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A Socialist Superwoman for the New Era
Chinese Television and the Changing Ideals of Femininity

ABSTRACT This paper examines changing representations of women in Chinese television dramas since the early 1990s and interprets them within a framework of global socialist media cultures, considering both domestic developments and transnational trends. Drawing on the analysis of three selected dramas, it traces the trajectory of televised femininity from exemplary socialist worker-citizens devoted to family and community, to more individualized middle-class urbanites. It is tempting to see this transformation as an outcome of China’s integration into the global capitalist economy, the attendant retreat of the party-state from the private realm, and the infusion of Western cultural gender ideals. Yet this interpretation downplays important continuities, and misses intriguing parallels with TV dramas produced in socialist Eastern Europe. The argument pays particular attention to the enduring appeal of the socialist-style superwoman who shoulders the double burden of a professional career and unpaid domestic work while also acting as a discerning citizen-consumer. KEYWORDS China, Eastern Europe, gender, global socialism, television

Since China’s economic reforms and opening to the world starting in 1978, representations of women in Chinese media have changed dramatically, giving rise to new models of Chinese femininity marked by a contradictory blend of individualism, sexual liberation, and consumerism, but also a revival of traditional gender norms, with an emphasis on domesticity and family life. Since the 1990s in particular, Chinese audiences have grown accustomed to images and narratives of women who are rather removed from the world of labor and working-class culture, and are instead devoted to their families and excel at housework, or are portrayed as voracious consumers, eager to pursue their individual aspirations and romantic passions. At first sight, these new models of Chinese femininity appear decidedly post-socialist, departing as they do from classic socialist ideals of gender equality that foregrounded women’s independence and equal participation in the labor market. As such, they can be interpreted as a logical outcome of China’s increasing integration into the
global capitalist economy, the attendant retreat of the party-state from the private realm, and infusions of “Western” cultural values and gender ideals. Yet, as we argue in the pages that follow, this interpretation tells only one part of the story: it downplays the continued resonance of classic socialist ideals of femininity in Chinese media, and misses intriguing similarities with models of femininity common in late-socialist television dramas produced in Eastern Europe. Drawing on recent research, we show that many aspects of femininity on show in contemporary Chinese dramas also appear in late-socialist dramas produced in Eastern Europe, especially in countries that were most exposed to Western influences. This suggests that contemporary ideals of femininity circulating in Chinese media are best understood as exemplifying a hybrid form of (late) socialist media culture, rather than as fully post-socialist.

To develop our argument, we first discuss Chinese gender policies and the nature of the Chinese media system. In both realms we trace key changes since 1978, and note relevant similarities with trends in socialist Eastern Europe. In the second part of the paper we develop a qualitative analysis of three state-endorsed Chinese TV dramas produced between the late 1980s and the late 2010s that encapsulate some of the relevant changes and illustrate pertinent continuities and discontinuities as well as transnational parallels.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF FEMININITY AND CLASS IN SOCIALIST CHINA

Much like their counterparts in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Chinese Communist authorities embraced the project of women’s emancipation. In line with the Marxist-Leninist vision of gender and class relations, they believed that the route to women’s liberation led through class struggle, and could be achieved by ensuring women’s economic independence and participation in the labor force. In the years following the Communist takeover, China implemented several policies designed to facilitate women’s employment, paralleling those of Communist-led countries elsewhere in the world at the time. The 1954 Chinese constitution guaranteed equal rights for women and men across all social realms, from politics and economy to culture and family life, and subsequent laws also instituted the right to paid maternity leave and subsidized child care. These policies contributed to a marked increase in employment rates among Chinese women, which outstripped those seen elsewhere in East Asia as well as in many capitalist countries in the West. By 1980, Chinese women’s labor force participation had reached 75.5 percent (compared to 91.5 percent among Chinese men), while average women’s participation rates in countries
classed as “developed” stood at only 58.7 percent (compared to 84.4 percent for men).2

Communist authorities were eager to present this increase in women’s employment as a demonstration of the superiority of Communism. However, several scholars have pointed out that the goal of women’s liberation remained unfulfilled, largely because efforts to achieve gender equality remained subordinated to the wider project of class struggle and socialist construction.3 This meant that feminist concerns had to be couched in the language of class, and anyone insisting on the primacy of gender ran the risk of being accused of “bourgeois feminism.”4 The emphasis on women’s equality was also largely limited to the public arena and was not accompanied by a redistribution of domestic labor in households.5 As a result, efforts to achieve gender equality led to a situation where Chinese women were bound to carry the “double burden” of both waged work and unpaid housework—a situation paralleled in other socialist countries at the time.6 In sum, the nature of gender policies in socialist China had much in common with other socialist countries and formed part of a distinctly socialist approach to gender shared across the Communist world.

Following the implementation of the “reform and opening” policy in 1978, women’s position started changing considerably, and in rather contradictory ways. The Chinese party-state gradually retreated from planning economic activities and endorsed private property rights, including employers’ rights to dismiss workers.7 With the decline in state intervention, Chinese women faced unprecedented discrimination in the workplace. The reformed enterprises were reluctant to cover the cost of maternity leave and childcare services, and women were therefore more likely to be laid off or receive lower pay than men. At the same time, the decline of socialist ideology also brought a resurgence of traditional gender roles: women were expected to return home to better fulfill their roles as mothers and wives. These changes were reflected in the sharp decrease in women’s employment rate, especially among married women in urban centers. Between 1988 and 2002, employment among urban wives saw a drop from 92.3 percent to 74.9 percent, in contrast to that of urban husbands, from 96.8 percent to 89.6 percent.8

Chinese women also faced far-reaching changes in the private realm. China’s gradual integration into the global economy went hand in hand with its growing exposure to Western ways of life, as well as a retreat of state intervention out of private affairs, which released individualistic aspirations and brought changes to women’s marital relations. The amendment of the 1950 Marriage Law in 1980 for the first time legalized “alienation of affection” as valid grounds for
divorce, which provoked an immediate rise in the divorce rate. The accelerated marketization and globalization process starting in 1992 further complicated this situation by introducing new models of femininity marked by contradictory ideals, including individualism, independence, and sexual liberation, but also "traditional" feminine qualities. This resurgence of gender differences and the emphasis on sexuality clashed with socialist ideals emphasizing gender equality and asexuality. As noted by Shuyu Kong, middle-aged housewives who had grown up during the ungendered Mao era thus suddenly seemed unfeminine and unattractive to their husbands. As a result, divorce rates grew rapidly, with the crude divorce rate (the rate per 1,000 population) in 2007 five times that in 1979, and extramarital affairs increasingly common, especially among urban families.

As evident from the discussion so far, the changing articulation of Chinese femininity in the post-reform era cannot be understood outside of the parallel transformations of the Chinese economy and class structure. A key part of this transformation was the identification of the middle class as an integral part of the new model of Chinese citizenship. The idea of producing a middle class in China came from the Party strategy designed to tackle social inequalities brought about by market reforms. Central to this strategy was the cultivation of a new form of citizenship “endowed with high cultural capital and the power to consume”—namely, the middle class, the expansion of which was deemed crucial to social stability. Meanwhile, in order to justify the existence of the wealthy and the power of capital, the party-state had to deviate from traditional socialist egalitarianism and recognize the legitimate status of capitalists as socialist citizens. This change became instituted through the so-called “three represents” theory, promoted by the former Chinese Communist Party leader Jiang Zemin and ratified at the Sixteenth Party National Congress in 2002.

An inevitable consequence of this new articulation of class structure was the changed status of the working class. The veneration of model socialist workers gave way to the worshipping of the urban middle classes, along with an emphasis on consumption as a key element of citizenship. This change in representations of class was visible also in the reconfiguration of Chinese femininity: the asexual socialist woman worker was replaced by a discerning, middle-class consumer who conforms to the traditional, patriarchal gender order. Yet at the same time, it is important to note that official rhetoric continued to support gender equality, and that the party-state sought to counter the adverse effects of economic liberalization on Chinese female workers. In the new political and economic environment, direct state intervention was of course no
longer an option; rather, women workers were offered legal support, and the state also encouraged them to improve their individual working abilities and self-confidence.\(^{15}\) This did not exhaust all routes for state intervention in gender politics. As our analysis of state-supported TV dramas suggests, this medium offered a fruitful means of promoting socialist ideals of gender equality, albeit adapted to fit with the demands of a reformed economy and the increasing emphasis on consumption. As we explain in the following section, the profound political and economic changes that swept China over the past few decades had their counterpart in the liberalization of the Chinese media system. Yet the party-state retained a considerable measure of control, which enables it to use the media to promote messages and ideals attuned to its ideological agenda—including socialist ideals of gender equality.

### Broadcasting Chinese Femininity: Between Propaganda and Entertainment

Influenced by television developments in other socialist countries, and modeled on the Soviet media system, Chinese television was initially intended to function as a propaganda weapon and to engage in competition with capitalist broadcasting systems, while also facilitating public education and providing entertainment.\(^{16}\) These traits were shared by television cultures elsewhere in the socialist world at the time, and confirm that Chinese television formed part of a wider, global socialist media culture.\(^{17}\) It is also worth noting that although television was introduced to China in the late 1950s, it was only in the 1980s that it became the nation’s main source of news and entertainment.\(^{18}\) Detailed information about the transnational entanglements of Chinese television during its early decades is lacking, but existing sources suggest that it remained relatively insulated from both Western and Soviet influences. Chinese television did initially join the International Radio and Television Organization—a global network of broadcasters from socialist states that served as a platform for program exchange and other forms of international collaboration—but it renounced participation in its activities in the early 1960s, following the Sino-Soviet split.\(^{19}\) As an alternative, Chinese television turned to Cuba, Vietnam, and North Korea for cooperation, but due to the “self-reliance” policy promoted by Mao Zedong between 1958 and 1966, followed by the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, China’s exposure to foreign television remained very low.\(^{20}\)

The economic reforms initiated in 1978 led to a moderate loosening of state control over the television sector as well as a gradual opening up to imported programming and transnational exchanges. State subsidies were terminated in
the 1990s, as a result of which Chinese television became increasingly dependent on market forces and driven by ratings. Over the course of the 1990s this process of marketization brought about greater production autonomy, a diversification of programming, and a much more pronounced orientation to entertainment. At the same time, Chinese television became increasingly Westernized; it modeled its management practices on Western commercial television and imported Western production values, technologies, and skills. The proportion of Western programming increased as well, particularly in entertainment and drama. During the 1980s and the 1990s the majority of imported serial TV dramas came from the United States, followed by Western Europe and Latin America.

Despite progressive marketization and Westernization, television broadcasting in China remained subject to ideological supervision and government censorship, and the Chinese party-state has continuously sought to ensure that both market forces and foreign borrowing ultimately work to the benefit of the Communist agenda. These changes show remarkable similarities with television cultures in (parts of) socialist Eastern Europe, where Western imports and even elements of marketization were reasonably common, yet political authorities remained anxious about their potential negative consequences. To this day, China’s National Radio and Television Administration has the final say in deciding what is broadcast and has the power to withdraw any programs that are believed to run against the official ideological line. The production of news and drama is subjected to detailed regulation, meaning that Chinese TV producers must strike a fine balance between seeking to maintain a level of creative autonomy, satisfying audience expectations, and toeing the ideological line. The party-state also limits the proportion of imported content, and the provenance of imported content has shifted considerably over time: while the 1980s were marked by an overwhelming reliance on Western content, recent decades have witnessed a surge in imports from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea.

These systemic changes were reflected in the changing nature of broadcast content. The growing dependence on advertising revenue led to a marked increase in the domestic production of entertainment content, including serial dramas. After the initial infatuation with Western serial fiction, Chinese audiences gradually embraced domestically produced dramas, and since the 1990s, TV dramas have been one of the most popular narrative forms in China and a key site of contestation over cultural ideals, values, and norms. Michael Keane offers a useful periodization of the evolution of Chinese serial drama, which captures some of the elements of the transformation this article
also investigates. He identifies three key stages: the “industrial” stage (1958–89), when dramas largely followed prescribed ideological formulas and focused on revolutionary history, social reforms, and issues of social justice; the “market” stage (1990–2002), characterized by a growing influence of the market, greater production autonomy, and exploration of new entertainment genres; and the most recent “interpersonal” stage (2003 onward), marked by a focus on cosmopolitan lifestyle and consumer culture. Keane also maintains that the third period has witnessed a proliferation of drama genres featuring female characters and targeting female audiences, such as “pink” dramas, which concern the romantic lives of urban Chinese women.28 The best-known example of these, from which the genre obtained its name, is Pink Ladies (Fenhong Nulang, 2003).

However, it is important to note that the boom in dramas featuring central female characters traces back to the early 1990s. The Chinese fascination with family or “indoor” dramas began with the sensational success of Yearnings (Kewang, also known as Aspirations, 1990), one of the case studies examined further on in this paper. As several authors have pointed out, Yearnings was China’s first domestic TV drama centered on the everyday lives and emotions of ordinary people, and its success led to a whole wave of soap-opera-style dramas on the country’s TV screens.29 Much like Yearnings, these dramas centered on family affairs and romance, and tackled controversial issues such as divorce, extramarital affairs, and unemployment. Their central female characters were written to appeal to female viewers who may have themselves experienced some of the situations depicted in the serials.30 However, while these early family or domestic dramas typically focused on women in traditional family roles, as well as their dilemmas between family life and career, more recent dramas produced since 2003 have shifted attention to more independent, professional women living in urban settings, and foreground consumption as a key feature of modern Chinese femininity.

As the discussion so far suggests, Chinese serial dramas constructed a range of different models of femininity. Existing literature that examines representations of women in Chinese dramas since the 1990s has identified three key types: self-sacrificing housewives yearning for family or marital stability; divorced women seeking to re-adapt to a fast-changing society; and more modern, individualized, independent, and liberal-minded urban dwellers.31 These diverse, contradictory models of femininity are seen to arise from two competing forces: the traditional culture based on Confucian gender norms, and the transnational consumer culture introduced by the newly established market economy. As Ying Zhu argues,
female roles depicted in domestic dramas largely conform to Confucian morality, in that they avoid overt expressions of sexuality and eventually confirm “the domestic space as the ideal female domain.” In contrast, other authors propose that the infiltration of consumerist values in China’s television system has given rise to modes of femininity that emphasize women’s economic independence and consumer power, which can be seen to destabilize the patriarchal order and hence run against the grain of Confucian gender norms. In sum, the transformation of femininity in Chinese dramas is typically interpreted through the lens of a clash between tradition and modernity, individualism and collectivism, and nation and globalization.

While these interpretations capture important aspects of the changing articulation of femininity on Chinese television, our own analysis suggests that they also entail important omissions. First, they tend to exaggerate the extent of change and downplay important continuities with traditional socialist models of femininity, such as the continuing emphasis on women’s professional qualities in the workforce. Second, they situate developments in Chinese TV drama vis-à-vis transnational influences coming from capitalist countries, including the United States, Latin America, Japan, and South Korea, while disregarding parallels with TV dramas produced in socialist Eastern Europe. The late socialist dramas produced in Eastern Europe also included representations of the double burden carried by women at home and in the workplace, thorny issues such as divorce and extramarital affairs, and increased attention to consumerism. At the same time, having identified the ideological power of women characters as problem solvers and mediators between the public and the private worlds, they committed to constructing ideal socialist women as exemplary worker-citizens and rational consumers, which, as we show later in this article, struck a similar chord as contemporary Chinese TV dramas. In the analysis that follows we seek to provide a more rounded account of the transformation of Chinese femininity on television, one that is attentive to both continuities and discontinuities and takes into account transnational similarities with both capitalist/Western and socialist countries.

In this article, we adopt a qualitative case study approach, using narrative analysis to examine three selected TV dramas produced in China over the past three decades. Each one roughly corresponds to one of the three periods identified in Keane’s periodization of the evolution of Chinese serial drama (industrial, market, interpersonal) and embodies some of the key features of femininity characteristic of each period. Our first case study is the already-mentioned TV serial Yearnings (1990). While it admittedly sits at the boundary between Keane’s
“industrial” and “market” periods, it was the first family drama centered on a female protagonist, and offers an ideal springboard for discussing how traditional socialist ideals of femininity associated with the “industrial” period changed in the wake of the “reform and opening” policy. The second case study is *Holding Hands* (*Qianshou*, 1999), representative of the “market” stage, set in the reform period and featuring a struggling working mother. The third is *The First Half of My Life* (*Wode Qianhansheng*, 2017), representative of the “interpersonal” stage, set in contemporary consumer society and focused on middle-class aspirations. All three dramas enjoyed high audience figures, warm critical reception, and state endorsement, and thus offer examples of narratives that struck a chord with audiences while also maintaining allegiance to official ideology.

Our analysis is focused on central female characters and their role in the overall narrative structure. As Helen Fulton argues, characters in TV serials are normally modeled on particular types of people that are seen to exist in reality, and their behavior can be explained in terms of their social context and positioning. In line with this, our interpretation combines narrative analysis with analysis of secondary sources that offer insights into production and reception, while also considering the wider political, economic, and cultural contexts.

**YEARNINGS: THE PRIVATE LIFE OF A MODEL SOCIALIST WOMAN-WORKER**

*Yearnings* was a fifty-episode serial drama produced by Beijing Television Arts Center in 1990. It depicts the joys and sorrows of two Beijing couples as their relationships evolved between 1969 and 1989. This was a transitional period: the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) had penetrated the daily lives of ordinary people, causing suspicion and estrangement in human relationships, while economic reforms starting in 1978 began bringing hope to many households. Set against this backdrop, *Yearnings* was released to widespread acclaim from the public and the government, allegedly receiving an audience share as high as 90 percent. Its sensational success was due not only to its proximity to real life but also to its central female character, Liu Huifang, who allegedly inspired many Chinese women to emulate her and cherish the traditional cultural values she embodied, including selflessness and dedication to family harmony.

It is important to note that Liu embodies not only traditionally feminine traits but also the superiority of the working class. She is a capable socialist worker employed in a factory who is entrusted to supervise Wang Husheng, a university student sent to the factory during the Cultural Revolution to receive “reeducation” from the working classes. When factory managers ask Liu to
confront and criticize Wang for his intellectual family background during a “struggle session” (a public meeting held to denounce those perceived as “class enemies”). Liu refuses, as she thinks Wang has done nothing wrong (fig. 1). Furthermore, knowing that Wang’s mother fell ill as a result of political persecution, Liu offers to take care of her, disregarding their class differences. In contrast to Liu, Wang seems selfish and opportunistic. He decides to marry Liu partly for her working-class identity, which will help him compensate for his intellectual family background and thus enable him to avoid persecution. When intellectuals regain official recognition in the late 1970s, thereby restoring their social standing, Wang loses interest in Liu and becomes infatuated with his ex-girlfriend. This eventually leads to the breakdown of their marriage. It becomes evident that Yearnings casts doubt on the moral principles of the intellectuals, represented by Wang and his family. In contrast to them, people from the working class, such as Liu, are represented as sincere, warmhearted, and selfless.

Even though Liu represents the working class, the dramatic plot does not pay much attention to workers’ production activities as such. Rather, the narrative

FIGURE 1. Liu Huifang of Yearnings (Kewang, 1990) is portrayed as a capable socialist worker and also a sincere, warmhearted woman possessing traditional feminine virtues. Here, she refuses to participate in denouncing Wang Husheng in the Cultural Revolution. Image from episode 1.
revolves around individuals' emotional predicaments and interpersonal relationships. As discussed earlier, the post-reform emphasis on economic development went hand in hand with the state’s retreat from intervention in the private realm, and an increasing emphasis on individualism. This shift prompted a growing prominence of private space in the cultural imagination, while also enabling a contradictory reconfiguration of gender relations that both reinforced gender differences and encouraged women’s individual aspirations and demands for independence. Arguably, the figure of Liu can be interpreted as an intervention into this shifting terrain of post-reform gender politics, promoting a mode of private conduct understood as appropriate for socialist women workers in post-reform China—namely, a mode based on self-sacrificing femininity underpinned by traditional values of family harmony and stability. Rather than following her own individual aspirations, Liu remains committed to the collective cause, and is represented as a victim of excessive individualism—indeed, selfishness—embodied in her ungrateful husband. The class difference thus coincides with both a gender divide and a divide between altruistic socialist morality and the dangers of selfish individualism released by the post-reform turmoil. As a model socialist woman, Liu is a capable and dependable worker who takes on the role of healing the social wounds created first by the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, and then by the newfound individualism brought by the reform and opening era.

A noteworthy reason for portraying Liu in this way comes from the male imagination of the ideal Chinese woman. As recalled by Zheng Xiaolong, deputy director of production at Beijing Television Arts Center in 1990, the all-male production team agreed that the leading character should embody all the feminine virtues while also enduring the suffering wrought by her determination to uphold high moral standards. The tremendous audience success of Yearnings demonstrates that this ideal of femininity struck a familiar chord with the wider public. It was also attuned to the ideological premises of Chinese-style Communism. As noted by Shuyu Kong, the idealized female characters found in Chinese TV dramas such as Yearnings combined the traditional Confucian ideal of a “virtuous wife and good mother” with altruistic socialist morality, and were in line with the party-state’s investment at the time in alleviating family conflicts and maintaining social stability. This aspect of family dramas seemed particularly pertinent to Chinese society during the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. It is therefore not a surprise that Yearnings received warm praise from the Communist elites for its potential to contribute to social harmony and stability.
However, it would be misleading to interpret the model of femininity promoted in *Yearnings* solely with reference to the changing domestic situation. In many ways, *Yearnings* also bore the imprint of transnational cultural flows, especially of the combined influence of US-style soap operas and Latin American telenovelas—an imprint that, as noted earlier, featured prominently on Chinese TV screens during the 1980s. In producing *Yearnings*, the Beijing Television Arts Center production team experimented with indoor blocking, multi-camera shooting, and other standard practices of US daytime soap operas while also borrowing such narrative conventions of Latin American family dramas as hyperbolic characters, twists of fate, and characteristically maternal female protagonists.40

At the same time, we should also note the striking similarities with models of femininity found in some late-socialist serial dramas produced in Eastern Europe. For instance, the popular Czechoslovak serial *The Woman behind the Counter* (1977) features a model socialist working woman Anna Holubová, who has lived through a bad marriage and is now a shop assistant in a supermarket in Prague, tirelessly extending her maternal love and care to both her own family members and her colleagues at the store. Paulina Bren has argued that *The Woman behind the Counter* must be read in the context of 1970s Czechoslovakia, when Communist authorities were seeking to regain their hold on power after the turbulence caused by political dissent in the late 1960s and the subsequent political purges of the 1970s.41 Much like Liu Huifang in post-Tiananmen China, Anna symbolically acts as a public caretaker, healing the wounds of the socialist family, both private and public, after a period of intense social upheaval. While we cannot know whether this similarity was a product of actual transnational influence—details on Chinese TV imports from Eastern Europe are not available—they do suggest that Chinese TV drama of the (early) 1990s potentially formed part of a global socialist TV culture.42

**HOLDING HANDS: THE CHINESE SUPERWOMAN IN THE MARKET ECONOMY**

*Holding Hands* was an eighteen-episode serial drama jointly produced in 1998 by the state-owned China International Television Corporation and a newly founded private media company. Set against the backdrop of accelerated market reforms in the late 1990s, the story traces the romantic and family life of a middle-aged urban couple living through this transitional period, dealing with timely issues such as unemployment, divorce, and extramarital affairs. It aired on CCTV-1 during evening prime time in April 1999, achieving an average
9.2 percent audience share—a very high figure at the time for a drama focused on urban romantic themes.\textsuperscript{43} As one of the first family dramas tackling the timely topic of unemployment, *Holding Hands* was not only well received but also won official recognition. It garnered several Feitian awards, a government award given to drama productions with outstanding ideological and artistic achievement. It therefore provides insights into the contradictions and challenges met by Chinese women in this period while also shedding light on the ideal womanhood then being promoted by the party-state.

The narrative focuses on the self-development of the wife, Xia Xiaoxue. At the outset, Xia is portrayed as a bad-tempered wife who sacrificed her promising career many years ago for an undemanding librarian job in the hope that this would allow her to take better care of her family. Yet her commitment to housework enables Zhong Rui, her husband, to be absent from family life for his work, which leads to endless fighting between the two. The situation worsens as Zhong starts an affair with his young female colleague, who appears more sensible and independent than Xia—a situation that culminates in divorce. At the same time, due to market reforms in state-run enterprises, Xia is laid off, thus losing both her job and her marriage. She is left with no other choice but to enroll in the government’s reemployment program (fig. 2). With the help of this scheme, she adapts to the competitive working environment and becomes a self-reliant, professional woman while also winning back her ex-husband’s love and respect.

The ideal of femininity embodied in Xia’s personal transformation cannot be understood outside the dramatic changes affecting Chinese women at the time, discussed earlier in this article. The narrative and angle of *Holding Hands* was a direct response to the transformation of family life and romantic relationships in post-reform China, the rise in divorce, and the proliferation of...
extramarital affairs. Specifically, the serial is narrated from the perspective of middle-aged Chinese women, who were torn between the competing demands of family and professional life, and who found it difficult to compete with younger and more individualistic women.\textsuperscript{44} At the same time, the serial also addressed unemployment, another acute social problem at the time, and one that disproportionately affected women. Faced with this “side effect” of the reform project, Chinese mass media—television drama included—were required to both conceal the social trauma caused by unemployment, and package the story of reemployment success into a myth of the liberal market.\textsuperscript{45}

Yet while these changes are clearly important, we should also note that the serial reasserts the relevance of the traditional model of socialist femininity, which requires women to both maintain a successful professional career and fulfill their traditional gender roles as mothers and wives. Ironically, it is this traditional socialist vision of gender equality that is offered as the best cure for the negative side effects of the market economy, and the growing appeal of individualism. However challenging the juggling of career and family may be, women should not sacrifice their career aspirations. If they want to achieve equal status and maintain marital stability, they should continue to invest in their professional self-realization, or alternatively take advantage of state-run reemployment schemes as a “second chance” for fulfilling their own potential as both mothers and wives and successful workers/professionals.

To what extent was this model of femininity shaped by transnational trends and influences? As noted earlier, in the 1990s, Chinese reliance on US dramas slowly gave way to dramatic imports from East Asia, especially dramas produced in Japan, South Korea, and later Taiwan. Particularly successful among these were South Korean “trendy” dramas, which were first introduced to mainland China in the early 1990s by China Central Television and quickly achieved widespread popularity.\textsuperscript{46} These were focused on the lifestyles, consumption, and love lives of young, trendy Korean urbanites. Their success in China soon inspired domestic versions modeled on the same narratives and aesthetic formulas, including the so-called “idol” dramas, aimed at college students, and pink dramas, aimed at young female professionals.\textsuperscript{47}

While Korea’s influence in inspiring the production of Chinese pink and idol dramas has attracted significant scholarly attention, the relationship between Korean imports and Chinese urban romance dramas such as \textit{Holding Hands} is less clear. Yet even a superficial examination of their key similarities and differences suggests that the presence of Korean dramas may well have played a role in shaping the production of domestic urban romance dramas—not as a model to
be emulated, but rather as a trend to be rejected. While South Korean romantic dramas achieved huge popularity among young Chinese professionals and students fascinated with consumption and urban lifestyles, Chinese urban romance dramas explicitly address the concerns of middle-aged Chinese women who have fallen victim to the negative side effects of reform policies. Furthermore, while South Korean dramas avoided larger social and cultural issues, urban romance dramas tackled difficult, potentially divisive themes such as unemployment and divorce. Finally, although many popular Korean dramas do have young professional women as their central characters, the narrative focus is on romantic plots, consumption, and leisure rather than on professional life as such, or on the challenge of balancing a career with family life. These differences suggest that Chinese urban dramas may have represented an attempt to offer a different reading of women’s position in post-reform China, one more attuned to the real challenges of daily life as well as aligned with the officially promoted model of Chinese femininity. To put it differently, the figure of the socialist superwoman who—much as Xia Xiaoxue at the end of Holding Hands—manages to sustain a successful professional career while also shouldering the burden of domestic work and family life is offered not only as a “cure” for the challenges of life in a market economy, but also as the socialist alternative to the capitalist lifestyle and values represented in South Korean dramas.

As with Yearnings, it is also worth noting similarities with models of femininity found in (late) socialist TV dramas. While most Eastern European dramas simply took the equal presence of women in the labor market for granted, and regularly depicted female characters in their working environments, some also tackled popular anxieties about the impact of women’s employment on family life, reflected an awareness of the double burden carried by women in socialist economics, and addressed issues of extramarital affairs and divorce, increasingly so toward the end of Communist rule.48 These similarities suggest that the depictions of femininity in Chinese dramas during the “market” period remained faithful to some of the traditional socialist ideals and hence still formed part of a distinctly socialist television culture, albeit adapted to suit a rapidly changing environment, and formed in conversation with cultural narratives from the capitalist world.

THE FIRST HALF OF MY LIFE: A SOCIALIST SUPERWOMAN FOR THE NEW ERA

Like Holding Hands, the 2017 serial The First Half of My Life focused on the self-realization of a divorced mother. Yet, set in contemporary Shanghai, it also
depicted the cosmopolitan lifestyle and consumerist ethos embraced by Chinese urban elites, and was thus arguably a hybrid combining urban romance drama with selected traits of South Korean trendy dramas, Taiwanese idol dramas, and Chinese pink dramas. The serial was based on the 1982 novel of the same title written by the Hong Kong novelist Yi Shu, produced by the private production company New Classics Media (Xinli Chuanmei), and screened in July 2017 on two satellite TV channels with nationwide reach. The highest audience share for a single episode reached 10.48 percent, and the show received the Magnolia Award, granted by the Shanghai municipal government and the National Radio and Television Administration for outstanding screenplay and acting performances.

The story of the central protagonist, Luo Zijun, in many ways resembles the story of Xia Xiaoxue in *Holding Hands* and uses melodramatic narrative devices similar to those seen in *Yearnings*. However, Luo’s class position, feminine qualities, and route toward self-development are considerably different. Luo begins the serial as a middle-class housewife who enjoys shopping and a lavish lifestyle. With her manager husband paying for everything and a maid taking care of housework and her son, all she needs to do is to look beautiful and dress well. But possessing these feminine qualities is not enough to maintain marital stability. Her seemingly harmonious family life is soon disrupted by the arrival of a female rival who is neither particularly young nor especially beautiful, but has a professional career and is thus able to share Luo’s husband’s work pressures. After the divorce, Luo is forced to regain her independence by returning to the workplace. With the help of her friends—Tang Jing, a competent senior consultant, and Tang’s fiancé, He Han, a partner in a multinational corporation—she launches a successful career while also continuing to take care of her son. In addition, she becomes an informed, discerning consumer who engages in moderate, rational consumption, since she can no longer afford to squander money as she did before. Intriguingly, Luo’s self-development also helps her win the affection of her friend’s fiancé, He. Unlike Tang, whose independent spirit is constantly bringing her trouble both at the workplace and in her love relationship with He, Luo is far more reliant and obedient; as a divorced mother with limited work experience, she gratefully takes He’s advice, and ultimately gains both a career and love.

Luo’s transformation arguably embodies all the key virtues of the new model of Chinese citizenship instituted in the early 2000s. As a middle-class urbanite, successful white-collar worker, discerning consumer, dedicated mother, and obedient coworker, Luo is exemplary of the new Chinese woman worker. The lifestyle
she and her middle-class friends embrace is fully consistent with the state-sponsored discourse on Chinese citizenship as discussed by David S. G. Goodman, which venerates middle-class entrepreneurship and makes the possession of private cars and apartments, luxury goods and high-end entertainment, seem easily achievable to everyone while masking increasing social inequalities. The central protagonists of The First Half of My Life all conform to this state-endorsed lifestyle: they are either professional or managerial middle classes and have a penchant for good food and fashionable clothes. The inevitable flipside of such veneration of middle-class identities and lifestyles is the demotion of the working classes. In The First Half of My Life, He is portrayed as an omnipotent hero who can appear at any time to rescue Luo, whereas other male characters with lower-middle-class or working-class identities are portrayed as incapable of loving and taking care of female protagonists (fig. 3).

This class hierarchy is also intertwined with a gender hierarchy: as the contrast between Tang and Luo suggests, the ideal Chinese woman should not be too independent, nor give in to the temptations of excessive consumption.

FIGURE 3. When Luo Zijun of The First Half of My Life (Wode Qianbansheng, 2017) gets caught in the rain on her way back from a work trip, He Han rescues her and sends her home, and a romance gradually develops between them. Image from episode 27.
Ultimately the ideal Chinese male citizen—embodied by He—prefers a woman who (like Luo) is relatively independent, but also willing to adopt a subordinate position vis-à-vis the wealthy, powerful, upper-middle-class male. Let us also highlight the importance of Luo’s evolution from a carefree, consumerist housewife to a more sensible professional, a process paralleled by a shift from irrational to rational consumption. Arguably, this aspect adds yet another layer to the multiple burdens carried by the ideal Chinese woman: not only must she develop a successful career and take care of her family, she is now also expected to sustain the state-managed consumer economy by reining in the excesses of impulsive consumption and upholding standards through being a rational consumer. This mode of consumption, and the model of femininity it forms part of, is also consistent with the recent articulation of China’s new goal of realizing the “Chinese dream” through social and environmental harmony. Such a political vision is set within the framework of sustainability, reasserts the primacy of collective interest over individual rights, and includes the reaffirmation of social justice, gender equality, and the advocacy of sustainable production and moderate consumption, which forms a distinctly socialist response to global calls for sustainable development.

It is precisely this emphasis on moderate consumption that also helps us situate this series vis-à-vis trendy and idol dramas imported from South Korea and Taiwan, and their domestically produced copies known as pink or idol dramas. In many ways, The First Half of My Life follows the narrative templates of popular Korean and Taiwanese dramas. Korean trendy dramas typically focus on the romance between a docile girl or woman from a lower social status and a man from a higher social class, and female protagonists are typically submissive and play secondary roles at work, waiting for a strong, authoritative, masculine character to rescue them whenever they encounter difficulties. Similar plots and characters can also be found in Taiwanese idol dramas, including the enormously successful 2001 serial Meteor Garden (Liuxing Huayuan), which follows the romantic entanglements between a working-class girl and a rich second-generation college student. Moreover, much like Korean and Taiwanese dramas, The First Half of My Life incorporates elements such as idol-like actors or actresses, fantastic occupations, distinctive locations, and branded commodities. Yet, as noted above, it also adds a distinctly socialist twist to these narratives by emphasizing the importance of a woman’s professional career, and by promoting a more moderate, rational, sustainable mode of consumption.

One may be tempted to argue that this emphasis on moderate consumption has little to do with the traditional socialist model of femininity, or indeed with...
socialism as such, and is instead rooted solely in recent developments and reflects China’s attempts to deal with the excesses of a consumer society. Yet this argument misses important continuities with long-established socialist discourses on consumption, which have long sought to reconcile modern consumption with the Communist agenda, typically by emphasizing the need for moderation and rational, informed consumer choices. In fact, depictions of femininity that entail rational consumption as an integral part of a model socialist woman’s duty can also be found in socialist-era TV dramas produced in Eastern Europe, including the already mentioned Czechoslovak serial Woman behind the Counter (1974) and the Yugoslav series Theatre in the House (1972–84). These similarities again remind us of the importance of acknowledging the continuing appeal of traditional socialist models of gender equality, and of the value of comparative analysis that is sensitive to transnational similarities beyond those emanating from the West or from capitalist economies in East Asia.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on three case studies, this article has traced the trajectory of Chinese televised femininity from exemplary socialist citizens devoted to family and community life, to more individualized, sexualized urban consumers who combine economic independence and compliance with traditional gender hierarchies. As noted throughout the analysis, the changing articulation of Chinese femininity is closely related to parallel transformations in Chinese economy, politics, and class structure, as well as the Chinese television system and culture. As television broadcasting became increasingly driven by ratings and oriented toward entertainment consumption, its representations of femininity likewise became increasingly devoted to consumerism. Yet at the same time, this analysis demonstrated that the extent of changes and discontinuities should not be exaggerated. The three dramas investigated above—chosen as representative of wider trends over three decades—promoted a model of femininity premised on classic Communist ideals of gender equality, emphasizing women’s excellence in both the domestic sphere and the workplace and the need for women to have professional careers. Of course, this ideal was adapted to suit the changing economic, social, and cultural realities of post-reform China. For instance, a career has been portrayed not only as a means of achieving economic independence, but also as a key ingredient of marital harmony and as an essential part of modern Chinese citizenship, designed to foster economic growth.

As we have shown, this figure of a socialist superwoman who is capable of gracefully shouldering the burdens of both a professional career and family life
while also acting as a responsible consumer has been prominent in dramas influenced by either Western soap operas or Korean and Taiwanese romantic dramas. Indeed, the ideal of the socialist superwoman arguably functioned as an alternative to models of femininity that either tied women exclusively to the domestic sphere, or associated them with excessive individualism and wasteful consumption. Our analysis also revealed several parallels with models of femininity found in TV dramas produced in socialist Eastern Europe during the 1970s and the 1980s, which suggests that contemporary Chinese models of televised femininity belong to a wider, global constellation of socialist media cultures—a conclusion that resonates with existing comparisons between Eastern European and Chinese media cultures. Rather than being increasingly subjected to “Western” or “bourgeois” cultural values and ideals, Chinese TV dramas thus continue to promote a model of femininity that is characteristically socialist, distinct from the one found in Western dramas as well as from the one characteristic of Japanese, South Korean, or Taiwanese series. At the same time, it should also be noted that this Chinese model of femininity echoes a global reimagining of femininity that calls for women’s responsible consumption due to increasing concerns about environmental damage and the interconnected global economy, which points to an increasingly complex global framework of feminine responsibilities.

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NOTES

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1. Wei Guoying, “Zhongguo hunyin jiating zhengce bianqian dui funü fazhan de yingxiang” [The influence of china’s marriage and family policy changes on women’s


15. Wei, “The Influence of China’s Marriage and Family Policy Changes on Women’s Development.”


24. For more details see Mihelj and Huxtable, *From Media Systems to Media Cultures*.

25. The National Radio and Television Administration, formerly known as the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (1998–2013), and then reorganized as State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (2013–2018), is currently the main governing body of the Chinese television sector. It falls under the direct supervision of the State Council and the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Propaganda Department.


33. For instance see Cai, “Rhetoric and Politics,” 163–64.


36. *Yearnings’s* specific audience share around 1990 is debatable since there were no reliable measurement methods then. However, it is certain that the reactions it triggered were unprecedented; numerous newspaper articles confirmed the overwhelming audience response to this first-of-its-kind soap opera. Although hard to believe nowadays, this “90 percent” figure has appeared in many Chinese newspapers and magazines. One possible explanation might be that there simply weren’t many Chinese TV dramas around 1990, and so when one was produced, it was likely to be broadcast by nearly all TV channels, once they obtained the rights. Having no other entertainment TV shows/genres as competitors, the soap-opera-style TV dramas would naturally become audiences’ favorite programs. By the late 1990s the production of Chinese TV dramas had increased dramatically, and drama genres had also diversified; hence the average audience share for any particular show declined correspondingly.


42. For more correlations between early Chinese TV dramas and the TV culture in other (former) socialist countries see Mihelj and Huxtable, *From Media Systems to Media Cultures*, 309–12.


44. Kong, “Family Matters,” 79.


48. For more on women depicted in their working environments see Imre, *TV Socialism*, 205. For more on popular anxieties see Mihelj and Huxtable, *From Media Systems to Media Cultures*, 172–75.


