turning point in many communities’ history and culture, a dividing line beyond which the (Han) state intervened much more directly in their daily lives. In Qiandongnan, along with discouraging arranged marriages and a reinvigoration of the Marriage Law, the democratic reforms saw Miao courtship rituals (*yaomalang/youfang*), in which a prospective couple would continue to reside at their natal homes but engage in sexual relations for a period of time, denounced for corrupting morality and harming production; outside of holidays dedicated to courtship and social interaction between the sexes, the practice was banned.<sup>18</sup> By the time of the Great Leap Forward, “unreasonable marriage customs” of ethnic minorities were openly attacked by the Guizhou Provincial Government, primarily because they were seen as inhibiting greater agricultural production.<sup>19</sup>

Some of the most direct and dramatic changes to affect women in ethnic minority regions were in the realm of health, particularly issues around reproductive health.<sup>20</sup> There was genuine sentiment among *shaoshu minzu* women to utilize the opportunities

<sup>16</sup> For representative selections of directives from the central government and the leadership of the ACWF, see *Renmin ribao*, “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo neiwubu mingling – hunyin dengji banfa yi you benbu bao jing zhonghua renmin gongheguo guowuyuan yu yijiuwuwu nian wu yue ershi ri pizhun, xian yu gongbu shixing” June 3, 1955, “Guanyu zhonghua renmin gongheguo funü lianhe hui zhangcheng (caoan) de baogao” September 12, 1957, and “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo funü lianhe hui zhangcheng” September 21, 1957.

<sup>17</sup> L. Shangyang, “Guizhou qingzhen miaozu de lihun yanjiu (1949-1965),” M.A. Thesis in History, East China Normal University, 2019. See also F. Liansheng, “Build and Transform: The Implementation of the Marriage Law in Southeastern Guizhou in the Early Days of the People’s Republic of China” in X. Kang (ed.), *Women, Family and the Chinese Socialist State, 1950-2010*, Leiden, Brill, 2019, pp. 121–140.

<sup>18</sup> *Qiandongnan Miaozu Dongzu Zizhizhouzhi*, *Minzu zhi*, 486.

<sup>19</sup> “Tongguo zhiding aiguo gongyue gaige shaoshu minzu bu heli de hunyin fengsu xiguan,” *Renmin sifa*, 17 March 1959, pp. 9–11.

<sup>20</sup> The discourse of Chinese officials and ethnologists regarding health in ethnic minority communities reflected anxieties about China’s own transition to modernity, a transmission of the discourse of ‘hygienic modernity’ introduced by Western and Japanese imperialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The health issues present in ethnic minority communities were a central pillar in their being labelled ‘backwards’ by Party and government officials. R. Rogaski, *op. cit.* From a longer-term perspective, it could be argued that the efforts of the Chinese state, from late imperial times on, to control disease in the Southwest was a thinly-disguised proxy for political control over indigenous populations, who were less susceptible to tropical diseases like malaria; D. Bello, *Across Forest, Steppe, and Mountain: Environment, Identity, and Empire in Qing China’s Borderlands*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 200–203.

presented by socialism to demand improved health services. Regarding birthing practices, the same reforms that were noted by Gail Hershatter in Shaanxi can be seen in documents about ethnic minority communities in southern China. Rudimentary methods of cutting the umbilical cord that often led to post-partum infection in both the mother and newborn child, and the lack of trained midwives capable of handling difficult births, caused high levels of maternal mortality and especially infant mortality.<sup>21</sup>

Following a national conference on *shaoshu minzu* health work in August 1951, recruiting “new style” midwives was a top priority, along with retraining other health workers, preparing government bureaucracies to oversee healthcare, establishing clinics, improving hygiene (mostly through the Patriotic Health Campaign), and distributing vaccines and medication.<sup>22</sup> In Guizhou, 790 new style midwife workers had been trained by March 1954; two years later, the number had jumped to over 17,000, one-third of whom were *shaoshu minzu*.<sup>23</sup> At the prefectural level, in Qiandongnan, by 1956 tens of thousands of women had been fully trained from scratch as new style midwives, retrained from the old to new methods, or trained to administer a variety of pre- and post-natal exams and assistance.<sup>24</sup> Nationally, over 8,000 ethnic minority midwives were trained in the year 1956, and over 80% of births in ethnic minority regions were done according to the new method.<sup>25</sup> More broadly, the public health campaigns of the Maoist period were not so much the extension of “modern” medicine to *shaoshu minzu* regions, but a synthesis of medical practices from the Chinese metropole (Han, coastal China), which itself was already an indigenized form of “Western” medicine, with local methods (民族医).<sup>26</sup> At any rate, these efforts did reduce infant and maternal mortality in ethnic minority regions of southern China, but slowly and unevenly. Statistics from Qiandongnan from 1964 show that in some counties, over 80% of births were delivered using “new style” midwifery while in others the figure was still as low as 23%.<sup>27</sup> In fact, even in the late 1980s, only 60%

<sup>21</sup> Reforms to birthing methods meant to reduce infant and maternal mortality brought ACWF cadres into conflict with ‘old style’ midwives, though many were ultimately retrained in the new methods. ‘New style’ midwifery also could cause friction with female shamans who played a prominent role in local animistic religions. Wang Haiguang discusses a similar issue in Mashan, Guizhou, where ‘medicine women’ (*yaopo*), fortune tellers, and exorcists incurred the opposition of newly-installed local cadres. Wang Haiguang, “Radical Agricultural Collectivization and Ethnic Rebellion: The Communist Encounter with a ‘New Emperor’ in Guizhou’s Mashan Region, 1956”, in J. Brown and M. Johnson (eds.), *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China’s Era of High Socialism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 285.

<sup>22</sup> A nation-wide push for training new style midwives coincided with International Women’s Day in March 1953, which also was accompanied by the aforementioned attempt to reinforce the Marriage Law; although the revival of the Marriage Law quickly faltered, the training programs for midwives continued apace.

<sup>23</sup> *Renmin ribao*, “Guangda funü jiji canjia guojia ge xiang jianshe gongzuo”, 11 March 1954 and “Guizhou xin xunlian le wuqian duo ming jiesheng yuan”, 11 April 1956.

<sup>24</sup> Qiandongnan Miaozu Dongzu Zizhizhou di fangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Qiandongnan Miaozu Dongzu Zizhizhouzhi*, *Weisheng zhi*, Guiyang Shi, Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1993, pp. 164–166.

<sup>25</sup> *Renmin ribao*, “Guizhou sheng shaoshu minzu diqu weisheng shiye you hen da fazhan”, 9 January 1957. Additional statistics along these lines could be cited, though it is important to approach these numbers critically and keep in mind that a significant number of the new style midwives were in fact ‘old style’ midwives who had been rapidly retrained in the new methods. Hershatter, *op. cit.*, pp. 157 & 161–168.

<sup>26</sup> *Qiandongnan Miaozu Dongzu Zizhizhouzhi*, *Weisheng zhi*, p. 188.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167. This source conspicuously lacks any mention of infant mortality at the prefectural level before the late 1980s, providing only sparse local numbers for the early 1950s. It seems unlikely that these statistics were

of births in Qiandongnan were delivered using “new style” midwifery and the infant mortality rate remained 26.58%, an improvement over statistics from the early 1950s, when infant mortality was over 50%, but still stubbornly high.<sup>28</sup>

## Property and Collectivisation

In Guizhou, the first (lower-stage) co-operatives were established in the summer of 1955 (quite late by national standards), the first higher-stage co-operatives were established in January 1956, and then were gradually adopted throughout the province in the course of 1956 and the early months of 1957.<sup>29</sup> Although this process appears rather mechanistic at first glance, the sources indicate that it was in fact a touch-and-go process with many pauses and retreats that also generated considerable disagreement between different levels of the Party. There was good reason to be cautious, as the democratic reforms and collectivisation effectively betrayed the arrangement that the CCP had brokered with ethnic minority elites and communities at the start of the 1950s.

Collectivisation exposed problems in “woman work”,<sup>30</sup> particularly surrounding culturally-specific types of property ownership, an issue local cadres were aware of and concerned about during the transition to higher-stage cooperatives. Customarily, Bouyei (Buyi), Miao, Bai, Shui, and Dong (Kam) women owned small plots of land for growing cotton (*mianhua di* 棉花地), hemp (*mayuan* 麻园), and indigo (*landian tian* 蓝靛田); all of which were connected to sideline work producing textiles and clothing. The exact process of acquisition varied by region, but these small plots were generally associated with marriage (known as “bride land” *guniang tian* 姑娘田, *guniang di* 姑娘地, and in the case of some Bai people, *guma tian* 姑妈田). Most often these were acquired at the time of marriage, paid for by the groom’s family, and less often were provided by the bride’s natal family and returned to the family after her death. In either case, they were intended to provide the new bride with the raw materials needed to produce clothing for her family, as well as surplus production as a form of sideline work. However, not all “bride lands” were cotton lands, indigo fields, or hemp

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not collected, although it is possible that they would not have been recorded as such (婴儿死亡率), thus making comparison with later years difficult.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 169.

<sup>29</sup> Still, by April 1957, 12.5% of peasant households in Guizhou were not in higher-stage co-operatives. D. Goodman, *Centre and Province in the People’s Republic of China: Sichuan and Guizhou, 1955-1965*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 64–65. In Yunnan, at the end of 1957, some 11% of the villages in Yunnan had not been entered into lower-stage cooperatives. J. Yang, *Mubei: 1958-1962 nian Zhongguo da jihuanguang jishi*, Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi, 2008, pp. 439–440.

<sup>30</sup> I follow the convention of leading scholars on this topic in translating *funü gongzuo* as ‘woman work,’ meaning the efforts of the CCP, the people’s government, and their affiliated organs (especially ACWF) to enlist women in the campaigns and initiatives of the Party-State, as well as political work that most directly concerned women, such as enacting the Marriage Law or ‘birth planning’ initiatives. On this last topic, see S. Mellors, “Less Reproduction, More Production: Birth Control in the Early People’s Republic of China, 1949–1958”, *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*, 13, 2019, pp. 367–389.

orchards; thus, a woman could possess both “bride land” of any nature as well as land for growing cotton, indigo, and hemp. Similarly, Bouyei women owned their own livestock (*peijia de niu* 陪嫁的牛 or *guniang niu* 姑娘牛), which were also acquired as part of marriage or reserved by a family for their daughter(s). Another major complicating factor was that women in Miao, Kam, Bouyei, and other communities often did not continuously reside in one location throughout the year, especially in the months and years immediately after marriage. For example, Bouyei women often remained at or returned to their parents’ household after marriage for extended periods of time to help with household and agricultural work. Thus, it was unclear how and where women’s property and labour should be enumerated, and what sort of compensation they should receive.<sup>31</sup>

Before 1958, the broad guidance from higher levels of the Party was to defer to local customs, employ consultative methods, and arrange repeated meetings to carry out political education before attempting to collectivise these types of property. However, the step-by-step move towards higher-level cooperatives chipped away at the retention of these properties by ethnic minority women. In the course of land reform, overzealous local cadres were reprimanded for expropriating (征收) property with religious or ritual functions as well as the bride lands mentioned above.<sup>32</sup> Regarding the initial stages of collectivisation (more accurately, cooperativisation), a March 1955 report from the Guizhou Provincial Rural Work Department mentions that women were unenthusiastic about joining the co-operatives because they were concerned about the fate of their lands (“cotton fields, red pepper fields, indigo fields, hemp orchards, bride lands, etc.”) and the effects on their labor, which was primarily dedicated to spinning, weaving, and managing family affairs. The Work Department advised lower-level cadres to temporarily exempt such lands from co-operatives and allow for a rate of privately held land (*ziliu di* 自留地) by area by women between 1-7%, while also not “overly emphasizing” women’s participation in agricultural labor.<sup>33</sup> A July 1955 document on implementing the Party Centre’s directives on collectivisation in Guizhou allowed for up to 5% of land to remain privately held, with special attention to be paid to lands owned by ethnic minority women.<sup>34</sup>

In attempting to overcome concerns about women’s property, local cadres also enlisted activists and allies from the local community. For example, a detailed account of the preparatory work undertaken for establishing a mixed-ethnicity (Bouyei, Sui, and Han) cooperative in Bankao Township, Libo County, Qiannan Prefecture,

<sup>31</sup> “Pingtang xian Liudong xiang dengta Buyi zu gaojishe shi zenyang xiang nü sheyuan jinxing zhengzhi sixiang jiaoyu gongzuo de” (included with Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui, “Guangxi bobai xian baizhong xiang fudaihui zai dongji zhengshe Zhong zuzhi nü ganbu nü sheyuan jinxing ziwu jiaoyu”, 21 March 1957, Jilin Provincial Archives, File No.: 0016-1957-0048-0001 (accessed through archives.gov.cn).

<sup>32</sup> There were also cases of women’s hair being forcibly cut and their attire changed in the course of struggle sessions, as well as attacks on elderly ‘witches,’ which may be a reference to ‘old style’ midwives. Song Y. (ed.), *The Database for the History of Contemporary Chinese Political Movements* [hereafter CUHK DB], “Guizhou sheng shaoshu minzu diqu weifa luan ji xianxiang yanzhong,” 7 March 1953.

<sup>33</sup> “Zhonggong Guizhou shengwei pizhuan shengwei nongcun gongzuobu “Guanyu shaoshu minzu diqu huzhuo hezuo yundong qingkuang he yijian de baogao”, 29 March 1955 in Guizhou nongye hezuohua shilliao bianxie weiyuanhui, *Guizhou nongcun hezuo jingji shilliao. Di yi ji: (1951-1986)*, Guiyang Shi, Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1987, p. 131.

<sup>34</sup> “Zhonggong Guizhou shengwei guanyu zhixing Zhongyang zhishi de yijian (jielu)”, 27 July 1955 in *Ibid.*, p. 152.

discusses the deep reluctance of ethnic minority women to join the cooperatives or even attend meetings designed to trumpet the cooperatives' benefits (which promised to return double their input of essential products like cotton). After propaganda teams composed of various ethnicities consulted with individual families using the local language (民族语言), the number of ethnic minority women joining the cooperative doubled.<sup>35</sup> But women were still apprehensive about surrendering their land (or, more accurately, the products of their land) to the cooperative. Additionally, there was disagreement between Han and ethnic minority members over the value of cotton-producing land (棉花地); *shaoshu minzu* farmers wanted it to count as much as grain-producing land for purposes of remuneration from the cooperative, but Han farmers objected since they themselves grew little cotton (and because the Party-State principally prioritized grain production). The local Party Committee responded with additional meetings and consultation with every family until a workable arrangement was hashed out; cotton-producing land was split into two grades depending on how productive it was, the better of the two being equivalent to grain-producing land. As a result, more ethnic minority women joined the cooperative.<sup>36</sup>

A group of similarly mixed-ethnicity (primarily Han and Miao) cooperatives in Machang Village, Xiuwen County (修文县马场乡) near Guiyang encountered similar issues. The ethnic minority members of the cooperatives were concerned about the fate of animals and land used for ritual purposes, as well as the cattle and land of women (姑娘牛 and 麻园地). Han farmers were irritated that their hemp orchards would be entered into the cooperative, but those of the Miao would not. As part of a broader compromise, the local cadres deemed that privately held land for Han would remain at 4.46% of the cooperative's land by area, and for ethnic minorities it would remain 7.6%, including women's lands used for producing textiles. "Bride lands" were not entered into the cooperative, and women's cattle could only be voluntarily entered into the cooperative and compensated by a cattle rent. The cooperative would also "give appropriate consideration" (给予适当照顾) to ethnic minority women's time spent spinning and weaving.<sup>37</sup>

Local reports dealing with overlapping issues of ethnicity, gender, and collectivization reveal a remarkable attention to potential problems that collectivization might encounter, and in fact, some reports accurately predicted difficulties that would arise if collectivisation were pushed too far, too fast. An October 1955 report from Duyun County (Qiannan) Rural Work Department continuously emphasised the importance of ethnic minorities voluntarily joining the cooperatives without coercion. Women were particularly concerned about losing their ability to be self-sufficient, as well as being forbidden from engaging in distinct cultural practices, such as periodically returning to their parents' household to assist with various forms of labour.<sup>38</sup> Thus, as

<sup>35</sup> "Bankao xiang minzu zaju diqu jianshe de jingyan," October 11, 1955 in *Guizhou nongcun hezuo jingji shiliao. Di er ji* (Guiyang Shi: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1988), pp. 89–90.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92.

<sup>37</sup> "Zijiang, Houshan deng liu ge she jianli minzu lianhe she de jingyan 1956 nian" (no more specific date given) in *Ibid.*, pp. 181–182.

<sup>38</sup> "Guanyu shaoshu minzu diqu jianli nongye shengchan hezuoshe de jidian tihui" October 11, 1955, in *Ibid.*, 95. Also, 'Zhonggong Guizhou shengwei pizhuan shengwei nongcun gongzuobu "Guanyu gaoji nongye

a general rule, at least some portion of ethnic minority women's land was not involuntarily entered into the cooperative, at least temporarily. Particularly in marginal areas where soil was poor and women produced all their family's clothing using their own cotton-producing lands, local cadres were urged to proceed cautiously and patiently.<sup>39</sup>

Despite such precautions, however, collectivisation provoked ethnic tension and resistance throughout southern China in 1955-57, and frequently sparked local unrest and uprisings.<sup>40</sup> Although there were usually local circumstances that played into unrest in a given region, there were also a number of common factors, including a Han Chauvinist attitude among many cadres, disrespect and disregard for ethnic minority cadres, elites, and representatives, food shortages due to over-requisitioning of grain, and attacks on *shaoshu minzu* cultural and religious practices, often because they inhibited the property and labour regime instituted by the (higher stage) cooperatives. Among this last category, the status of women's land was one of the paramount issues. A September 1956 report about a recently-suppressed uprising in Luodian County, in Qiannan Prefecture, found that, among other issues, the inclusion of Miao and Bouyei women's reserved lands (自留地) into the cooperatives directly contributed to the uprising. Under pressure from local cadres, some women even agreed to give up their private plots if they would be allowed to grow cotton and hemp on reclaimed land, but this request was criticised as "walking the capitalist road" (走资本主义道路).<sup>41</sup> The same month, in neighbouring Qiandongnan, leading cadres in the prefecture organised a "nationalities visitation team" to assess the reasons for such widespread dissatisfaction with the cooperatives, and similarly found that women's lands (蓝靛田, 姑娘田等) had been entered into the cooperatives against the wishes of the local people.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, in his detailed analysis of an uprising in nearby Mashan (Meitan County, Guizhou), Wang Haiguang found that the inclusion of "bride lands" as well as hemp and indigo fields into the cooperatives was a factor in the resistance to the CCP in 1956.<sup>43</sup>

In Qiandongnan, higher-level cooperatives were instituted on a trial basis in some localities in the winter of 1956-57 and then throughout the prefecture in April 1957. Guidance from the Provincial Party Committee allowed for some flexibility, but stipulated that, while some portion of cotton lands, indigo fields, hemp orchards, etc. could be exempted from the cooperative, "no more than 3% of [a cooperative member's] total land" should be thus excluded. A special exemption was made for "bride lands," which were only to be voluntarily entered into the cooperative.<sup>44</sup> However, in the event,

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shengchan hezuoshe zhong ruogan juti wenti de chuli yijian" March 20, 1956 in *Guizhou nongcun hezuo jingji shiliao. Di yi ji: (1951-1986)*, p. 207.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>40</sup> J. Yang, *op. cit.*, p. 521.

<sup>41</sup> "Guizhou sheng Luodian xian minzu wuzhuang baoluan yanzhong", 30 September 1956 in CUHK DB.

<sup>42</sup> Fan Liansheng, "The three rural problems and the social transformation of villages in the early days of the PRC - taking Qiandongnan as a case study (1949-1956)" [*Jianguo chuqi sannong wenti yu xiangcun shehui bianqian - yi Qiandongnan diqu wei gean de kaocha (1949-1956)*], PhD Dissertation in History, Fujian Normal University, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> H. Wang, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

<sup>44</sup> Qiandongnan Miaozu Dongzu Zizhizhou difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Qiandongnan Miaozu Dongzu Zizhizhou zhi. Zhengquan zhi (Zhengfu fence)*, Guiyang Shi, Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2002, p. 187.

it appears that local cadres did often violate the instructions of their superiors, or at least tack towards the most radical interpretation of the options presented to them, entering women's land and cattle into the cooperative and providing insufficient compensation in return.<sup>45</sup> A set of "emergency instructions" from late July 1957 from the Guizhou Provincial Party Committee on the unrest in ethnic minority regions, which was forwarded by the Party Centre to other provinces and autonomous regions with large ethnic minority populations, was frank in its criticisms, condemning local cadres for a domineering attitude towards ethnic minorities (the masses, cadres, and representatives alike):

*In the cooperativisation process this spring, this attitude manifested even more severely, for example in insisting that ethnic minorities enter their hemp orchards, cotton lands, indigo lands, and cattle into the cooperative despite their opposition, ignoring the ethnic minorities' customs and habits, and severely separating from the masses.*<sup>46</sup>

In the following months, the Party evaluated mistakes in the realm of ethnic minority policy and re-emphasised the importance of combating Han Chauvinism, respecting local customs, and recruiting and respecting minority cadres.<sup>47</sup> However, the continuous drive towards higher-stage cooperatives and demands for greater production were clearly the top priority. Therefore, while these appeals to respecting local customs were sincere, they were also implicitly of secondary or tertiary importance. Moreover, the Anti-Rightist Campaign caused many minority cadres to be accused of "local nationalism" for their reservations about collectivisation, allowing for radicals to become paramount in 1958 when the Great Leap Forward was launched.<sup>48</sup> Regarding the issue of women's lands, at the start of the Great Leap Forward, the basic goal of 5% of land being reserved for private use was maintained, which in places like Qiandongnan Prefecture primarily meant women's lands for textile production.<sup>49</sup> This was actually in accordance with "Sixty Articles" (工作方法六十条) set out by Mao Zedong in January 1958, which allowed for 5-7% of co-operative/commune land by area to be used for private purposes (自留地). However, in the heady drive towards communisation of the countryside in 1958, these lands were generally entered into communes, then returned (恢复) in 1959, then re-entered into the communes in 1960, and then finally returned again with the winding down of the

<sup>45</sup> For example, 'Zhonggong Guizhou sheng pizhuan shengwei nongcun gongzuobu 'Shengwei noncun gongzuobu guanyu jindong mingchun zuohao chujishe shengji bingshe gongzuo de yijian' ', 27 August 1956 in *Guizhou nongcun hezuo jingji shilliao. Di yi ji: (1951-1986)* and 'Zhonggong Guizhou sheng pizhuan shengwei nongcun gongzuobu 'Guanyu zuohao nongye shengchan hezuo she shouyi fenpei gongzuo de yijian' ', 30 August 1956 in *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>46</sup> 'Zhongyang pifu "Guizhou shengwei guanyu jiejie shaoshu minzu diqu saoluan shijian de jinji zhishi' ', 9 August 1956 in CUHK DB.

<sup>47</sup> H. Wang, *op. cit.*, pp. 282-283.

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of the situation in these areas on the eve of the Great Leap Forward, see 'Zhonggong Zhongyang bangongting "Qingkuang jianbao (zhengfeng zhuanji) huibian (sanshiyi)' ', 25 October 1957 in CUHK DB (especially section on "Guizhou sheng nongcun zhengfeng qingkuang").

<sup>49</sup> "Quan sheng jiben shixian gaoji nongye hezuohua" [October 1957], *Guizhou nongcun hezuo jingji shilliao. Di si ji*, Guiyang Shi, Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1989, p. 71.

Great Leap in 1961-62.<sup>50</sup> Nationally, a target of 5-7% of land being privately held was set in 1962, returning to the standard set in the Sixty Articles, but in ethnic minority regions this could be as high as 10% or even more, and the guidelines for the issue of ethnic minority women's hemp, cotton, and indigo lands was that they should be "given appropriate consideration."<sup>51</sup>

## A Hollow Liberation

In addition to cataloguing and managing property, the state's efforts to calculate women's labor productivity was recognized as especially difficult in ethnic minority areas.<sup>52</sup> The cooperatives, and later the commune system, distributed food and other resources through work points, which were allocated according to the putative contribution of one's labour to production. Even as state media praised women for breaking the "superstition" that they were unable to complete the same tasks as men, work point allocation followed the gendered division of labour built into the communes, with tasks performed by women - such as collecting manure, tending to livestock, small-scale irrigation projects, and managing orchards - garnering less work points than those typically performed by men.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, women were not compensated at all for household labour, and traditional means of sideline work for additional income, namely spinning and weaving, had been discouraged, eliminated, or otherwise became untenable given the labour regime imposed by collectivisation.<sup>54</sup> Women's household weaving was meant to be replaced by textile factories, and instead of intensive weaving during wintertime slack periods, women were engaged on projects to boost agricultural production.<sup>55</sup> Theoretically, women could gain technical training in agricultural production, or work towards becoming a cadre (especially in the ACWF), positions that carried greater work point compensation, but the demands of both commune and household labour left very little time and energy to pursue these opportunities. The result was that the work point regime had caused some households, especially those headed by women, to not garner enough work points to even cover their basic food needs (*kouliang*).

<sup>50</sup> Gao Wangling, *Zhongguo nongmin fanxing wei yanjiu (1950-1980)*, Xianggang, Zhongwen daxue chubanshe, 2013, pp. 152-153. The allowance of household sideline work (家庭副业) and local markets (农村集市) also tracked the tumultuous politics of the Great Leap period.

<sup>51</sup> "Zhonggong Guizhou shengwei gongzuo huiyi guanyu tudi, shanlin suoyouquan wenti de taolun jiyao (November 15, 1962)" in *Guizhou nongcun hezuo jingji shiliao. Di yi ji: (1951-1986)*, p. 504.

<sup>52</sup> "Xinan junzheng weiyuanhui tudi gaige weiyuanhui guanyu huafen nongcun jieji de ruogan wenti yu dafu", 10 December 1951, in CUHK DB.

<sup>53</sup> G. Hershatter, *op. cit.*, p. 82; *Renmin ribao*, "Yunnan funü yao di nanziyong - Jifei zhishui zhishu yang yang neng," 20 March 1958; *Renmin ribao*, "Cong 'gun hen zhao' dao 'bo hai mi na,'" 14 June 1959, also talks about these issues.

<sup>54</sup> G. Hershatter, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

<sup>55</sup> *Renmin ribao*, "Lisu zu de gongye zhi hua", 5 December 1958.



Although higher-stage cooperatives had set the stage, the wholesale enlistment of women in the commune regime of labour was conducted very rapidly, beginning in 1958. Although statistics from this period should always be approached with some scepticism, local evidence from archival documents indicates that women's time was meant to be exclusively committed to the state-directed production drive, and that women constituted the vast majority of those engaged in agricultural labour like ploughing and planting, as local men had been recruited for large-scale infrastructure works or sought out industrial work in nearby cities.<sup>56</sup> For example, a 1959 report on the Great Leap Forward in Jianhe County (剑河县), Qiandongnan Prefecture, claimed that all the ethnic minority women in the county had turned over housework to collective institutions and joined production.<sup>57</sup>

In order to allow for the "feminization of agriculture," a range of institutions sprang up during the Great Leap Forward to socialise household duties.<sup>58</sup> These varied by locality; most places in China had established canteens by the end of 1958, but centres for prenatal care and birthing, childcare, and care for the elderly were only established in some localities. Regardless, these institutions were typically underfunded and haphazardly established, and were thus short-lived, leaving rural women to rely on their family and themselves to manage the strenuous demands of both household duties and agricultural labour. These factors left women in a highly precarious position, especially if they were elderly, disabled, widowed, or pregnant. From the earlier experience of lower and higher stage cooperatives, the Party was well-aware of these issues and did nominally make provisions for food relief and other assistance to vulnerable groups through a minimal social safety net known as the "five guarantees" (*wubao*) that included food, clothing, housing, and medical care.<sup>59</sup> However, these measures were insufficient to begin with and became more so over the course of the Great Leap Forward. Moreover, the work point system provided a clear incentive to work as much as possible, rather than rest and recover one's health, especially once earning work points meant the difference between living and starving to death. Additionally, local cadres could be capricious and even cruel in their distribution of work points, denial of exemptions from labour for health reasons, and punishments to those "shirking" work.<sup>60</sup> This also should have been anticipated on the basis of earlier experience; before the work point regime was instituted, there were already issues in ethnic minority regions of cadres chastising "lazy" pregnant women

<sup>56</sup> "Guangxi bobai xian baizhong xiang..."; S. Du, *op. cit.*, p. 173. G. Hershatter, *op. cit.*, pp. 237–244. E. Meuggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001, p. 176.

<sup>57</sup> "Guizhou Jianhe xian 1958nian nongye dayuejin gongzuo zongjie" 1959 (no specific date) in CUHK DB.

<sup>58</sup> G. Hershatter, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

<sup>59</sup> "Pingtang xian Liudong xiang dengta Buyi zu gaojishi..."; G. Hershatter, *op. cit.*, pp. 139 & 246–258.

<sup>60</sup> This phenomenon is examined more systematically in Kimberley Ens Manning, "The Gendered Politics of Woman-Work: Rethinking Radicalism in the Great Leap Forward", *Modern China*, 32/3, 2006. Manning distinguishes between two camps among party cadres who did "woman work" - Marxist maternalist and egalitarian - and that these coalesced into two factions that were cultivated through recruitment and training, and then reinforced through familial and local/village ties. She also argues that party leaders and Fulian leadership advocated maternalist discourse but that grassroots cadres were more radical/egalitarian and pushed for a gender-neutral conception of labor that did not, for instance, make exceptions for women if pregnant or suffering from medical conditions like edema during the famine.

in an effort to drive up production, frequently leading to miscarriages, and abusing their authority to pressure women into exploitative sexual relationships.<sup>61</sup>

The combination of increased demands on women's labour (both within and outside of the household) and the famine that followed the Great Leap Forward had disastrous consequences for women's health. A 1960 report from the Guizhou Health Department about Qiandongnan stated that 19% of women engaged in agricultural and other forms of labour were suffering from amenorrhea or uterine prolapse (conditions associated with malnutrition), though this varied widely by location and was as high as 80% in some production teams. The report handled the issue delicately, not mentioning starvation or famine directly, and even blamed the high levels of uterine prolapse on women having birthed multiple children using "old style" midwifery techniques, but admitted that malnutrition and exhaustion were major causes of such a high prevalence of these conditions. Responsibility was placed at the feet of local cadres, and although instructions for corrective measures were issued by the Provincial Party Committee, "[cadres] in some places have not paid enough attention [to these measures]; they believe that medical treatment and production are contradictory, and have not realized that the immediate goal of medical treatment is to better manage production." This document reflects the contradictory messages that local cadres received from higher authorities during the Great Leap Forward; even when discussing ameliorative measures to protect women's health, the document continuously adds reminders that production should not be adversely affected (in essence, proving the just-denounced belief that production and health were contradictory).<sup>62</sup>

Rather than an isolated incident, reports from other areas of southern China in the same period indicate that starvation and disease in ethnic minority regions was widespread, with women suffering especially high rates of illness or secondary conditions of malnutrition (amenorrhea, edema, and uterine prolapse).<sup>63</sup> Amidst the endless exhortations for greater production, in early January 1959, the Guizhou Provincial Party Committee obliquely addressed such issues, advising lower-level cadres to be sure to allow pregnant and menstruating women periods of rest, and in October 1960 a Prefectural small leading group (领导小组) on the "three ailments" (edema, amenorrhea, and prolapsed uterus) was set up to address these problems and began directing resources to alleviate them.<sup>64</sup> Yet, even after reforms were adopted to mitigate the effects of famine, the situation remained dire. A January 1962 report about Baijin District in Qiandongnan talks about entire households fleeing the region, women

<sup>61</sup> "Guizhou ganbu weifa luanji de yanzhong qingkuang" March 19, 1953 and "Bijie zhuanqu hezuohua yundong zhong de wenti", 9 April 1956 in CUHK DB.

<sup>62</sup> Notably, the report also called for flexibility in providing healthcare to women laborers, including the deployment of "mass healthcare work" (群众性的治疗工作) and the combination of modern medicine with local, traditional medical practices. "(Guizhou sheng weisheng ting) Guanyu dangqian fangzhi funü jibing ji baohu funü laoli wenti de baogao" 1960 (no specific date given) in CUHK DB.

<sup>63</sup> J. Yang, *op. cit.*, pp. 457 & 511. For a general discussion of these issues, see Frank Dikotter, *Mao's Great Famine: the History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-62*, London, Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 255-262.

<sup>64</sup> "Zhonggong Guizhou shengwei guanyu banhao dangqian remin gongshe jiti fuli shiye de guiding, January 7, 1959" in *Guizhou nongcun...*, *op. cit.*, p. 366, "Guanyu zhengdun he gonggu renmin gongshe de jueyi (7 January 1959 Zhongguo gongchandang Guizhou sheng di yi jie weiyuanhui di ba ci quanti huiyi tongguo)" in *Ibid.*, p. 378 and *Qiandongnan Miaoou Dongzu Zizhizhouzhi, Weisheng zhi*, p. 170.

suffering from edema, and production teams where nearly half the members had died in the previous year, insincerely noting that “the cause of death is unknown.”<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

The issues examined above show how concurrent policies interacted and conflicted with each other, and in particular how collectivisation undermined efforts to build trust with *shaoshu minzu* communities. The treatment of ethnic minority women and struggles over the status of their property within the cooperatives fed into a broader failure of *shaoshu minzu* work in 1956–1957, which presaged the much more dramatic fiascos of the Great Leap Forward period. The sad irony is that a Party-State ostensibly committed to women’s liberation sought to curtail the autonomous spaces and practices for women simply because those spaces and practices were deemed to be an impediment to greater agricultural production. More than any other motivation, the continuous drumbeat of demands for greater and greater production was the central imperative of the Party-State in rural *shaoshu minzu* communities. All other concerns, from respecting the customs of non-Han peoples to ensuring the health of women laborers, were negligible by comparison.

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<sup>65</sup> “Zhu Gengshen tongzhi guanyu Baijin qu Doudi gongshe Shibao dadui shenghuo qingkuang de liangci huibao”, 27 January 1962 in CUHK DB.

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# Muslim, Modern, Model Subjects: Writing Uyghur Women into the Chinese Nation, 1949-1966

Arianne Ekinici

## Introduction

Women often serve as boundary markers in the creation of national society, and literature from the early People's Republic of China (PRC) (1949-1966) features a particular affixation – almost an obsession – with both women and their intended role in the new nation. This is particularly evident in literature discussing Xinjiang, which often emphasises relations between Han Chinese and minority women.<sup>1</sup> Founding documents cast the PRC as a multi-ethnic nation and a secular state committed to liberation, but what did this mean for gendered Muslim populations at the fringes of the new nation? Mobilising sources from the popular press read against official publications, this article seeks to tease out the implications of state policies and to examine exactly how the state intended to incorporate Uyghur women into the Chinese nation in the early PRC, and how these new subjects were intended to embody the roles of woman, ethnic minority, and Chinese citizen. While a number of historical studies have explored the ways in which women were incorporated into the Chinese nation, the majority of these studies have focused on Han ethnic women of the interior, with a smaller selection examining minorities in Southwest China.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, this article focusing on Uyghur women of the early PRC period not only contributes to the

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion, see T. Grose, "Beautifying Uyghur Bodies: Fashion, "Modernity," and State Discipline in the Tarim Basin", *Monde chinois*, 3/3, 2020, pp. 12–13.

<sup>2</sup> Studies by Gail Hershatter and Wang Zheng in particular provide a number of concepts useful to examine PRC interactions between the state and its female subjects, as well as nuanced narratives against which we can measure both the experience of non-Han female subjects and state discourse in Xinjiang concerning the supposed social progressiveness of Inner China. See Z. Wang, *Finding Women in the State*; G. Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2014. For further explanation on the discourse of social advancement of Han women in Inner China as used vis-à-vis

literature on Chinese women's history from its geographical margins, but also complements a recent boom in historical studies of Xinjiang, where histories of the pre-PRC period have dominated to date. Indeed, studies of Xinjiang and Uyghurs in the PRC have been predominately conducted within the domain of anthropology, not history, and primarily focus on Reform and Opening (post-1978) and later periods, when the foundation for relations between Uyghur women and the Chinese state were already well established.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the goal of this article is to bridge earlier literature with contemporary events by examining the very foundations of the relationship between Uyghur women and the Chinese state as envisioned by early PRC actors.

## Setting the Stage

In 1966 a staff writer for *People's Music* (人民音乐), the official musical periodical of the People's Republic of China, encountered a former shepherdess named Shalamaiti who could apparently twirl across a makeshift stage with perfect grace, charming attendant villagers with ballads derived from traditional tunes but praising communist development in her native Hotan (和田).<sup>4</sup> As a tenured Uyghur performer in the local cultural team, this former shepherdess was instrument of and testimony to the state. She was the emblem of the ideal ethnic citizen and her performance a testimony to the Chinese state's power to transform both individual and community – as long as they accepted the state's standards. While Shalamaiti never acquired the accolades bestowed upon Qemberxanim, Xinjiang's most famous female performer, her depiction in *People's Music* provides a precise understanding of how the state approached Uyghur women within Uyghur society and wrote both into the nation during the foundational years of the PRC (1949-1966).

Hotan was not an early stronghold of Chinese communism. The oasis community in southern Xinjiang had only tentative connections with Inner China through the early 1950s. Prior to the establishment of the PRC, the oasis cities circling the

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Uyghur women in Xinjiang, see A. Ekinci, *Legible Citizens: Writing Uyghur Women into the Chinese Nation*, Master Thesis in History, University of North Carolina, 2019, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> For example T. Grose, *op. cit.*; S. Tynen, "Belonging between Inclusion and Exclusion: Dimensions of Ethno-Cultural Identity for Uyghur Women in Xinjiang, China", *Geopolitics*, 26/4, 2019, pp. 7–22. The current situation in Xinjiang, most notably the incarceration of several million Uyghurs in re-education and forced labor camps since 2014, strict laws concerning the practicing of Uyghur culture and religion, and the forced sterilization of Uyghur women, have sparked interest in the region (see notably D. Brophy, "Good and Bad Muslims in Xinjiang", *Made in China Journal*, 9 July 2019; J. Kinzley, "Beijing's Long Struggle to Control Xinjiang's Mineral Wealth", *China File*, 28 November 2018; J. Millward, "Reeducating Xinjiang's Muslims", *China File*, 7 February 2019).

<sup>4</sup> "毛主席的思想哺育她成长:和田专区文工团沙拉买提同志访问记" (Mao Zhuxi de sixiang buyu ta chengchang: Hetian zhuanqu wengongtuan Shalamaiti tongzhi fangwenji, Chairman Mao's thought nurtured her growth: An Interview with Comrade Shalamaiti of Hetian Cultural Troupe), *Renmin Yinyue*, 1, 1966, 1, pp. 12–13. *Renmin Yinyue* 人民音乐, translated *People's Music* or *Folk Music*, was the premier Party-sponsored musical journal. Content and message of early magazines did not always conform perfectly to official ideals, but still went through several rounds of review prior to publication.



Taklamakan Desert, locally known as Altishar,<sup>5</sup> were important crossroads for Silk Road trade and enjoyed strong connections with communities across the mountain passes in what became India, Afghanistan, and Soviet Central Asia. Resident traders hailing from these regions claimed extraterritoriality within Altishahr which, combined with the presence of British and Russian consuls, strong local leadership, and the coexistence of Chinese civil and local religious courts, made for a legal terrain comprised of overlapping spheres of jurisdiction and uneven rule of law.<sup>6</sup> In culture, speech, and appearance, the predominately Turkic-speaking Muslim communities reflected this convergence of trade and travel routes. Radical political notions travelled these routes as well and, from 1933 to 1934, Hotan was the seat of the Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan (TIRET). This short-lived polity was founded on notions of self-determination and took a virulently anti-communist stance. Though crushed by Soviet and Chinese forces while still in its infancy, memory of the polity instilled fear of local antagonism towards Chinese rule when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gained political control of Xinjiang in 1949. While officially part of the PRC, Hotan was home to a population of suspect political allegiance and little common language. As late as 1958, local agitation challenged Chinese rule. Given this background, the early PRC's claim that every individual in Altishahr now held Chinese citizenship equal with all other citizens of China, and were under the exclusive purview of the government in Beijing, was a novel notion. In our narrative, Hotan is the stage on which the inchoate Chinese state transformed a population of "others" into legible citizens of the PRC, personified by the story of Shalamaiti's metamorphosis from illiterate and impoverished peasant to inspired and lyrical proletariat performer. As demonstrated below, the state's justification for incursion into the region and official approach to incorporating subjects was founded on gendered notions of local society encouraging a particular set of relations between the state and Uyghur women.

## Text and Theory

Texts providing an unmediated view of Uyghur women's incorporation into the Chinese Nation or their variegated experiences of citizenship and identity construction are scarce. Available texts concerned with the lives and experiences of Uyghur women in the early PRC were, as a rule, state produced, state sponsored, state approved, predominately written in Chinese, and primarily read by a Han Chinese

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<sup>5</sup> Altishahr (*lit.* "six cities") is the vernacular Turkic name for the ring of oasis settlements surrounding the Taklamakan desert and comprising the southern half of the contemporary Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. While Altishahr is commonly employed in academic texts and among Uyghurs, it is not a state-sanctioned term in the PRC. The official Chinese term for the region is 'Nanjiang' or 'Southern Xinjiang.' For further discussion, see R. Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2014, pp. 3–9.

<sup>6</sup> L. Newby, *The Empire and the Khanate: A Political History of Qing Relations with Khoqand c. 1760-1860*, Leiden, Brill, 2005, p. 145.

audience. Both official texts intended for use in specific government functions and texts sold in the marketplace and intended for a general audience were published under high levels of government oversight. Documents produced directly by the government and intended primarily for internal consumption include *Brief History and Introduction to the Uyghurs*, produced by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and *Xinjiang Autonomous Region*, a 27-page booklet produced in 1956. These texts provide a carefully composed “overview” of Uyghurs and of their ideal relationship with the Party and state. Commercially available texts intended for a popular audience, on the other hand, are sites of navigation between overarching ideals and individual lives. Commercial texts consulted for this paper include articles from the state newspaper *People’s Daily* (人民日报, 55 articles), as well as the state-funded periodicals *New Women of China* and *Women of China* (新中国妇女 and 中国妇女, 4 articles), *People’s Music* (人民音乐, 16 articles, including 12 from a 1966 special issue on Xinjiang), Chinese Muslims (中国穆斯林, 12 articles), *China Pictorial* (人民画报, 6 articles), *China Drama* (中国戏剧, 3 articles) and *Changjiang Literature and Art* (长江文艺, 1 article).<sup>7</sup> While such texts offer little insight into the inner world of a Uyghur performer, they do contain a clear blueprint of how officials and authors imagined the integration of Uyghur women into the Chinese nation.

Read against the official narrative, popularly available sources from the early decades of CCP rule in Xinjiang depict how the Party state conceptualized Uyghur women as Chinese citizens, ethnic individuals, and gendered subjects in practice; how state employed authors intended the public to understand this relationship; and where officials struggled to accord policy goals and individual experiences. Though state sanctioned texts cannot be assumed to accurately represent the lived experiences of Uyghur women, the narrative fissure created through authorial attempts to graft individual encounters onto the “official stance” in the popular press provides insight into how the state intended for policies to be carried out in practice, and implications for both the type of subjecthood offered to Uyghur women and the value of Uyghur women’s roles in the creation of the new nation. What emerges are a set of assumptions about the nature of ethnic minority subjecthood and women’s place in the nation that is not written anywhere in official literature, but certainly begins to explain the unequal foundations of ethnic relations that continue to trouble the region today. The story of Shalamaiti has been selected not because it is unique, but because the narrative exemplifies the characteristics ascribed to Uyghur women and their interactions with both Uyghur society and the communist state across literature intended for a general audience of this period.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The corpus includes primarily articles written in Chinese by authors with Chinese names, and several articles originally written by Uyghur women and translated into Chinese. All publications were published by official bodies. This does not, however, mean that they adhered perfectly to Party ideals in every publication. For an extensive discussion of the negotiations between the state-employed editors of an official publication and the central governing body, see Z. Wang, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1964*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Shalamaiti’s story both illustrates the ideals discussed in the other articles of the 1966 special issue of *People’s Music* and exemplifies common elements across dramatized works and non-fiction accounts on Uyghur women in the early PRC. Many features of Shalamaiti’s story are shared with both Aisham, the heroine of the 1958 drama “At the foot of Tianshan Mountain” and Anarhan, of the eponymous 1962 film, both of which recount the tales of a young Uyghur woman’s liberation through contact with the Chinese State (Wang Shide 王世德, 兄弟民族

## Performing Subjecthood, Reading Performance

As the narrative printed in *People's Music* goes, Shalamaiti was born a nobody with no prospects, and achieved liberation and professional fulfilment only through the support of the state.<sup>9</sup> The text never mentions her family; it is implied that they were poor peasants little invested in their daughter's future for, on the very eve of revolution, at the tender age of 9, she was sent out to the fields to work as a shepherdess without ever having set foot in a school. At the age of 17 she (exactly how is never explained) was recruited for the newly formed Hotan Cultural Team.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the physical challenges characterizing the life of a traveling performer, Shalamaiti struggled to keep up with training on account of her illiteracy and ignorance of Chinese. At one point she became so dispirited she almost left the team. Hearing this, the team leader gathered performers into a study group to read Chairman Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art", emphasizing the importance of artistic production derived from and inspiring the lives of the common people. Shalamaiti's eyes were opened: in old society a poor peasant girl like her could barely eke out a living at the level of a beast of burden. Becoming a performer was an impossible dream, and this opportunity represented the Party's trust in her potential. Shalamaiti determined to live up to that trust, and fulfill the needs of the masses. She began practicing on her own; whenever she encountered difficulty Mao's words gave her the courage she needed to overcome obstacles and quiet her fears. She learned several dances, began to excel at singing, and taught herself to play two instruments. Still, she believed that the people needed more than the dances she had memorised: they needed fresh material that would instil revolutionary thought and love for the Party into the very landscape of their existence. Surmounting the hurdle of her own illiteracy, Shalamaiti began to compose her own tunes, singing snippets for her teammates and reworking them again

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中新英雄人物在成长——评话剧《天山脚下》(Xiongdi minzuzhong xin yinxiong renwu zai chengzhang – pin huaju 'Tianshan jiaoxia', The development of new heroes among brother nationalities – discussing the play "At the Foot of the Tianshan Mountains"), *Zhongguo Xiju*, 1958, 5, pp. 34–35; Li Enjie 李恩杰 *dir.*, 阿娜尔罕 (Anarhan), Beijing, Beijing Film Studio and Tianshan Film Studio, 1962). Numerous non-fiction articles in *People's Daily* and *People's Pictorial* exhibit similar characteristics, expectations and tropes. See, for example: Bo Sheng 柏生, "新疆的少数民族青年和妇女——访西北各族青年、妇女参观团的新疆少数民族代表" (Xinjiang de shaoshu minzu qingnian he funu – fang xibeige zu qingnian, funu canguantuan de xinjiang shaoshuminzu daibiao, Minority youth and women in Xinjiang – Interview Xinjiang representatives from the Northwest Youth and Women delegations) *Renmin Ribao*, 3, 4/4/1950; Ge Li 歌黎, "一对维吾尔族青年男女的自由结婚" (Yi dui weiwuerzu qingnian nannu de ziyou jiehun, A Young Uyghur Couple's Independent Marriage), *Renmin Ribao*, 3, 10/22/1952; Anonymous, "新疆省各少数民族的女产业技术工人正在成长" (Xinjiangshen ge shaoshuminzu de nu' changye jishu gongren zhengzai chengzhang, Female industrial workers of every ethnicity in Xinjiang Province are coming into their own) *Renmin Ribao*, 3, 3/11/1954; Ru Suichu 茹遂初, 维吾尔族音乐舞蹈工作者沙里曼·乌拉卓娃在记录民间艺人牙生吐尔德唱的歌曲 (Weiwu'erzu yinyue wudao gongzuoshe Shaliman Wulazhuowa zai jilu minjian yiren Yasheng Tu'erde chang de gequ, Uyghur musician and dancer Shaliman Ulachova is recording the songs sung by folk artist Yasin Turdi), *Renmin Huabao*, 11, 1957, pp. 11–12; Ru Suichu 茹遂初, 维吾尔族民间艺人艾莎乌拉普 (Weiwu'erzu minjian yiren Aisha Wulapu, Uyghur Folk Artist Aisha Wulapu), *Renmin Huabao*, 6, 1959, pp. 22–23; Staff Writer, 欣欣向荣的新疆 (Xinxin xianrong de Xinjiang, Thriving Xinjiang), *Women of China*, 10, 1965, pp. 16–18.

<sup>9</sup> The account here is paraphrased with care taken to preserve the original tone and language.

<sup>10</sup> For background on the Hotan Cultural Team and the arts in Xinjiang, see Tian Ke 田柯, 天山南北歌声扬 (Tianshan nanbei geshengchang, Singing North and South of the Tianshan Mountains), *Renmin Yinyue*, 1, 1965, pp. 24–26 and Liu Tiaojiang 刘兆江, 向和田文工团学习什么 (Xiang Hetian wengongtuan xuexi shenme, What can we learn from Hotan's Cultural Group?), *Renmin Yinyue*, 1, 1966, p. 11.

and again until four songs featuring her beloved Hotan became Party-perfect audience favourites. The transformation of this “ordinary farmgirl” into such an exemplary performer, the author surmises, is “an impactful example of the power of Chairman Mao Thought to give those who drink from his bosom the nourishment and strength to realise their full potential”.<sup>11</sup> In the author’s eyes, Shalamaiti is the embodiment of transformation possible through interaction with the Chinese Communist Party: “Her entire performance will persuade you of the power of the Party’s leadership, the exertion of the masses striving to revolutionize this beautiful land, and the fierce love held in the heart of every ethnicity in Xinjiang for Chairman Mao that inspires them to strive ever onward”.<sup>12</sup>

The published interview reads like a planned script for communist liberation of oppressed populations; Shalamaiti’s adherence to Party ideals, as laid out in state produced publications such as the Chinese Academy of Social Science’s 1963 official account, *Brief History of and Introduction to the Uyghurs*, is so complete as to inject doubt into the veracity of her existence.<sup>13</sup> It is, of course, not Shalamaiti’s voice we find on the pages: the entire interview is written in Chinese and published in a state-run Chinese language periodical. Shalamaiti’s voice comes to us through the art of translation, an act that goes unacknowledged by the author. Given the author’s anonymity (simply “a staff writer”), we cannot surmise who first made her story accessible to a Chinese speaking audience, or how closely the transcription adheres to the answers Shalamaiti provided in the Hotan dialect of Uyghur.

Regardless of who performed the initial act of interpretation, the journalist renders her speech legible to the larger Chinese-literate audience by writing her voice into the norms of state narrative. The text is peppered with common Chinese phrases such as “life of beasts of burden”, an idiom often used in the early PRC to describe living standards prior to liberation.<sup>14</sup> Even Shalamaiti as a person is presented via the lens of linguistic interpretation through the reduction of her given Uyghur name, now lost to us, with the nonsensical Chinese transliteration 沙拉买提, which translates literally as “salad-buy-raise”.<sup>15</sup> This article is not an anomaly; even narratives originally penned by Uyghur females and translated into Chinese demonstrate strong adherence to socialist literary conventions.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Anonymous, *Mao Zhuxi de Sixiang*.

<sup>12</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Xinjiang Ethnic Minority Social History Survey Group 新疆少数民族社会历史调查组, 新疆少数民族社会历史调查组, 维吾尔族简史简志合编 – 初稿 (Weiwu'erzu Jianshi Jianzhi Hebian - Chugao, *Brief History and Introduction to the Uyghurs – Draft*), Beijing, Institute of Ethnology & Anthropology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 1963.

<sup>14</sup> In Chinese, “牛马生活” (Cow horse life). This exact phrase appears in *People’s Daily*, the official national newspaper, 118 times between 1946 and 1966.

<sup>15</sup> For historic confusion over Uyghur-Chinese transliterations, see Ä. Sulayman, “Hybrid Name Culture in Xinjiang: Problems Surrounding Uyghur Name/Surname Practices and their Reform”, in I. Bellér-Hann et. al (eds.) *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia*, Aldershot, Ashgate Pub, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Reyihan 热衣汗 (auth.) and Tuohutibahai 托乎提巴海 (trans.), “生活在毛泽东时代” (Shenghuo zai Maozedong de shidai, Living in the Mao Zedong Era), *Renmin Ribao*, 4, 6/8/1950.

## Liberation via Visibility

While notably silent concerning the circumstances of Han women, early PRC books and articles on the Uyghurs emphasize that, prior to liberation, Uyghur women were oppressed by and within their own societies.<sup>17</sup> Virtual prisoners of their own homes and illiterate, Uyghur women were treated as mere commodities to be bought and sold through marital transactions. The parents of especially beautiful girls were subject to additional pressure from local notables – noted for marrying and discarding dozens of girls in turn. More than one text mentions a former town head rumoured to have bullied parents of 138 Uyghur maidens into granting him their daughters' hands in marriage to illustrate this point.<sup>18</sup> Almost unanimously, texts agree that Uyghur women were married off at the tender age of 12 or 13.<sup>19</sup> While the same publications present plenty of evidence to the contrary, with the national newspaper *People's Daily* featuring photos of female Uyghur fieldworkers greeting PLA soldiers as they march across Xinjiang and mentioning women like Shalamaiti who worked outside the home in their late teens and twenties and seemed unencumbered by dependents, potential contradictions are ignored.<sup>20</sup> Regardless of the setting, individual stories were interpreted within the official framework of preliberation gender-based oppression within Uyghur society.

Oppression does not necessarily occur behind closed doors. The state's presence in Xinjiang was still rudimentary in the early PRC, and high mountain meadows were largely beyond the state's gaze. Even at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, before the state intensified surveillance, remote settlements in mountain valleys south of Hotan remained largely beyond state reach.<sup>21</sup> A gate at the end of the country road guarded by the last patrol post warned all who passed that they were exiting the state's domain – and with it the state's protection. The small settlements beyond, nestled high up in hidden mountain valleys, were not only beyond the state's purview – they were bereft of most forms of state support. To access anything from healthcare to education, the residents had to come down the mountain and cross into spaces regulated by government ordinances and doling out services only to those with a state-issued ID.

The state can govern only populations visible to state organs; likewise, as writers cannot report on what they do not see, official publications have obvious limitations on the selection of characters and scope of narratives. Shalamaiti's identity prior to interaction with state structures is mentioned only in passing and affixed with no distinct features. Looking back at Shalamaiti's adolescence, we notice that, even though she

<sup>17</sup> Women of China magazines, for example, says of the pre-PRC period, "The working people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang lived in poverty, and women's lives are even more miserable. Apart from being oppressed by other classes politically and economically just like men, they were also oppressed by religious laws and regulations." Staff Writer, 欣欣向荣的新疆 (Xinxin xianrong de Xinjiang, Thriving Xinjiang), *Women of China*, 10, 1965, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Anonymous, "南疆妇女开始揭下面纱" (Nanjiang funü kaishi jiejia miansha, Southern Xinjiang Women Start to Unveil), *Renmin Ribao*, 3, 5/14/1950.

<sup>19</sup> Nai Yin 乃茵, "新疆妇女的新生" (Xinjiang Funu de Xin Shenghuo, The New Life of Xinjiang Women), *Xin Zhongguo Funü*, 10, 1950, pp. 39–40.

<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the depiction of Han women as oppressed pre 1949 is almost identical. See G. Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*, op. cit., pp. 6, 48.

<sup>21</sup> Author's travels in Keriya, January 2013.

was technically engaged in occupation and physically liberated from the house, her earlier occupation as a shepherdess rendered her invisible to state eyes and intractable by state organs. Only her return to a life ordered under state eyes answers the state's call to have Uyghur women rendered publicly visible.<sup>22</sup> This process does not always entail stepping onto the stage, but certainly necessitates stepping into state-defined spaces of production or political participation, and redefining oneself via Party language.

Publications featuring women from across Altishahr encouraged them to both step over the threshold and unveil, moving from dark to light, from obscurity to visibility – and legibility.<sup>23</sup> One lengthy 1952 feature article in *People's Daily* recounts the successful efforts of a Han Party cadre in Eastern Xinjiang actively interceding in minority family affairs to extract a young bride from the four walls of her in-law's home, from under her mother-in-law's control, to bring her into state spaces. This young woman was not asked to be an active revolutionary, but merely to be present at local Party functions and thus reconfigure her social and family life into a structure recognised by the state.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of where or how they were concealed from state view (and thus state reach), Muslim minority women in Xinjiang are meant to subject themselves to the public eye and allow their lives to be defined in relation to state-devised social structures, such as state schools, work units, study groups or political meetings.<sup>25</sup>

The implication in Shalamaiti's story is that toiling on the steppe is equivalent to being barred behind the threshold in that females out of the state's vision were denied access to state structures and therefore excluded from personal or professional advancement.<sup>26</sup> The path by which Uyghur females – supposed victims of paternalistic oppression and societal neglect – were intended to become ideal socialist subjects and enthusiastic participants in production, is laid out in the narrative at hand: Shalamaiti's story picks up when she joins the Hotan Cultural Team, an organization legitimised by the state. Her existence is granted meaning when she steps into the state's sight, allows her role in life to be redefined using terms set by the CCP, learns a trade, and begins to practice that trade for the state's ends.

<sup>22</sup> Zhao Taoqi 赵涛祺, *新疆维吾尔自治区* (Xinjiang weiwuer zizhiqu, Xinjiang Autonomous Region), Beijing, Tongsu Guiwu Publishing, 1956, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> This imagery is not unique to Xinjiang, Islam or Uyghur women, and is indeed present in famous operatic version of *The White-Haired Girl*, an allegory for the salvation of the [feminine] peasantry at the hands of the [masculine] PRC, see X. Kang, "Revisiting White-Haired Girl: Women, Gender, and Religion in Communist Revolutionary Propaganda" in *Gendering Chinese Religion: Subject, Identity, and Body*, J. Jia, X. Kang, and P. Yao (eds.), Albany, State University of New York Press, 2014, p. 145.

<sup>24</sup> Yao Wen 姚文, "从封建旧家庭到和睦的新家庭——记新疆一个回族家庭的变化" (Cong fenjian jiu jiating dao hexie de xin jiating – ji Xinjiang yi ge huizu jiating de bianhua, From an Old Feudal Household to a Peaceful New Household – Changes in a Muslim Household in Xinjiang), *Renmin Ribao*, 3, 4/27/1952.

<sup>25</sup> See Hu Zhong 胡中, "新疆各族妇女在前进中" (Xinjiang ge zu fu nu'zai wang qian jinzhe, Women of Every Ethnicity in Xinjiang Striding Forward), *Xin Zhongguo Funu*, 23, 1951, pp. 32–33; Yao Wen *loc. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> As Gail Hershatter notes in *The Gender of Memory*, work performed by women was not counted as work equal with work performed by men until this work was delegated out by local cadres. Numerous historians of the PRC have noted that women often worked a double shift in the 1950s and 60s, as the labour required to run a household – from carding wool to cooking dinner – was performed in the domestic sphere, out of state eyesight, and thus not recognised as official work. G. Hershatter, "Chapter 2: No One is Home", in *The Gender of Memory*, *op. cit.*, pp. 32–64. As discussed later in this article, female religious figures are also barred from official structures.

In essence, when she steps on stage Shalamaiti is singing about how the state made it possible for her to sing. Rather than exposing herself to a judgmental masculine gaze and incurring sexualised shame for her self-exposure, as official texts imply would have been the case in pre-liberation Uyghur society, the article portrays the public eye as gender neutral and affirming, provided the individual is stepping onto stage intending to act as a channel for the state's aspirations.<sup>27</sup> Rather than a sensuous entertainer, Shalamaiti is portrayed as a professional purveyor of socialist culture. Once on the public stage and under the state's eye, Shalamaiti is extended the state's protection. Indeed, subjection to the state gaze is cast as the sole means of tapping into opportunities and invoking the state's protection, the sole avenue of individual advancement. Access to civic protections, education, and professional advancement are therefore cast not as the inalienable rights of all citizens, but contingent upon self-subjugation.

## An Inherently Unequal Citizenship: Ethnic Relations and Professional Development

Due to the incomplete narrative provided by the interview, we cannot be sure exactly how the transformation into state subject occurred in Shalamaiti's case: one day she is herding sheep across the steppe, the next she has been recruited for the Hotan Cultural Team. However, we can ascertain that this transformation happened through channels provided by Party apparati. The early 1950s witnessed a professionalisation, standardisation and salarisation of many lines of occupation, including art.<sup>28</sup> The performing arts were early recognised as a key avenue for conveying political information to captive audiences in rural areas, where up to 95% of the population was illiterate.<sup>29</sup> Local performers like Shalamaiti were intended to make the messages they shared seem more authentic as they arose "naturally" from a member of the community.<sup>30</sup>

By the early 1960s, the state had established colleges and institutes instructing locals in the professional arts in both Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, and Kashgar. Notable

<sup>27</sup> Public appearances are unanimously presented as positive experiences for Uyghur women. See also Liu Qingrui刘庆瑞, 快乐的维吾尔族姑娘 (Kuaile de weiwuer guniang, Happy Uyghur girls), *China Pictorial*, 1, 1951, pp. 4–10.

<sup>28</sup> For an overview of this process, see C. Mackerras, "Folksongs and Dances of China's Minority Nationalities: Policy, Tradition, and Professionalization," *Modern China*, 10/2, 1984. For a specific treatise on the development of national dance, including Uyghur dance, see E. Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> For one example of performance used as a vehicle for instruction, see J. Althenger *Legal Lessons: Popularizing Laws in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1989*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. 111–119. On literacy see Dai Lili戴丽丽 and Li Yibo李逸博, "中国"扫盲"记: 十几年扫掉上亿文盲, 运动员起跑线上比写字" (Zhongguo Saomang ji: shijinian saodiao shangyi wenmang, yundongyuan qipaoxian shang bu xiezi, Recalling "sweeping away illiteracy" in China: More than 100 million illiterates wiped out in ten years), Pengpai Xinwen, 9/28/2019.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed narrative of the process of training a model worker, see "Chapter 8: Model" in G. Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*, op. cit., pp. 210–235.

Kashgar native Qemberxanim introduced Uyghur dance to Chinese performers in the 1940s and, by the time she was commissioned with creating the dance curriculum at the Northwest Arts Academy in 1950, had established Uyghur dance as one of the core forms of Frontier Dance within the burgeoning field of Chinese National Dance.<sup>31</sup> Through Qemberxanim, specific variations of Uyghur dance were preserved and promoted, albeit as a component of China's rich cultural heritage. Artists like Shalamaiti could gain professional training, and a guaranteed salary, but only by joining a state-funded establishment and agreeing to use performance to promote Chinese socialism. As the interview contains no information about her education or travels beyond Hotan, it seems unlikely that Shalamaiti received a formal education in the arts. However, she presumably learned Uyghur dance performance within the framework of Chinese National Dance.<sup>32</sup> The remark that Shalamaiti's ignorance of Chinese proved a stumbling block in perfecting her performance suggests that at least some of her instruction was in Mandarin Chinese.

Across professional fields in Xinjiang, the transformation of young Uyghur women into model modern employees occurred under the helping hand of Han women imported from the interior. While some of these women were established professionals, the majority were laborers or technical specialists in their late teens and early twenties who were expected to "professionalise" industries, such as sericulture, textile and handicraft making, and the performative arts, in which local women had been involved for centuries. Nevertheless, across the board it was assumed that Han women could teach Uyghur women to do their job better by mere virtue of being the "elder brother ethnicity".<sup>33</sup> Omitting reference to Qemberxan, *Brief History* claims that, in the short period since liberation, Uyghur arts bloomed "under the Party's guidance [...] with the help of Han experts."<sup>34</sup> Chapters on pre-existing geography and natural resources, in both *Brief History* and a 1950s government pamphlet on Xinjiang, emphasise the coexistence of bountiful resources and widespread poverty, attributed to a lack of infrastructural support, disregard for common welfare, and political infighting.<sup>35</sup> Whether in arts or water management, the implication is that previous stewards of state left potential resources untapped, ill-managed and underdeveloped. Official discourse admits no viable local alternatives to the PRC's program in Xinjiang, no other way Shalamaiti could come down off the mountain and become a recognised professional.

<sup>31</sup> E. Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>32</sup> Tian Ke "Singing North and South of the Tianshan Mountains" *op. cit.*; Yu Sanjiang 于三江, 天山南北乐声喧 (Tianshan nanbei yuesheng xuan, Music North and South of the Tianshan), *People's Music*, 1, 1959, p. 71.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Xu Baosheng 徐宝生, "生活在新疆七一棉纺织厂的各民族工人们" (Shenghuo zai Xinjiang Qiyi Mianfangzhichang de ge minzu gongrenmen, Workers of every ethnicity living in Xinjiang's 7-1 Cotton Textile Factory) *Renmin Ribao* 2, 5/26/1954. Even when discussing Han women interacting with minority women, texts employ the term "elder brother ethnicity".

<sup>34</sup> Xinjiang Ethnic Minority Social History Survey Group, *Brief History*, *op. cit.*, p. 5. This sentiment is echoed across *People's Music* articles.

<sup>35</sup> Zhao Taoqi, 赵涛祺, 新疆维吾尔自治区 (Xinjiang Weiwuerzizhiqu, Xinjiang Autonomous Region), Beijing, Tongsu Guiwu Publishing, 1956, pp. 9, 16.



Despite its rhetoric of gender equality, the Party often did not place equal importance on men and women's work.<sup>36</sup> Interaction with minority women was one avenue that allowed Han Chinese women to claim authority and expertise in a manner often denied to them within purely Han contexts, especially in relation to Han men.<sup>37</sup> While narrative after narrative portrays Uyghur women as bungling, incompetent, and – like Shalamaiti – at a loss without outside instruction, Han women are accorded endless patience combined with almost superhuman skill sets.<sup>38</sup> The majority of young Han women employed by the new state factories in the 1950s are given supervisory positions, but the role of *all* Han women as instructors and mentors is repeatedly emphasised in Party accounts. One *People's Daily* article on the July First Textile Factory in Urumqi specifies that “every Han worker recognised that training the ethnic workers was their honourable duty”, and that “Han women workers take helping their younger brother ethnic colleagues as a very honourable duty [...] when the ethnic women workers are studying technology, the Han women workers very patiently explain the basics of operating the machines, even acting out the motions, encouraging and helping them in studying the operations [...] within a month, the ethnic women workers have already learned some *basic* machine operations”.<sup>39</sup>

The “natural” response to the state's bestowal of such unprecedented opportunities for minority women and the benevolent guidance of their Han superiors is a “spontaneous” outpouring of gratitude and willingness to turn oneself into a vessel for the Party's message, in the form of giant carpets woven in anticipation of a visit from Chairman Mao, songs composed by Shalamaiti, poetry commemorating liberation, and speeches given by model workers.<sup>40</sup>

Given the circumstances of their production however, published accounts of unbidden pro-Party production must be taken with a grain of salt. By the mid-1950s, most artists were state employees entrusted with specific duties.<sup>41</sup> Song and dance were more than mere entertainment: along with public meetings, performance was one of the prominent avenues the Party developed for disseminating both ideology

<sup>36</sup> Susan Glosser and Susan Mann go further, to argue that the Party prioritized stability above equality, repeatedly sacrificed women's rights for the nation, and envisioned the patriarchal nuclear family as the building block of socialist Chinese society. S. Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915–1953*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003, p. 171; S. Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 151.

<sup>37</sup> S. Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 183.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Wu Naijun, who is portrayed as a veritable renaissance woman, demonstrating exemplary abilities in teaching multiple subjects and performing secretarial tasks, organizing campaigns, directing and starring in political plays, drawing up architectural blueprints, mediating between obstinate Uyghur husbands and entrepreneurial (but oppressed) wives and daughters, running a start-up, designing clothing and marketing merchandise after only two years in Altishahr. Xia Weirong, 夏维荣, “伍乃菌在喀什” (Wu Naijun zai Kashi, Wu Naijun in Kashgar) *Kashi shi wenshi ziliao*, 1, 1986, p. 15. Yu Sanjiang, “Music North and South of the Tianshan” *op. cit.* likewise portrays Uyghur musicians as childlike in talent prior to proper Chinese training.

<sup>39</sup> Xu Baosheng, “Workers of every ethnicity living in Xinjiang's 7-1 Cotton Textile Factory”. In this text and others in *People's Daily* the term used is always “elder and younger brothers”, even when the subject is female.

<sup>40</sup> Xinjiang Ethnic Minority Social History Survey Group, *Brief History*, pp. 210, 224. The same expectation of gratitude for state intervention is expected of Uyghur women today. See discussion of “Embracing a New Life” Campaign in Yi Xiaocuo, “‘Saved’ by State Terror: Gendered violence and propaganda in Xinjiang”, *SupChina* 5/14/2019.

<sup>41</sup> C. Mackerras, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

and information about key campaigns.<sup>42</sup> While *Brief History* celebrates their newfound professional respect, artists were dependent on the state for continuation of that respect – and their material livelihood.<sup>43</sup> The state, in turn, sanctioned certain voices and ensured the study and pursuit of official types of art, thus blurring the line between grateful beneficiaries of the state and dependent state employees. As Gail Hershatter has demonstrated in her study of women in rural Shaanxi, model workers were both scouted out and intensively *trained* by the state, just as “spontaneous” displays of love for the Party and zeal for socialist development were acts of carefully supervised composition.<sup>44</sup>

Importantly, once a woman had subjugated herself to state gaze, gained the benefits of collaboration, and made herself a vehicle for Party propagation, she could not back down: by 1952, most state cadres were subject to a law prohibiting voluntary resignation.<sup>45</sup> It is uncertain whether Shalamaiti could have left the cultural team. Was her resolution to stick it out truly a personal choice and instance of Mao-inspired determination, or was this decision made on her behalf by the team leader? Could she have ever elected to return to the mountains and remove herself from state gaze?

The answer is most likely “no”, at least if Shalamaiti hoped to retain access to any of the resources and protections she benefited from while an employee of the state. Under the new regime Uyghur women were assumed to exist along a finite spectrum: towards Party-moderated modernity, obtained through submission to the state; or backwards into darkness and obscurity.

## Secularised Production

In introducing their program and framing their critique of former socio-political structures, agents of the new state toed a precarious line between justifying communist incursion and antagonising the local population. To justify incursion into the region and secure the allegiance of their new subjects, early agents of the PRC were tasked with convincing the local population that collaboration with the new state was both the region’s sole avenue for social, political, economic, and resource development *and* came with a guarantee of respect for and preservation of local culture. To avoid inciting rebellion or resentment, state agents carefully parsed historical institutions from cultural heritage, proposing to overturn “feudal” manifestations of the former while patronising the latter.

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<sup>42</sup> See D. Gladney, *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects*, Chicago University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 54–59.

<sup>43</sup> C. Mackerras, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

<sup>44</sup> G. Hershatter, *Women and China’s Revolutions*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, p. 235.

<sup>45</sup> D. Davis, “Social Class Transformation in Urban China: Training, Hiring, and Promoting Urban Professionals and Managers after 1949”, *Modern China*, 26/3, 2000, p. 262.

Party-payrolled authors channelled distrust of the state's new subjects into scathing critiques of pre-existing local structures, particularly religious landholdings, and religious professionals.<sup>46</sup> Regardless of whether the PRC had a solid understanding of historic transborder Sufi brotherhoods and their relation to political power and community formation, authors clearly saw religious organizations as holding potentially subversive sway over local economic, political, and social realms. State agents sought to disrupt this power through divorcing religious institutions from independent finance and reconfiguring local labour relations, specifically by making every individual accountable to the state.

Once on the ground, the state reached into local land practices to deepen its control over population and production. Within Altishahr, many of the large landholdings were owned by *waqfs*, tax-exempt Muslim charitable endowments.<sup>47</sup> Waqf income sustained mosques, shrines, and attached village schools as well as provided a livelihood for local *mullahs* and members of patrilineal religious lineages. The existence of *waqf*lands and unregulated religious funding was a clear impediment to both agricultural collectivisation and state consolidation of local power.<sup>48</sup> Confiscation of *waqf*land, which occurred simultaneously with campaigns for the "scientific" reform of agricultural production, was accompanied by portrayal of landlordism as not just feudal, but parasitic and unproductive.<sup>49</sup> The previous structure of relations between individuals, society, and production, in which households – often headed by a male and comprised of extended families – were the basic unit of population, taxation, and labor, was read not as culturally significant, but as counterproductive.<sup>50</sup> To successfully implement the twin goals of socialist transformation and planned production, the state needed direct access to each potential producer, both male and female. Interaction with women was seen as key to the total transformation of local societies: without women's participation the state's reach extended only to heads of households, who would still exercise social and economic power over individual members within, and retain the power to represent, the household as a unit vis-à-vis the state.<sup>51</sup> If females were erstwhile hidden in the homes, then the establishment of direct contact between female subjects and the state necessitated either the state entering into the home, or females stepping into public spaces. Confiscation and conversion of *waqf* holdings, which saw the state replace landlords and *waqf* organizations as the primary land holders, allowed the state to restructure the organisation of labour, social relations, and the paths of production.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Zhao Taoqi, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> For exact holdings and distribution of this land see J. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, pp. 16–17, E. Schleussel, "Hiding and Revealing Islamic Pious Endowments in Turn-of-the-Century Xinjiang," *Muslim World*, 2018, 108 p. 613–629, and R. Thum, *op. cit.*, p. 191. For a more detailed explanation of *waqf* law in Altishahr, see I. Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters in Xinjiang 1880–1949: Towards a Historical Anthropology of the Uyghur*, Leiden, Brill, 2008, pp. 316–318.

<sup>48</sup> K. Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>49</sup> S. Schmalzer, *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 29; Xinjiang Ethnic Minority Social History Survey Group, *op. cit.*, p. 226

<sup>50</sup> K. Kim, *op. cit.*, pp. 77 and 84.

<sup>51</sup> G. Hershatter, *op. cit.*, pp. 219 and 224.

<sup>52</sup> While the Party hoped to fully implement central policies, including collectivisation, in Xinjiang, their actions were often tempered by a fear of antagonising the local population, and thus certain campaigns were more

## Islam Attacked as Feudal Institution, Islam Patronised as Local Culture

One of the key barriers perceived to stand between the state and subjects – particularly female subjects – in Xinjiang were structures of religious authority. While mosque and madrasa alike were male-dominated spaces, religious structures were seen as wielding undue influence over all members of society. Though redistribution of *waqf* land severed the economic power of religious institutions, the state was still wary of the potential social power of institutions and networks that fell beyond the state's purview. The solution was to bring religious institutions under the state's arm and curtail their power through patronage.

This policy was carried out via nationalisation of mosques and provision of standardised religious education emphasising Islam's compatibility with key socialist values. For many Uyghurs, however, this meant marginalisation. The new Islamic institutions were developed on the base of existing reform movements and institutions in Beijing, which were predominately Hui and emphasized pro-state Sunni teachings.<sup>53</sup> Practices common across Xinjiang that took place outside the mosque – and thus beyond the state's arm – including shrine pilgrimage, saint veneration, and consultation of shamans of both sexes, were deemed subversive and excluded from official Islam.<sup>54</sup> As Matthew Eerie has observed, “those areas that can be controlled become part of officialdom, while those areas beyond control earn the moniker “unofficial” and, thus, unacceptable”.<sup>55</sup>

State-sponsored writing on Islam in China highlights values in Islam compatible with the Chinese vision of socialism, such as thrift, an industrious spirit, and patriotism.<sup>56</sup> These values were affirmed in the China Islamic Institute, established in 1955, where an all-male student body took courses in political and social thought, geography, Chinese, Arabic and history alongside Quranic knowledge. Women were barred from attending official institutions of advanced Islamic learning, and thereby blocked from becoming part of institutionalised Islam.<sup>57</sup>

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moderate than in Inner China. For a discussion of the tensions between attaining Party goals and retaining local support, see Wu Zhe “Caught between Opposing Han Chauvinism and Opposing Local Nationalism: The Drift toward Ethnic Antagonism in Xinjiang Society, 1952–1963”, in J. Brown J. and M. Johnson (eds.), *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2015, pp. 306–339. Justin Jacob's work suggests that Han cadres did not always practice restraint and respect: J. Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2017, pp. 185–190.

<sup>53</sup> A. Glasserman, “Making Muslims Hui: Ethnic Bias in the New Curriculum of the China Islamic Association” in Gui Rong et al (eds.), *Hui Muslims in China*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2016, pp. 50–52.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53; ‘shaman’ is a blanket term for religious specialists interceding between human and spirit; in Uyghur these may alternately be called daxan, baxsi, perixon, palei, qumilaqci, gadugar or sehirci. See P. Schrode, “The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Uyghur Religious Practice”, *Die Welt des Islams*, 48/ 3–4, 2008, pp. 399–401.

<sup>55</sup> M. Eerie, *op. cit.*, p. 129

<sup>56</sup> Li Fuxun 李福順, “伊斯蘭的節約精神”(Yisilan de Jieyue Jingshen, The Spirit of Conservation in Islam), *Zhongguo Muslim*, 1, 1958, p. 24–25; Zhang Jie 張杰, “論愛國是伊斯蘭教界必盡的職責”(Lun aiguo shi yisilanjiaoshi bijin de zhize, Patriotism is an obligation required of Islamic believers), *Zhongguo Muslim*, 5, 1958, pp. 3–4.

<sup>57</sup> M. Jaschok and J. Shui, *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam: a mosque of their own*, Richmond, Curzon, 2000.

Early articles concerning the institution suggest that its purpose was to train an ideologically uniform Islamic clergy that could serve as a conduit between Party and people.<sup>58</sup> As with other professionals on the state payroll, graduates of these institutions were expected to use their position as intermediaries to support socialist intervention and stress the compatibility between local culture and Maoism, patriotism, and civic duties.<sup>59</sup> By 1960, the China Islamic Association's monthly magazine *Muslims in China* lauded the ideological progress being made among the first [all-male] cohorts.<sup>60</sup> The problem with existing institutions and social structures was thus not ascribed to Islam itself, but to traditional leaders and the supposedly deviant practices they inspired.

With women out of the way, the state's standardisation of religious leadership thus coexisted with deep criticism of power abuses by male religious professionals 'meddling' in civic and familial affairs.<sup>61</sup> A number of Uyghur women were paid to channel the Party's voice in producing native – and therefore seemingly authentic – critique of religious leaders who had received their training in traditional institutions.<sup>62</sup> Sailima Talifuwa's 1954 *People's Daily* article "Women of every ethnicity stand up in Xinjiang", for example, accused old society religious leaders (who would have been supported by *waqf* incomes) of institutionalising the "sale" of young girls into marriage and of presiding over a patriarchal society where women were prisoners of their homes and marginalised members of their own communities.<sup>63</sup> Notably, the Chinese College of Islamic Education did not offer instruction in Islamic law or train individuals to preside over *qadi* courts, as all legal decisions, including those concerning personal status law, now came under state jurisdiction. Assumedly, only secular law offered unbiased individual legal protection extending over all subjects equally, regardless of gender and ethnicity.

<sup>58</sup> Yan Hui 馮輝, "中國伊斯蘭教經學院第二屆學生畢業" (Zhongguo yislanjiao jingxueyuan di er tang xuesheng biye, The Second Class of the Chinese College of Islamic Education Graduates). *Zhongguo Musilin*, 2, 1960, p. 26.

<sup>59</sup> Zhang Jie, *op. cit.*

<sup>60</sup> Yan Hui, *op. cit.*

<sup>61</sup> Imams conducting unlawful marriages with underage brides were heavily criticized, but civic marriage among Uyghurs was celebrated. See Ge Li 歌黎, "一对维吾尔族青年男女的自由结婚" (Yi dui weiwuerzu qingnian nannu' de ziyou jiehun, A Young Uyghur Couple's Independent Marriage), *Renmin Ribao*, 3, 10/22/1952.

<sup>62</sup> It is more productive to think of these women as 'co-opted agents of the state' rather than as avid converts to Chinese communism. It is important to note that these texts were produced under state guidance and authors were directly or indirectly employed by the state. While some Uyghur women may have internalised the narratives they helped to produce, the degree to which they internalised dialogue, versus the degree to which they saw compliance and adoption of Party-sanctioned language as necessary for personal and professional advancement, is impossible to elucidate. These texts bear remarkable similarity to recent videos commissioned by the Xinjiang Propaganda Bureau using "everyday Uyghurs" to rebuke international critique of Chinese policies towards Uyghurs. J. Kao et. al, "We are very free' How China spreads its propaganda version of life in Xinjiang", *New York Times*, 22 June 2020.

<sup>63</sup> S. Talifuwa 赛力玛·塔力甫瓦, "新疆各族妇女站起来了" (Xinjiang ge zu funu' zhanqilaile, Women of every ethnicity stand up in Xinjiang), *Renmin Ribao*, 6, 21 September 1954; Anonymous, "Southern Xinjiang Women Start to Unveil", *op. cit.*; Hu Zhong, *op. cit.* However, Hu Zhong's text is accompanied by a photograph showing PLA soldiers greeted by smiling, uncovered Uyghur women working in the fields. Descriptions and photographs taken by foreign residents in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century provide also contrary evidence, suggesting that practices varied across Xinjiang.

## Islam within Uyghur Culture

Popular publications evince a bifurcated approach to Islam, criticising historical Islamic structures while showcasing Party patronage of cultural manifestations of faith. In doctrine, Islamic institutions were standardised, and brought into the realm of centrally governed civic affairs, under the supposedly universal umbrella of socialism. Expression of religious belief, on the other hand, was relegated to the realm of cultural affairs, seen as local and particular.

Within Party-sponsored publications, little of the substance of Islamic thought or of Islam in practice is ever considered. Even articles in *Chinese Muslims* take a secular or political stance towards Islamic institutions and practices; nowhere in the magazine does Islamic knowledge or belief ever come under discussion. Religion itself was never treated as a category separate from ethnicity and local cultures.<sup>64</sup> While the legal status of religious institutions and educators is interpreted within the secular framework governing institutions and educators generally, laws covering freedom of religious expression primarily address freedom of cultural expression.<sup>65</sup> In Xinjiang, Islam is portrayed not as a broad system of beliefs through which communities interpret all aspects of society and individual life, but a set of practices particular to different ethnic groups, near synonymous with folk culture. As one publication states directly following a paragraph on religious freedom, “the state gives equal weight to minorities’ ancestral customs and respects people of all ethnic groups [...] every ethnic group has the freedom to preserve or reform its *local customs*.”<sup>66</sup> While the constitution guarantees individual rights to religious freedom, the surrounding discussion makes clear that this is a right to local variance, not a right to engage in systems that could challenge state hegemony. In writing about religion in Xinjiang, the state evidenced little interest in the socially informative side of Islam, preferring instead to see the practices of Uyghur Islam, like all other religions in the PRC, as a discrete embodiment of local custom, compatible but not competing with the universal system of Chinese socialism.

## Emasculated Islam

By locating religion within local custom, and thus within a delineated sphere of activity, the PRC attempted to strip it of any potential to regulate individual lives, structure society, or determine political and economic affairs. Though religious holidays are publicly observed, the rites comprising holiday observance are now defined or controlled by the state, which exerts economic control over imam and mosque

<sup>64</sup> M. Jaschok and J. Shui, *The History of Women’s Mosques in Chinese Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>65</sup> Zhang Zhiyi 张执一, “正确认识 and 贯彻党的宗教信仰自由政策” (Zhengque renshi he guanche dang de zongjiao Xinyang ziyou zhengce, Correct understanding and implementation of the Party’s policy of freedom of religion of religious belief), *Minzu Tuanjie*, 4, 1962, p. 2-6.

<sup>66</sup> Tian Xilin 田熙林, “在前进道路上的我国信仰伊斯兰教各民族” (Zao Qianjing Daolushand de Woguo Xin Yisilanjiao Ge Minzu, On the Road to Progress: Muslim believers of every ethnicity in our nation) *Zhongguo Musilin* 1, 1957, p. 18. Emphasis my own.

alike, and deem which participants are within its sphere of patronage. As mentioned above, female religious figures from the side-lines, who were neither artists nor male religious representatives, were decidedly not patronised by the state. Positive emphasis in popular publications is placed on public spectacle, particularly as displayed in song, dance and costume. By the mid-1950s, in larger towns, these are performed by official troupes, such as the Hotan Cultural Team, and the music has moved from sacred to secular, with new lyrics praising socialist development set to older folk tunes. Shrine festivals and religious rites do not make their way into Party publications, with the unspoken suggestion that aspects of visible culture often encountered in observance of days imbued with religious significance do not lose their cultural essence when religious references are removed.<sup>67</sup> The equation of religious observance with particular cultural celebrations suggests religious expression is merely one aspect of folk culture.

Uyghur culture, and particularly folk culture is often reduced to *visible* culture – food, song, dance, and colourful clothes. Of the hundreds of references to Uyghur culture in *People's Daily* and other publications, these are almost exclusively the only specific aspects mentioned. Furthermore, these traits are always presented as areligious, accessible to non-Uyghur Chinese subjects, and patronised or appreciated by the PRC.<sup>68</sup> Unlike requesting the incantation of a shaman, one needs no cultural capital to appreciate Shalamaiti's performance. Of particular importance to the authors is how these cultural products are used in service of the state, either in expressions of gratitude to the Party or to propagate Party messages. Shalamaiti is a model performer because she demonstrates audio-visual aspects of Uyghur culture can be appropriated in creating convincing Party propaganda and thus advance the reach of the state. Notably, no other aspects of Uyghur culture – nothing that could make her seem fundamentally distinct, nothing that would be difficult to harness into labour for the state – are included in her narrative. While Islam was woven into the daily fabric of Uyghur life, Shalamaiti's artistic outpourings are notably secular.<sup>69</sup> This is Uyghur culture cleaved from its religious heritage.

Furthermore, the components of Uyghur culture most-commonly celebrated are feminine aspects of culture. Writers on the Party payroll seem particularly entranced with Uyghur song and dance, and popular literature is replete with references to women's colourful clothing, particularly in performance.<sup>70</sup> While Uyghur music generally features male and female dancers with male accompanists, pictures in *People's Daily* predominately feature female artists.<sup>71</sup> The other products of Uyghur

<sup>67</sup> For an example of historical shrine rites and other religious practices woven into daily Uyghur life, see R. Thum, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–120 and I. Bellér-Hann, *op. cit.*, pp. 303–422.

<sup>68</sup> Xinjiang Ethnic Minority Social History Survey Group, *Brief History*, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

<sup>69</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to findings by Rachel Harris and Rawhul Dawat that, even in the contemporary era, there is strong debate over the relationship of religion, cultural heritage, and the forms of Uyghur music. See R. Harris and R. Dawut, "Mazar Festivals of the Uyghurs: Music, Islam and the Chinese State" *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 11/1, 2002.

<sup>70</sup> These preferences persist. See B. Blanchard, "China Says Xinjiang Minorities Too Busy Dancing to Make Trouble" *Reuters*, 5/28/2013.

<sup>71</sup> In her survey of Chinese Dance on the international stage, Emily Wilcox also finds that, while Han men had "dominated the representation of Chinese culture abroad [...] in the 1950s and early 1960s, the artistic work of women and ethnic minorities took center stage. E. Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

culture most mentioned in official publications are those, such as weaving and embroidery, that were traditionally performed by females and are, again, soft and colorful. Specifically masculine folk arts suggestive of strength and power, from copperwork to Yengisar knife-crafting, are absent almost altogether. The portrayal of old religious institutions as antithetical to female interests, the exclusion of women from religious institutions, and depiction of arts (from textile production to song writing) as a praiseworthy outlet for female talent, also subtly suggests work in service of the Party as the route for female emancipation.

## Conclusion

As a newly established state founded on the principles of secular governance and peer equality, the People's Republic of China struggled to understand and incorporate populations defined primarily through ethnic and religious difference. Hotan was culturally and geographically on the edge of this new nation, populated by hostile populations that had protested communist rule through the late 1950s. In order to establish indisputable regional authority and claim state control over natural and labour resources in the borderlands, the Chinese Communist Party needed a creative solution that would justify state incursion while ensuring that incorporation of these lands and peoples into the PRC had at least a semblance of popular support among local communities.

To force through a vision of socialist society possible in communities across Xinjiang, the state employed local models to act as vehicles for spreading socialist thought via vernacular mediums. These individuals became embodiments of socialist liberation and guides to new life under the PRC. What makes Shalamaiti such a laudable model is her public proclamation of personal liberation through alignment with the state rendered universally applicable to her Hotanese audience via the medium of minority music. Her performance is manifestation of the transformative power of Chinese communism; it portrays Maoism as both particular and universally applicable and provides a path for community participation as national subjects.

The PRC's interpretation of pre-existing structures in Xinjiang as feudal and patriarchal allowed agents of the PRC to construct a convenient narrative of liberation through secular nationalism that focused on the emancipation of Uyghur women: freed from the home, they are liberated through productive labour in state structures. Popular and official publications alike rest on several assumptions that together negate the possibility of alternate modernities within Xinjiang: that there is a standard set of rights and liberties to which subjects in Xinjiang did not formerly enjoy access; that women previously exercised no power within their homes and communities; and that there was neither impetus for change from within the community nor a group with an alternate source of power sufficient to enact change. While the institutions of pre-PRC Uyghur society are portrayed as predatory, Uyghur "culture" is distilled into the decorative arts (song, poetry, embroidery, dance, and costumes). Components



of folk art may be used as mediums for political messages, but they are not depicted as constitutive of manifestations of identity and the substance of civilisation in and of themselves. Individuals – and particularly women – who may have crossed the boundary between religious institutions and Uyghur culture, are absent in official depictions. We see echoes of this today: even as while suppressing aspects of Uyghur culture and society that threaten to undermine Chinese hegemony, the state continues to promote feminised visual aspects of Uyghur folk culture for domestic tourism.<sup>72</sup>

In contrast to the particularism of Uyghur folk culture, writers on the state payroll claimed the PRC provided a universal, pan-ethnic model of socialist development promoting individual liberation and personal protections. “Real” liberation, they clarify, comes from the state and requires support for and submission to this universally applicable system.<sup>73</sup> As former feudal powers capitalising on locals’ faith had left them underdeveloped and impoverished, recourse could only be found externally. Here the Chinese state steps in to lead the oppressed and impoverished – and particularly women – towards the socialist future. Using this model, the Party justified state-led development *and* portrayed this as benevolent intervention.

The *ideal* is that all individuals freely elect to collectively support the Party and participate in the new state, propelled by their intuitive understanding of the Party state’s innate integrity and authority; and that every individual, and every ethnicity, enjoys a potentially parallel relationship with the state. As seen in the sections above, however, the state’s own portrayal of Uyghur women undermines the notions that individuals in this population were free to choose whether to enter into a relationship with the Party state and that, upon entrance, they enjoyed a system of indifferent equality among ethnic peers and across gender. Uyghur women in the early PRC are given a single option of advancement seated within a system of social, political, ethnic and gender hierarchies. To claim official status within the nation and the benefits of citizenship, one must first bow before the state, acknowledging experience of deprivation in the past and dependence in the present. As such they are denied an unmediated path to either political enlightenment or basic civil rights.

Looking back on developments in Xinjiang over the past decade, there are clear parallels between the state stance towards Uyghurs evident in early PRC literature and campaigns targeting Uyghur women today.<sup>74</sup> As in the 1950s, Uyghurs are portrayed as inherently feudal and backward, both victim to and perpetrator of oppression, particularly of Uyghur women. Acting out of benevolence and moral imperative, the state intervenes to mitigate extremism and provide education and professional opportunities. This time, however, advances in technology have allowed intervention

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<sup>72</sup> Anonymous, “You Shall Sing and Dance: Contested ‘Safeguarding’ of Uyghur Intangible Cultural Heritage”, *Asian Ethnicity*, 22/1, 2021, pp. 121–139.

<sup>73</sup> Mi Shoujiang and You Jia, Min, *Islam in China*, Beijing, China Intercontinental Press, 2004, p. 177; Xinjiang Ethnic Minority Social History Survey Group, *Brief History*, *op. cit.*, p. 226; Anonymous, “Southern Xinjiang Women Start to Unveil”, *op. cit.*

<sup>74</sup> This is particularly evident with the “Embracing a New Life” campaign as well as new music and dance performances featuring nationalist Uyghurs. See Xinhua TV, “Villagers embrace new life after relocation in Xinjiang, China”, 23 December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rUziNWIWJg> (last accessed 23 June 2021) and A. Qin, “China Tries to Counter Xinjiang Backlash With ... a Musical?”, *New York Times*, 4 May 2021.

to be far more invasive; whereas women in Shalamaiti's generation were expected to step over the threshold, agents of the state now step in.<sup>75</sup>

To borrow Rochelle Terman's language, Uyghur women of both Shalamaiti's age and the present are in a double bind: interest in opportunities newly opened to them or recognition of any imperfections within their community inherently invites Chinese intervention based on the claim of liberating and protecting otherwise vulnerable subjects.<sup>76</sup> Acting out of duty and moral obligation, the PRC steps in, offering them access to rights and recognition as full members of society via external aid and tutelage from more advanced ethnicities. Rights and recognition are, however, not inherently due to every individual, but dependent on reliance on the state and acceptance of the state writ terms of their reliance. Theirs is a liberation predicated on voluntary subjugation.

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<sup>75</sup> D. Byler, "China's Government Has Ordered a Million Citizens to Occupy Uighur Homes. Here's What They Think They're Doing", *China File*, 24 October 2018, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/postcard/million-citizens-occupy-uighur-homes-xinjiang> (last accessed 23 June 2021).

<sup>76</sup> R. Terman, "Islamophobia, Feminism and the Politics of Critique", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 33/ 2, 2016, p. 77–102.

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# Personalia

**Jennifer Bond** is a Lecturer in Education at University College London. She is a historian of Modern China and her research interests span the fields of Chinese History, Gender Studies, Education, Religion and history of diplomacy. Jennifer is currently working on a book manuscript which explores the identity negotiations of girls who attended missionary schools in early twentieth century East China.

**Arianne Ekinci** is a PhD candidate in History at UNC-Chapel Hill studying at how borderland populations attempt to claim political belonging in the form of rights, recognition and residence when new nation-states form, and how those new nation-states in turn attempt to incorporate borderland populations into the nation. Her research focuses on the East Turkestani/Uyghur in homeland and diaspora.

**Coraline Jortay** has recently received her PhD from the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB, Brussels, Belgium). Her research focuses on the literary debates following the “invention” of gendered pronouns in Chinese, and more generally on pronominal re-appropriations in twentieth and twenty-first century Sinophone literature. She is currently a Laming Junior Research Fellow at the Queen’s College, University of Oxford.

**Chang Liu** is a Lecturer at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Shenzhen). Her ongoing book manuscript investigates the changing cultural-political discourses about single womanhood in the first half twentieth century China and the everyday lives of actual middle-class single women in urban areas, with a focus on Shanghai.

**Yilong Liu** is a PhD researcher at The University of Manchester. His current research looks at queer theory, cinema, affect, and diaspora. His co-produced short documentary *Particle* (2018) is selected by the 15<sup>th</sup> Beijing Queer Film Festival (Love Queer Cinema Week).

**Gina Marchetti** is Chair of the Department of Humanities and Media Studies (HMS) in the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Pratt Institute. She is the author of *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (California, 1993), *From Tian’anmen to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens* (Temple, 2006), *The Chinese Diaspora on American Screens: Race, Sex, and Cinema* (Temple, 2012), *Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s INFERNAL AFFAIRS—The Trilogy* (HKUP, 2007), and *Citing China: Politics, Postmodernism, and World Cinema* (Hawai’i, 2018).

**Steven Pieragastini** received his PhD in History from Brandeis University in 2017 and is currently an independent scholar and freelance translator. He has researched and published on the history of interactions between religious/ethnic minorities and the Chinese state, the history of universities in Shanghai, and the intersection of imperial projects in China's borderland regions.

**Ximena Alba Villalever** is a researcher in the Latin American Institute of the Free University of Berlin. Her research interests center on migration, gender, inequality, globalization and violence. She has researched and published on different processes of Chinese migration, particularly to Mexico, with special emphasis on the processes of globalization "from below" that take place within contemporary migration and with a gender perspective that seeks to understand and visibilize the participation of women in such processes. She is currently working in a project analyzing transit migration through Mexico and the perceptions of violence in migrants' trajectories.

**Fang Wan** is a PhD candidate in the Department of China and Inner Asia at SOAS University of London. Her current research focuses on Chinese internet literature and gender culture in contemporary China. She is also interested in the interaction between new media and popular culture, digital humanities, modern and contemporary Chinese literature.



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