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## Developing Transnational Feminist Dialogues: How Chinese Women Craft Identity at the Intersection of Tradition, Socialism, and Globalization

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Developing Transnational Feminist Dialogues:  
How Chinese Women Craft Identity at the Intersection of Tradition, Socialism, and  
Globalization

Senior Project submitted to  
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by

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## Introduction

The 1995 Beijing United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women marked a milestone in the dialogue on feminism between the United States and China. After giving a speech at the event, former U.S. First Lady Hilary Rodham Clinton received international praise for her proclamation that "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights once and for all." Indeed, the conference in September was preceded by the Chinese government's release of several human rights prisoners only a month before (Sutter). The political climate that foreshadowed the event, as marked by a tenuous human rights relationship between the two nations, brought particular weight to Clinton's remarks in 1995. In considering the synchronicity between feminism and human rights more broadly, an association that was insightfully highlighted by the former First Lady and many other international speakers at the FWCW, we may recognize that developing an empathic feminist discourse between populations in the U.S. and China would likely contribute to the development of a more effective dialogue surrounding the issue of human rights. Furthermore, as the current era calls for increasing political, economic, and social engagement between the two nations, examining the function of feminism in both countries constitutes an important step in the journey towards fostering a mutual understanding as necessary for a stable and harmonious future.

Although the 1995 conference achieved numerous significant, positive outcomes, such as enabling Chinese feminists to develop greater international networks than they previously had (Hershatter, Honig, and Rofel 374), many elements of its execution and reception indicate domestic and, consequentially, transnational conflicts. While mainstream American media used the opportunity to portray a hostile, anti-democratic Chinese government and an oppressed

female population, Chinese state-censorship simultaneously skewed its coverage of the event to focus only upon the Communist Party's enablement of female liberation (Welland 941). The lack of transparency afforded to ordinary citizens in both nations demonstrates the need for further examination of the relevant notions of feminist expression that are held and performed by Chinese and American women.

In the service of promoting shared understandings between the two populations, it is necessary to note that as the 2016 presidential election approaches, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, who, as evidenced by the 1995 FWCW, is often presented as a major figure of western feminism among international audiences, is becoming increasingly rejected by young voters who believe that she is not representative of the concerns central to the contemporary feminist movement (Shwartz). For many young women, objectives of female liberation today differ greatly from those of their predecessors in the movement's first and second waves. Whereas traditional aims rooted in the acquisition of legal, political and economic equality between genders were both necessary and relevant to the twentieth century social conditions from which they emerged, ideologies presented by young feminists today have been updated to reflect a changing national environment. The notion of intersectionality, first termed by American professor Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, has recently prevailed in the U.S. in order to shift feminist discourse away from a focus on problems exclusive to white, middle-class women, a stance which many voters criticize second-generation feminist advocates like Clinton for upholding. In contrast, intersectionality works to address the immense variation of women's experiences as shaped by diverse oppressive systems that attempt to marginalize them based on race, ethnicity, class, and ability.

Third-wave feminism defines the post-1990's contemporary movement as it has evolved from conditions of the first and second waves in order to support principals of intersectionality. In her article "What Is Third- Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay," scholar R. Claire Snyder discusses the post-modern and post-colonial ideologies of the current wave as intended to embrace a multiperspectival version of feminism that emphasizes inclusivity and a non-judgmental approach towards feminist politics. Snyder quotes a definition of the third-wave provided by professor Leslie Heywood which states that this tradition "respects not only differences between women based on race, ethnicity, religion, and economic standing but also makes allowance for different identities within a single person" (Heywood). Arguing that paying attention to multiple-identities within feminist discourse is necessary in order for the movement to speak to young generations; scholars like Heywood and Snyder reject the notion of a singular feminist identity and instead advocate for the acknowledgement that different contexts shape women's experiences and behavior. They assert that no matter how she dresses, what race she belongs to, the way she earns money, or where she grew up, all women are capable of autonomy in a way that corresponds with their individual and intersectional circumstances.

Third-wave feminism, and the emphasis on intersectionality that it poses, may thus be viewed as the contemporary movement through which many young feminists in the United States identify. Their ideologies and practices can be strengthened through considering how the experiences of certain groups, such as those of Chinese women, are informed by the distinct socio-historical factors which structure their environments. In this sense, an examination of how the quest for female liberation functions within the features of current Chinese society may be beneficial for western feminists who wish to effectively broaden the reaches of intersectional

ideology and practice to address the challenges and celebrate the achievements of a broader population.

In congruence with my argument that ideas about feminism held by many young American women differ from the traditional aims of by public leaders like Clinton, and that these ideas can be enhanced by conducting greater transnational explorations, it is necessary to note that investigations of how contemporary events have transformed notions of feminism for young Chinese women were seldom produced since the FCWC in 1995 (Zheng and Zhang 40). Repressed by government censorship and portrayed negatively in international media, the lack of transparent communication between contemporary feminists of both nations calls for an evaluation of the movement's present conditions. Aligning with principles of western intersectionality that seek to identify how distinct hierarchical structures impact women's lives, we must situate the experiences of Chinese women within the complex histories that define their present social position in order to effectively comprehend the modes of feminist expression that they exhibit.

I divide these structures into three groups that accord with three chronological time periods to represent the major forces of patriarchal oppression facing Chinese women today. As will be illuminated, women's changing status has shifted cooperatively with changing conditions of the state. Throughout the various dynastic systems that governed China in pre-modern times, doctrinal Confucian ideals worked to structure a gender hierarchy in which women, associated with the passive *yīn* (阴), were placed in an inferior position, while males were associated with the superior dominance of *yáng* (阳). Conceptualizing these differences as the divine natural



order, physical separation between the sexes was deemed necessary to assure that yin would remain submissive to yang.

The Confucian *Book of Rites* (*lijì*/礼记), which served as a doctrine of social etiquette during early dynastic periods, emphasized the need for gender segregation in which women were to remain in an inner realm and be excluded from public affairs belonging wholly to men. Women's roles were contingent on carrying out familial duties as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers in order to maintain patriarchal tradition. Likewise, family systems continued to be patrilocal and patrilineal, in which a wife's standing within the family depended on her reproduction of male heirs (Ding and Xu 77). In feudal society and the centuries that followed, a female's identity was measured by her embodiment of three modes of obedience: obeying the father before marriage (*wèi jià cóng fù* /未嫁从父), obeying the husband in marriage (*jì jiā cóng fū* /既嫁从夫), and obeying the sons in widowhood (*fū sǐ zòng zǐ* /夫死从子). Practices of prostitution and holding concubines that were widespread in the pre-modern era also worked to reinforce patriarchal dominance, as women who performed these duties represented the social capital of a man and were treated in accordance with his status (Hinsch 39). For most women, few opportunities were available outside of marriage, motherhood, and domestic work. Practices such as foot binding, deprivation of legal rights to ownership, and the confinement of women to the private sphere persisted, leaving later generations to conclude that the circumstances of pre-republican China were marked by systemic female oppression.

While this outline provides only a brief and simplified explanation of women's position in a vast history, the traditions of gender essentialization and female confinement to the private realm that permeated this era are necessary in order to comprehend the complex circumstances facing

Chinese women today. Due the historical breadth of these conditions and the relatively recent shift away from dynastic rule, I pose the subjugation of Chinese women in the pre-republic as the first major system of patriarchal dominance impacting women today due to the long lasting impacting of these gendered ideologies.

Beyond pre-twentieth century tradition, the second socio-political circumstance that dictates the contemporary female experience in China is rooted in socialist gender policies implemented by Chairman Mao Zedong and the Communist Party after 1949. State feminism, in this context, indicates how the move towards women's liberation was allegedly inherent to the aims of the Cultural Revolution and the CCP objectives. Drawing on Marxist discourse, leaders equated women's struggle with class struggle, and believed socialism would bring about women's liberation by enabling their participation in the public sphere (Wesoky 59). In the 1950 Marriage Law, 1954 Chinese Constitution and other succeeding reforms, women were granted equal rights intended to promote their economic, political, educational, familial and social agency.

Recognizing that disparate authority exercised over women was the backbone of what he named the "whole feudal-patriarchal ideology and system," Chairman Mao encouraged female emancipation by requiring them to join the work force. In doing so, he proclaimed that they would "hold up half the sky as iron girls" by becoming model workers whose labor was considered necessary and equally valuable as that of male producers. While scholars like Wang Zheng attest to the irrefutability of women's liberation under Mao, others argue that these steps were made primarily to expand the labor force in the service of national goals (Wu 409).

As instruments of the revolution, women were forced to reject female-specific apparel and other items believed to be symbols of the *petit bourgeois*, changing their looks and clothing to mirror those of men. Gender erasure, denial of femininity and the silencing of women's sexual

identity (*xìngbié móushā*/ 性別謀殺) were institutionalized perspectives that accompanied the feminist gains made in the twentieth century. CCP policies that rejected female individuality, and encouraged the desexualization and masculinization of women's bodies (Yang 40) worked to create a norm that "a woman's body is not like a man's, she is less than a man. In order to be equal she must be the same. Homogeneity becomes the standard and individuality is a problem" (Yang 46). In this sense, the destruction of female identity, despite the legal gains made, suggests the inconclusive impact of socialist policies upon women. Thus, I argue that ideologies of female gender erasure posed by Chairman Mao, whose principals have remained widely influential upon his death in 1976, comprise the second major system of patriarchal oppression faced by Chinese women today.

Following pre-modern tradition and socialist policy, the economic modernization reforms (*gǎigé kāifàng*/ 改革开放) first implemented by statesman Deng Xiaoping in 1978 mark the creation of a third set of circumstances that continues to greatly impact the Chinese female experience. The lifting of previous redistribution and collectivization policies, as well as the expansion of the private economy and free-market, have resulted in China's rising international status over the past three decades. Domestic manifestations of the nation's increasing involvement in the global economy created immense social changes for women who are especially affected by the influx of commercial culture. As capitalist practices in the west historically position women as objects of consumption through the commodification of female bodies, sexualities, and images (Yang 51), representations of the sexualized woman have returned to Chinese mass-media over the past decades, sharply contrasting them with the propaganda produced and idealized during the Cultural Revolution.

Filmmaker Huang Shuqin comments on how male dominance is reproduced by commercial culture:

“Both the Cultural Revolution and commercialized society today are based on male power... The difference is that during the Cultural Revolution, men wanted women to become masculinized. In commercial society, however, men want women to become feminized. Both periods are men telling us what to do, so in terms of male power, they are basically equivalent” (805).

In this quote, Huang speaks to the continuity of female oppression in modern China. She argues that the contrast between socialist goals and capitalist impacts upon women finds a limitation on the surface level, as both structures are ultimately rooted in enforcing male control and female subordination. Indeed, Huang’s sentiments support my assertion that the circumstances formulating the contemporary experiences of women in China can be understood through acknowledging the double-burden imposed upon them through the demands of socialist ideology and global capitalism.

By providing this historical outline, I aim to affirm the notions put forth by numerous scholars of Chinese feminism and stated explicitly by scholar Sharon Wesoky in her text *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization*: that the condition of Chinese women has moved in symbiosis with the conditions of the state (239). As female identity has historically been constructed in accordance with China’s changing economic and political configurations, demonstrated in pre-modern dynastic traditions and CCP reform policies, it is necessary to consider how the complex conditions of the contemporary nation have, yet again, demanded a reconstruction of female identity. I argue that the current moment is uniquely defined by the conjunction of these systems, in which the quest for female identity is informed by the demands of tradition, socialism, and global capitalism. By explaining the patriarchal nature of these structures as they intersect in the present, I highlight the ways in which the contemporary social, economic and political situation

of the nation must be considered when examining how Chinese women express as a response to their present-day context.

For the purpose of promoting a more authentic understanding between politically underrepresented populations of young Chinese and American women, I argue that the ideologies of intersectionality which are central to third-wave feminist thought can also be found when observing the concerns and behavior of millennial Chinese women. These observations may be executed through an examination of mass media, which, third-wave scholars argue, will provide “a public gauge of attitudes [because] the world of popular culture is the marketplace of ideas” (Baumgardner and Richards). Considering media sources as a demonstration of public attitudes about women’s position in society, I will analyze four modes of contemporary Chinese media produced in television, internet, literature and film to review the way in which third-wave concerns are exhibited by and relevant to Chinese women.

Highlighting the notion of intersectionality as it is significant for western and Chinese feminist practice, I examine how illustrations of females in popular culture navigate the the complex conditions of contemporary Chinese society that attempt to restrict their identities. *By utilizing the diverse patriarchal structures intended to suppress them in order to achieve personal advancement and seek individuality, these women demonstrate how the pursuit of self-identity is a legitimate mode of female liberation within their particular context.* My research works to expand ideas about feminism among Chinese audiences, as well as to provide westerners with insight into how Chinese women perform a shared determination for social empowerment in a way that will strengthen approaches towards intersectionality. Taken together, this study aims to help establish a more harmonious discussion of feminism, as integral to human rights, between the two nations.

In Chapter One, I examine the reality dating television show *If You Are the One*. It reflects contemporary marriage culture, which can be defined by the leftover women phenomenon. I discuss the way in which the program serves as a representation of numerous constraining systems rooted in tradition, socialism and capitalism by reinforcing essentialist gender roles and female objectification. After establishing the show's function, I continue on to highlight the ways in which female contestants nonetheless subvert these patriarchal objectives by displaying autonomy, vocalizing choice, and proudly embodying multidimensional identities.

Chapter Two discusses the story of Internet celebrity Guo Meimei who attempted to utilize gender oppressive systems like China's mistress culture and the capitalist obsession with materialism, which typically objectifies women, for her own socio-economic advancement. The result and reception of her story among the mainstream Chinese audience conveys how the long-held attitude which unfairly emphasizes the deviant nature of women who engage with patriarchal dominance in a non-traditional form remains prevalent today. By reconsidering her story through the third-wave feminist notion that acknowledges pluralism and intersectional modes of advancement, I hope to reframe the dominant narrative surrounding her in order to defend women's navigation of patriarchal oppression for personal emancipation.

In Chapter Three, I explore the rhetoric of Post-Mao female writers as exemplified in Zhou Weihui's semi-autobiographical novel *Shanghai Baby*. After acknowledging arguments from feminist theorists who find that the novel reinforces the public consumption of female sexuality and undermines women's political agency, I analyze the plot, major themes and significant excerpts to assert how Zhou emphasizes female empowerment in the midst of patriarchal systems. By bringing a discussion of female sexuality and private space into the public sphere, and highlighting multidimensionality in women's identities, I argue that *Shanghai Baby* affirms

how third-wave intersectional concerns are present in the feminist expressions of Chinese women.

Chapter Four discusses the films *Suzhou River* and *Tiny Times* in order to discuss how third-wave notions of feminism can be found in both countercultural and conventional media. In the sixth generation film *Suzhou River* by Lou Ye which was considered avant-garde at the time of its release in 2000, one actress plays two characters in order to display women's capacity for plurality and agency while engaging with global capitalism. I then analyze the 2013 block-buster *Tiny Times* to demonstrate how female multidimensionality and individuality in the complex contemporary era is becoming increasingly present in mainstream depictions of women.

In the concluding chapter, I discuss how the patterns found in my analyses of popular culture sources work to situate self-identity as both a tool of oppression and vehicle for liberation in the experiences of Chinese women today due to the demands of the traditional, socialist and capitalistic structures that they face. I elaborate upon how my research can be used to broaden definitions of feminism among Chinese audiences and aid in achieving the necessary objectives put forth by more traditional women's liberation movements. I also expand upon how acknowledging modes of feminist expression in China may be beneficial for the ideologies and practices of third-wave intersectionality within a western context. Lastly, I position the significant role of feminism within the development of effective transnational dialogues which are necessary to ensure a harmonious future relationship between China and the U.S.

## 1. Commercialization and Complexion in Reality Dating Shows

I begin my exploration of contemporary Chinese feminism through an analysis of the popular, post-millennial television dating show *Fēichéng wùrǎo* (非诚勿扰), translated by local and global media into English as *If You Are the One* (hereon referred to as IYATO). In her article "If You Are the One: Dating shows and feminist politics in contemporary China," sociologist Luzhou Li discusses how, since its initial air date in 2010, the program has functioned within a mainstream population as "a cultural forum for the negotiation of contested values and beliefs among diverse social groups" (520). Although this category of television, particularly as it exists through dating shows, certainly has a limitation in performing accurate depictions of real life, "the dating shows circulated in China conjure up a microcosm of social reality, which has real impacts on [women]" (Luo and Sun 240). In accordance with the ideologies put forth by western third-wave theorists who emphasize popular media's utility for studying the sociocultural practices of a particular nation, I find this reality television program to be an insightful lens into social attitudes, as it both enforces and is shaped by the gendered hierarchies of globalizing China. Through my analysis, I aim to indicate that U.S. and Chinese women hold similar objectives of social empowerment.

Before examining the way in which the format and content of IYATO can help to inform an understanding of contemporary modes of feminism, I begin with an examination of China's current marriage culture. Not only is this aspect of the nation's social structure fundamental to the television show, Chinese marriage norms also inform the discussions posed in later chapters about Internet celebrity Guo Meimei, post-Mao body writing, and various genres of contemporary cinema as they all seek to further illuminate women's feminist expression within patriarchal systems. Marriage culture, as a problematic hierarchy structured by the three



oppressive structures outlined in the introduction, can be defined in terms of the derogatory label leftover women (*shèng nǚ*/剩女). This term has recently pervaded dominant social practices and expectations by imposing unequal gender standards that aim to regulate women's decisions at the intersection of work and marriage.

In her text "Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China" Leta Hong Fincher provides an in depth explanation of the detrimental rise, objectives, and broad-reaching effects of the leftover women label as a mode of female oppression. *Shèng nǚ* was officially defined by the All-China Women's Federation in 2007 as unmarried women above the age of twenty-seven, added to the China's Ministry of Education's official dictionary the same year, and has since been marketed by state media as a national crisis. Xinhua News Agency, the official press agency of the CCP and arguably the most influential news network in China today, as well as other major media outlets, have positioned the leftover women 'catastrophe' at the forefront of their discussion about the most pressing issues in contemporary women's lives. Examples of headlines ran by Xinhua News since 2007 read "Overcoming the Big Four Emotional Blocks - Leftover Women Can Break out of Being Single" and "Eight Simple Moves to Escape the Leftover Women Trap" (Fincher 3). Immediately after Women's Day in 2011, the Women's Federation posted an article stating that "as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their M.A. or Ph.D., they are already old, like yellowed pearls" (Fincher 3). The aforementioned examples are just several demonstrations of how Chinese, frequently state-run media has utilized the leftover women label to create controlling standards about acceptable female identity. If, as described in this essay's introduction, the steps made toward female advancement during the socialist era are attributed to Communist Party goals of state-feminism, then we must fairly acknowledge how, decades later, the Chinese state is also largely responsible

for the promotion of an oppressive gender structure which encourages women to sacrifice their individual economic success in order to pursue traditional obligations as a wife and mother (Luo and Sun 243).

In her book, Fincher proposes that the phenomenon is government backlash against the education and career gains made by females during the socialist era. Identifying two distinct purposes for the state media's campaign on leftover women, Fincher speaks firstly about marriage promotion as an attempt towards social stability. Instead of celebrating the immense education gains made by urban women over the past decade, the image of an educated, career-oriented woman has been used to mock her inability to find a husband as a result of such “over-qualifications” (25). Secondly, Fincher discusses how government population-planning goals have attributed to the cultivation of this label. The eugenics campaign (*yōushēng yōuyù*/ 优生优育) assumes a prominent role in this objective, as the author insightfully points out that is exactly these educated, 'high-quality' women who the government would like to see produce 'superior' offspring. She writes: "If Chinese women were to reject marriage as well; it would deal a devastating blow to the Chinese government's population planning goals” (30).

Fincher also discusses how China's recent privatization of housing and the real-estate boom has created immense gender inequity, exacerbating the leftover women phenomenon. While men legally own most properties in China today, wives or girlfriends, who forfeit the right to ownership due to social norms about prioritizing male security in marriage, frequently fund such properties (51). The increasingly, dramatic social pressure felt by young women to marry, as carried out by the state-run leftover women campaign beginning in 2007, has forced many to agree to unequal financial arrangements in marriage for fear of the stigmatization they would

undoubtedly face if remaining single (73). This fact is even more complicated by the Marriage Law passed by the Supreme People's Court in 2011, which states that if, upon divorce, both parties are unable to agree about a fair division of property, each person is entitled to keep the property registered in their name. As Fincher explains, however, most property deeds are in men's names despite the fact that female parties frequently finance them, indicating an extreme reversal of property rights at the expense of women's liberation. The unequal power dynamic created by these social norms, economic customs, and recent laws have meant that marriage is an inescapable but detrimental trap for many women who fear becoming leftover. For these reasons, China's contemporary marriage culture, which is informed both by traditional values and capitalist expansion, may be viewed as a system of patriarchal dominance intended to subordinate women that will be furthered referenced in proceeding chapters.

Contextualizing an analysis of the dating reality show *IYATO* with a discussion of marriage culture in China is both useful and necessary, as demonstrated through producer Gang Wang's statement that the show was largely inspired by the leftover women phenomenon. Indeed, the program consistently, and perhaps wholly, relies on women's internalization of the social pressure felt to find a husband before becoming leftover. In the following primary source analysis, I will examine the multitude of ways in which *IYATO*, an example of media as powerful institutional apparatus (Luo and Sun 244) works to reinforce patriarchal dominance through its presentation of essentialist gender roles and objectification of women. By first establishing the show as a representation of the larger oppressive systems faced by women in China, the following exploration of how female contestants utilize such structures in order to pursue liberation works to demonstrate how their exhibition of autonomy and individuality is an impressive mode of feminist expression that should be acknowledged as such. In addition to

improving ideas about feminism in China, these understandings are equally useful for westerners because they reinforce the intersectional principles that stress inclusivity and the acceptance of women's diverse experiences.

IYATO assumes the following format: at the beginning of each episode twenty-four female contestants file on stage and take their places behind individual lit-up podiums. Many of them have remained on the show for numerous episodes or seasons, and new faces frequently appear as women are either 'taken away' by successful male guests or offered performance opportunities outside of the show. On the surface, IYATO presents a difficult challenge for male contestants due to the large amount of successful women whose primary jobs are to judge and interrogate him. For this reason, it has received special attention from both domestic and international audiences for what many presume to be a unique display of female empowerment (Li 521). Each episode features four to six single men who range in age and nationality but are always financially successful and profess a dedication to the pursuit of their future wife. Intrusive, personal questions from female contestants are accompanied by self-promotional videos from the bachelor about his dating history, current living situation, and future plans. Females are able to turn off the light on their podium to signify disinterest in the male upon learning more about him. After three rounds of questioning and criticism, the bachelor may choose between female contestants whose podium lights remain lit.

In her article, Li discusses the multiple dynamics that disempower female contestants on IYATO. The host, Fei Meng, a former news anchor who serves as a wise, masculine mediator, as well as the two guest psychologist commentators, Jie Le (male) and Han Huang (female), all work to reproduce and essentialize gender difference on the show. In accordance with Li's analysis, Huang embodies a maternal, positive and traditionally virtuous image of a wife rather

than that of a professional, outspoken woman. She is asked to speak less frequently than Le, who provides much more aggressive commentary. Their contrasting characteristics construct a dichotomy that both normalizes and values gender difference and traditional roles. Furthermore, Le and Meng "enact an old-boy buddy formula throughout the show, which sets hegemonic masculinist standards for the show" (527). Meng encourages male contestants to find a date, promoting the sense that the females exist to be chosen, conquered, and possessed.

Women are also subjected to an objectifying gaze in multiple ways throughout each episode, contributing to the show's enforcement of patriarchal dominance. As Li proposes, the juxtaposition of one man and twenty-four women configures a phallogentric, implicit harem-like format. A voyeuristic panorama occurs at the beginning of each episode when the women first walk onto the set of the show, embodying the gaze of the male camera operators, the absent male producers, and audience members of both genders. Li discusses how female viewers often identify with the male perspective while watching, gaining male voyeuristic pleasure and heavily scrutinizing the physical appearances and feminine qualities of the twenty-four women in online forums. Additionally, at the beginning of each episode the single man selects one woman whom he would like to date, deeming her his *xīndòng nǚshēng*, or heart beat girl (心动女生). This process requires the bachelor to perform a male gaze by looking at each of the twenty-four women one-by-one and choosing his dream girl based only off of her physical appearance. As Li writes, the presence of the harem-like structure and the multiple objectifying modes of male voyeurism presented in *IYATO* "confirm the traditional formula of gaze and points to a patriarchal unconscious" (529), akin to beauty pageants practiced in many Western and globalizing nations.

This mode of systematic female objectification is continuously upheld by the program's male-oriented discourse. In the following example, host Meng Fei directly addresses the gender imbalance in China's population through discussion of the increasing quantitative disparities between the male and female population in China, and the effect that the large ratio of men to women will undoubtedly have upon the nation's dating practices. Reading from an article published by the Chinese Academy of Social sciences entitled "Contemporary Chinese Social Structure" Meng states:

In this book, authorities announced that beginning next year the male population of China will increasingly exceed the female population. By 2016, the male population will have passed the female population by 30%. This current situation is very severe. In the past it is extremely common for men to marry women, but if this situation continues than maybe in ten years, marrying a woman will be a sign of a successful man. (JSTV You Are the One (非诚勿扰))

The commodification of female contestants in the service of a male-oriented discourse is thoroughly demonstrated throughout this excerpt. Among domestic and foreign audiences alike, the reality show has a reputation for unabashed, honest discussions that challenge traditional social norms. Instead of utilizing this moment to bring the logic of the leftover women phenomenon into question, however, Meng advocates for the objectification of women and the continuation of unequal standards for gender identity by directly presenting women as commodities equivalent to nice homes, cars, and clothes. This process reinforces the unequal gender hierarchy which denies women personal autonomy, choice, and freedom to create their own identities.

Female economic dependence upon men, as a central objective of the leftover women campaign, is also exemplified on the program when, during questioning, female contestants are frequently critical of the bachelor's job and income. On one famous occasion, Ma Nuo, a 22

year-old model from Beijing, became an overnight sensation in 2010 when she rejected a suitor's invitation to ride on his bicycle on an episode, stating that she "would rather cry in a BMW than laugh on a bicycle" (*níng zài bǎomǎ chē lǐ kū, yě bùzài zìxíngchē shàng xiào* / 宁在宝马车里哭，也不在自行车上笑). In another instance, a female contestant refused to shake hands with a bachelor, claiming that he must first pay RMB 200,000 because her criteria for a future boyfriend is that he earn at least that much money every month (Bergman).

These two occasions might appear to be extreme, but the one-sided focus on male success that they represent is a central theme of the program, despite the controversy that these instances caused. Just after Nuo's infamous BMW statement, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television in China issued two documents attempting to forbid the capitalistic materialism promoted by contestants on the show, as such values allegedly disagree with socialist ideology. This tension illuminates a discrepancy in the execution of socialism within popular culture that further demonstrates its role as an oppressive system built against women. Pressured through state-sponsored social norms like the leftover women campaign which pressure women to seek success through marriage rather than prioritize individual ambition, women are consequentially systematically objectified. They are then criticized for embracing their objectification and asserting the desire for a financially successful husband, enforcing a narrow perspective on female identity that simultaneously confines and punishes women navigating China's transition into a capitalist economy. I discuss this entrapping cycle in order to further establish how IYATO illuminates a larger, state-sponsored socio-economic system intended to diminish women's pursuit of liberation by suppressing their freedom in creating identity.

As demonstrated in the previous analysis, the popular reality dating show *If You Are the One* can be viewed as a lens through which to gauge the complexities of the female circumstance in contemporary China. Built upon the ubiquitous leftover women sensation which attempts to regulate women's identities in the service of patriarchy, IYATO further imposes male dominance through its presentation of essentialist gender roles and objectification of female contestants. In considering these features, as well as instances of state interference within the program, I find that the show reveals the broad structures facing women as formed by the tension between tradition, socialism and capitalist expansion. Equally apparent on the show, however, is the process in which female contestants utilize the diverse systems intended to subordinate them in order to achieve personal advancement. I argue that by acknowledging the patriarchal components of IYATO, women's displays of autonomous individuality can be seen as significant and impressive expressions of self-ownership.

In his article "Women and Quiz Shows: Consumerism, Patriarchy and Resisting Pleasures," media critic John Fiske argues how the game show format may generally work to empower women: "The structure of each show equalizes the genders...The responsibility for initiating the relationship, the open control of the process of romantic choice and the more passive role of being selected are explicitly shared equally between the genders" (143). In this sense, IYATO demonstrates a significant departure from the traditional matchmaking practices that denied women's involvement throughout previous generations. As they are no longer confined to a passive role while being courted before marriage like they would have been only a century prior, women on the program exhibit agency in terms of their dating preferences and vocalizations of personal opinions about sex, love and romance in each episode. Noting the confinement of women to the private sphere during pre-modern times and the repression of female sexuality



under Mao, female contestants autonomous discussion of these topics within a public format marks a significant testimony of personal empowerment.

Furthermore, female contestants subvert the patriarchal goals that underlie the show by boldly proclaiming their ability to make choices and construct their own identities. While systems of male dominance intend to regulate notions of womanhood, I observe that women on IYATO utilize the rigidity of such standards in order to challenge social norms. After viewing of many episodes, I found that sexual, hyper-feminine, women frequently reject proposals from single men who they do not find to be their intellectual equals. Similarly, career-oriented, highly-educated women often profess a dedication to traditional values. Instead of epitomizing the reductive tropes that segregate female identities, contestants on the program are complex and multidimensional. In fact, whether or not it is to heighten suspense for viewers, much of the show is founded on the unpredictability and intricacies of their personalities. According to Wesoky, Chinese women's liberation in the contemporary era rests, in part, on encouraging her to become more of a complete human being, instead of traditionally female (75). The way in which female contestants display themselves as agents of control and variation in terms of their own identities illustrates Wesoky's notion of liberation, as they express individuality in the face of a gender hierarchy that attempts to deprive them of this right.

The analysis of IYATO explicated in this chapter demonstrates how women's pursuit of self-identity serves as a legitimate mode of feminist expression within the contemporary Chinese context. I argue that the presence and significance of this process should be comprehended in order to advance mainstream definitions of feminism in China. Additionally, these insights should allow western audiences to realize how Chinese women exhibit similar intentions for social empowerment, thus enhancing our own applications of intersectional ideology by

becoming more cognizant of women's distinct experiences. Furthermore, these implications can contribute to the establishment of solidarity between Chinese and American feminist populations, which is a necessary step in promoting the cultural understandings required for a positive, stable transnational relationship.

A further elaboration of how the female utilization of oppressive patriarchal systems in order to achieve personal liberation is an increasingly common, though often overlooked, feminist process in China is continued in the following chapter about the story of the 'deviant' web celebrity Guo Meimei.

## 2. Sex Work and Selfhood in the Scandal of Guo Meimei

For the purpose of highlighting how the concerns of western third-wave and intersectional feminism are present within the Chinese context, I turn to the story of Guo Meimei (郭美玲) as an embodiment of the process through which many females seek to craft an authentic identity and achieve personal liberation while navigating the various systems of female oppression that have come to characterize gender dynamics in the contemporary era. The previous chapter primarily focuses on marriage culture, which is currently dominated by the state-sponsored panic over 'leftover women,' as it intersects with increasing capitalist norms to form a complex patriarchal system intended to suppress female socio-economic independence and control women's identities.

Building upon these notions as they are evidenced by a close analysis of the popular reality dating show *If You Are the One*, this chapter elaborates on how capitalist expansion and traditional modes of female oppression, such as mistress culture, intersect to create an oppressive contemporary circumstance for women in China. However, just as I argued that the female contestants on *IYATO* pursue social advancement in their search for self-identity despite the program's sexist influences and objectives, I argue here that Guo exhibits agency and autonomy in her involvement with patriarchal systems, as demonstrated through her public proclamation of doing sex work and goals of socio-economic success. Because of the ultimately detrimental outcome of her story, Guo's case is especially necessary to explore in order to expand concepts of feminism in China, strengthen intersectionality in the U.S., and thus lead to a greater understanding between Chinese and western audiences in order to foster a cooperative relationship.

Born in 1991 in the small city of Yiying, Hunan province to a single mother employed in spa services, Guo went on to study in Shenzhen and complete several courses at Beijing Film Academy in 2008, after which supported herself with small performance work and financial assistance from her mother. On June 21, 2011, she became an overnight internet sensation when posting her occupation as "general manager of the Chinese Red Cross Chamber of Commerce" on her Weibo account, a twitter-like social media outlet hosted by the internet company Sina which verified her employment status as legitimate. Her profile, in which she named herself "Guo Meimei Baby" included glamorous photos of her posing in designer clothes, holding luxury items, and driving expensive cars, as well as other images that showcased her affluent lifestyle and ideal feminine looks. Online followers were immediately suspicious of how such material extravagance could be supported by her alleged senior position a prevalent philanthropist organization.

In recalling how her story is significant for the purposes of highlighting expressions of third-wave feminism in China, I do not attempt to excuse Guo Meimei's commitment of identity fraud. Indeed, her false proclamation created serious detrimental effects and a decline in donations for the Chinese branch of the Red Cross, for which she later apologized and stated "because of my vanity, I've made a huge mistake" (Qin). Nonetheless, I aim to reframe the popular culture discourse surrounding her in order to explore how Guo's negative notoriety is shaped largely by oppressive systems of patriarchy that she aimed to utilize for her own liberation as a woman.

Following her Weibo employment status change, Guo's relationship to an older married Shenzhen real-estate investor named Wang Jun came to light as the source of her self-proclaimed involvement with the Red Cross Society of China. In an initial interview with Lang Xiangping,

host of Ningxia television's "Decoding Finance," Guo and her mother claimed that Wang Jun was her godfather (Ding). Later, however, the actual nature of their relationship was revealed when she confessed her role as his paid mistress. Their decision to disguise this reality highlights the Guo family's acknowledgement of the negative social stigma placed upon women who engage in sex work, explicating the large-scale cultural significance of this phenomenon as it works to socially subordinate women. By first acknowledging the systemic pervasiveness of shame as placed upon female sex workers, we may comprehend the weight of her public proclamation.

In July 2011, Wang was arrested by police in Beijing on suspicion of criminal offenses. He admitted that a mutual friend had introduced him to Guo in 2008 and that they had since held a relationship involving the exchange of sex for cash. Wang stated that he would arrange her flight from Beijing, lodging in Shenzhen and compensate her with RMB 50,000 per meeting.

According to Wang:

"She demanded that I buy her a sports car as a birthday present; if I didn't she would sever ties from me. In the end I gave her 2.4 million RMB to go buy a car. She knew I had a wife and kids but she wanted my money; I was drawn to her youth. Each had our own desires." ("From Gambler to Call Girl")

Soon, Wang purchased a Beijing company called Zhonghong Bo'ai Asset Management Ltd. Co., a for-profit company intended to conduct a project with the commerce section of the Red Cross and provide free medical transportation to the elderly through vehicles marked with the charity's logo. He admitted that Mei Mei invested a 10% share, and that he told her she could be the CEO although he wasn't sure what the title, adapted from English, actually meant. After adding this position to her Weibo profile, the "Red Cross Scandal" erupted violently as Guo's first instance of celebrity notoriety.

Although there are countless examples of China's young generation using social media to boast their obsessions with attaining of wealth, the broader repercussions of her actions have since deemed Guo an ultimate representation of the dark influence that the capitalist mindset has had on youth culture in contemporary urban China within the dominant discourse surrounding her. As discussed in the preceding chapter, it is necessary to consider how her negative reputation was bolstered by the current social circumstance in China that voices disapproval of female materialism as defying socialist values while also embracing capitalism's objectification of femininity, in turn creating a double-burden that entraps women attempting to craft personal identity.

However, Guo's story is unique, and, I argue, empowered due to the publication of her sexuality for personal advancement. She is not simply another example of the social demise that can be caused by a generation's worship of media and affluence, but is instead set apart by her controversial identity as a woman who intentionally commercializes her body for financial success. Unlike the *fù èr dài* (富二代), children of the nation's new-money entrepreneurial class with a reputation for showcasing their excessive materialism through social media - and whom she certainly resembles on the surface - Guo's work as a paid mistress to support the lifestyle that she proudly boasts online works to accredit her autonomy. At a basic level, her actions serve to subvert the patriarchal dominance of capitalism by declaring ownership over her body. Her agency within this capitalist system speaks to the way that Guo can be viewed in relation to third-wave ideology, which recognizes women's pursuit of self-identity and personal advancement within their distinct contexts as a legitimate mode of feminist expression.

Articles run by Chinese media outlets that discuss Guo's engagement with sex work have appeared frequently since her initial emergence in 2008. In some, investigators assert that she

earned between 50,000 and 500,000 RMB per night spent with a *gān diē*, (干爹), meaning godfather or sugar daddy. Other examples of recent news media include statements from police or her acquaintances that suggest the perseverance with which she would seek out wealthy customers. For many who have learned of her story, Guo is simply one of the thousands of young women who serve as *Èr nǚ* (二奶) which translates literally to second woman and indicates females who work as mistresses, prostitutes or escorts for men in exchange for financial or material compensation. In a nation that holds a popular history of men possessing concubines to indicate social status in the recent dynastic era, the practice remains a fundament of male power declaration in modern culture. According to a study conducted by the Crisis Management Centre at Renmin University in Beijing in 2012, 95 percent of corrupt officials had paid for extramarital affairs, and 60 percent had kept a mistress for an extended period of time (Palmer).

In an article for *Aeon* magazine in 2013, British writer James Palmer interviewed Xiaoxue, a mistress from rural Sichuan province who now works in Beijing. She stated that "if you're an official, you have to have a mistress or at least a girlfriend otherwise you're not a real man." While the practice of paying women for extra-marital sex is a sign of power and success for many men, it creates negative social consequences for women involved, who support the other end of the 'transaction' but are received with shame. The silence that many women vow to keep along with doing sex work is perhaps why these practices, despite their frequency, are dealt with discretely in mainstream culture. In his article, Palmer writes that women who support themselves in this way are portrayed by popular media as 'beauty attracting disaster', [and have an] 'evil, poisonous nature', as if the poor officials would never have tasted the apple of

corruption without a woman to lure them on." The way that media presents this occupation serves as an effective mode of enforcing male dominance through keeping mistresses, while also ensuring that the women who were involved kept quiet to avoid criticism. Although Guo herself began with intentions to mask her participation in sex work, adhering to the social stigma that the title carries, she eventually rejected the cultural confines that expected her to feel remorse for her actions.

In some circles, the internet celebrity Guo has been commended for shedding light on the frequency with which these transactional relationships take place in China, publicizing the existence of a significant power structure which many women are expected to adhere to, but must do so silently. It is through her eventual refusal to keep quiet in the way that mistresses traditionally do, and her consequential claim that these choices are not products of submission to men but intentional actions of self-empowerment, that makes Guo a controversial icon of female-identity in our time. While I do not argue that sex work is inherently feminist, the particular power dynamic that it enforces is specific to the context of each situation. As also applies to my previous analysis of the dating show *IYATO*, although commodification of the female body can indeed be a significant manifestation of patriarchal subjection, the autonomy employed by women in these situations, whether they be showcased on reality television or involved in sex work, must be considered in terms of their feminist merits.

Guo's self-governance can be further demonstrated through her televised statement that "there are many men who'd pay anything to sleep with me. There is never a shortage of men who want me to be their mistress. But I don't say yes to them all, because I have my standards, too" ("Heavy Media Takedown"). This quote demonstrates her knowledge of her self-involvement within a system that traditionally perpetuates women's socio-economic oppression, while



simultaneously signifying refusal to abandon her choice and autonomy. In turn, she expresses resistance to a negative stigma that, as applies to sex work generally, alienates *er nai* women and aims to bolster female social subordination. In this sense, Guo has, whether intentionally or not, opened the opportunity for dialogue about women's right to use their own bodies and crafting their own identities as a way of achieving their personal liberation.

Currently, her fame no longer lies only in her unabashed proclamation of doing sex work or her role within the Red Cross scandal that brought her initial notoriety. In September of 2015, Guo was charged with operating an illegal gambling ring out of her Beijing apartment and sentenced to five years in prison, as well as a fine of RMB 50,000. Although she admitted to participating in gambling at her trial, she denied operating the ring, stating "I shouldn't have participated in gambling, but I don't think my actions constituted [a] crime" (D. Zhang). Her male associate, Zhao Xiaolai, was sentenced to two years in prison and a fine of RMB 20,000; less than half of hers, despite their equal collaboration. In this sense, her reception by a mainstream, domestic audience, as they intended to overemphasize her deviance and associate her behavior with femininity, proves how current social structures work to trap women who attempt to utilize patriarchy for personal gain.

In some ways, Guo's story resembles several famous tales of the dynasty era. The *femme fatales* of Chinese culture known as *hóngyán huòshuǐ* (红颜祸水), which translates directly to young beautiful women as the source of calamity, are great female beauties held responsible for catastrophic destruction. From the imperial concubine Bao Si (褒姒) who was held accountable for the fatal conclusion of the Western Zhou Dynasty, to Xi Shi (西施) whose beauty is said to have bewitched the king of the ancient Yue state causing him to forget his imperative duties,

Chinese dynastic history holds a tradition of attributing instances of political failure to the 'danger' of female beauty (J. Sun). Continuing the practice, instead of acknowledging equal participation in illicit activities from men such as Wang Jun and Zhao Xiaolai, Chinese news outlets and their followers have chosen to scrutinize Guo, thus deeming her both evil and infamous. In this sense, her media scandal can be seen as a modern continuation of an ancient cultural mindset, symbolizing a patriarchal dominance rooted in historic conditions. Guo exemplifies how many women are still trapped within a narrow identity and punished when attempting to pursue independence and individuality.

Like the female contestants on *IYATO*, Guo's actions demonstrate feminist resistance; vocalizing her role as a mistress threatens the norm of male socio-economic superiority, a hierarchy whose pervasiveness is evidenced through the leftover women phenomenon explained in Chapter One. Reinterpreting her narrative can work to improve ideas of contemporary feminism in China through the acknowledgement that her actions were intended to achieve personal liberation in the midst of oppressive capitalistic and traditional systems. Similarly, my reevaluation of her story may be advantageous for intersectional feminists in the West who aim to construct awareness of other women's experiences and the distinctive systems that impact them. Considering Guo Meimei, along with the examples of popular culture media discussed in other chapters, can thus lead to greater understanding of the feminist expressions shared by Chinese and Western audiences and help to foster transnational solidarity.

In the following chapter, I turn Zhou Weihui's novel *Shanghai Baby* as a work of the post-Mao women's literary genre body writing in order to elaborate upon the way that female utilization of oppressive patriarchal systems in order to achieve personal liberation is an increasingly significant feminist process represented in Chinese popular media.

### 3. Relationships and Revelations in Romance Writing

In her article "Post-Mao Chinese Literary Women's Rhetoric Revisited: A Case for an Enlightened Feminist Rhetorical Theory," Hui Wu asserts that fiction written by post-Mao female authors responds to the social and political experiences faced by women over the past few decades. Historic gender roles, the Communist Party's ideological rejection of femininity in the twentieth century, and recent economic reforms leading to an insurgence of capitalist practices have conjoined in the contemporary era to create a uniquely pivotal moment in China which has demanded a reconstruction of female identity. Situating post-Mao women's writing within the process of rethinking gender issues as brought forth by China's continuing cultural shift, Hui states:

"The rhetoric of Post Mao female writers is about developing a literature of women and for women: a literature that empowers women, including women with or without choices, working women, impoverished women, married or unmarried women. This literature purports to educate men and emancipate women from traditional ideology, and to develop China into a society respectful of women's human rights and free of gender discrimination." (413)

Here, she argues that within literature, intersectionality and individuation of women's experiences, as exacerbated by these complex socio-historic circumstances, must be acknowledged and represented in order to create a more equitable national perspective on women's rights. In previous chapters, I analyzed the dating reality show *If You Are The One* and the controversial popular culture icon Guo Meimei in order to point out the impressive, but often discounted, feminist merits exhibited by women in the face of oppressive patriarchal systems. In this chapter, I examine how the rhetoric employed by post-Mao female writers, specifically by Zhou Weihui in her 1999 text *Shànghǎi Bǎobèi* (上海宝贝), or *Shanghai Baby*, can be utilized

to highlight relevant feminist attitudes regarding the pursuit of self-identity as a mode of liberation, which is similar to those proposed by western third-wave theorists.

The congruent nature of the challenges faced by women in both hemispheres can effectively be explored through the sub-genre *měinǚ zuòjiā* (美女作家), or beauty writing, and *shēntǐ xiězuò* (身体写作), or body writing. It is worth noting that these terms find their origins in "The Laugh of Medusa," an essay published in 1976 by French feminist Helene Cixous in which she controversially rejected the bourgeois nature of prevailing western feminist movements while, at the same time, embraced the existence of a feminine essence. Upon reaching the Chinese feminist sphere in the late-twentieth century, Cixous' rhetoric has been borrowed to define a genre characterized by its author's unabashed descriptions of sex, gender role subversion, and untraditional lifestyle choices made by young urban women.

Before proceeding with an analysis of *Shanghai Baby* by Zhou as an example of the merits of this genre, I acknowledge arguments from theorists who claim that texts like *Shanghai Baby* undermine women's political autonomy by overemphasizing sexuality and objectifying the female body (Wu 644). I quote from Megan Ferry, author of "Marketing Chinese Women in the 1990s," who questions "whether the public consumption of female sexuality, as witnessed in the sensation that these young [body] writers have caused, undermines women's literary agency and self-representation" or whether these authors simply "support the same essentialized understanding of female sexuality that the market, critics and publishers uphold" (655). Ferry's quote suggests that the sexual and feminine nature of beauty/body writing supports women's exclusion from intellectual realms and reinforces patriarchal hierarchy, which is aggravated by shifting political ideologies and the imposition of a capitalist culture of consumption in the Post-Mao era.

However, Wu cites other theorists who have praised *Shanghai Baby* and similar texts for their contributions to the feminist agenda. In "Who is a Feminist?" Zhong Xueping identifies authors within this genre as "young women writers [who] began to write differently from their older counterparts by taking the issue of womanhood and femininity further and more daringly into the domain of sexuality" (635), which rings true to the changes from traditional to third-wave feminism that I outlined in the introduction. Zhong reflects on how these texts work to defy traditional ideology, openly express female sexuality, and advocate human rights for those constrained by tradition while facing social and economic change (Wu 416). Synthesizing these two perspectives, I argue that postmodern Chinese beauty and body writers utilize the relevant systems of patriarchal dominance, such as traditional gender roles complicated by the contemporary cultural shift, and capitalistic commercialization of women, in order to illustrate a relevant and relatable image of feminism. The following analysis of *Shanghai Baby* demonstrates the process of women employing gender-subordinating structures in order to achieve personal liberation. I argue that this action must be recognized as a legitimate mode of feminist expression in order to empower definitions of feminism in China and the U.S., which may help to construct a more equitable transnational dialogue.

In *Shanghai Baby*, Zhou speaks of women experimenting with self-identity, acknowledging their choices in terms of sex and romance, and achieving personal fulfillment in doing so. Women in this story do not reject their sexualization or the rigid social norms that face them, but rather seek to appropriate and subvert the power dynamics that these systems impress. The first example of this process within the novel can be found through examining the romantic relationships of the novel's narrator, Nikki, a young writer and recent college graduate whose friends call her Coco after Coco Chanel. Her boyfriend, Tian Tian, is an intellectual artist, who is

also weak and helpless; all of which are qualities that make Coco fall in love with him and allow her to play a caregiver-role in his life (a dynamic emphasized by the absence of his estranged mother). Tian Tian is also sexually impotent, which makes the couple's relationship even more unconventional. In many ways, their attraction to one another is the epitome of true love; they profess to adore each other's minds, support each other's art, and seem to create a world sustained only by them in the confines of his luxury apartment. In other ways, it is clear that Coco is forced to sacrifice an element of her intimate satisfaction for her involvement with him.

When Coco begins an affair with a German businessman named Mark, her sexual identity is presented as an object to be carefully crafted. Mark, although married with a child, is a playboy-type whose wealth and success deems him a symbol of capitalist imposition within the text. While he isn't a permanent resident of the Shanghai like most other characters, Mark's extravagant job allows him to travel frequently to see Coco and continue a secret affair. Nonetheless, he remains an elusive figure in the novel, often contacting Coco from distant locations, usually out of physical grasp and unable to provide her the emotional support that Tian Tian does. Although both relationships are incomplete in different ways, with men who couldn't be more different, Coco's capacity for involvement with both of them provides her sense of fulfillment outside the traditional expectations for romance and sexuality. This aspect of the novel works to expand upon the notions of choice as examined in my analysis of the female contestants on the television show *IYATO*.

Zhou writes: "Mark's abilities seemed to have been a gift from the gods whereas Tian Tian was the opposite. They were like beings from two different universes. Their existences met in inverted images of themselves projected onto my body" (177). It is at the moment when Coco first sleeps with Mark and creates an intimacy so opposite of that which she shares with Tian that

her experiences with different kinds of men are first juxtaposed as a mode of personal self-exploration. Through Coco, Zhou expresses the ability to feel preferences for being dominated by or dominating men, taking agency in her own sexual exploration rather than serving as a submissive recipient of male sexuality. She creates a space for her female narrator to analyze the impacts that love and physical intimacy have upon her, allowing, in a way characteristic of the beauty/body writing genre, a woman to form and offer her own opinions about the use of her body. Although some critics accuse Zhou of reinforcing female objectification through her overt discussion of Coco's sexual interactions, I argue instead that her novel, like many elements of *IYATO*, promotes an accepting, public exploration of the interior female private, as it was disregarded in both the pre-modern and socialist era.

Other female characters in *Shanghai Baby* also display autonomy within their sexual and romantic relationships in order to experiment with identity and seek personal advancement. This process is exemplified through Zhu Sha, Coco's married older cousin, whom Zhou describes as being a ladylike, white-collar beauty, embodying female propriety and traditional temperaments that contrast with those held by the free spirited Coco (49). When Coco's parents deliver the surprising news of her cousins' divorce from her husband Ming Wei, Zhu Sha's specific female identity, which she had strictly adhered to and set a precedent for all her life, becomes a malleable and shifting object as she begins to explore her genuine desires. Zhu Sha explains to Coco that, despite their exterior suitability for one another, common interests and financially comfortable situation, their marriage simply lacked a sexual component. The divorce was solidified when Zhu Sha told Ming Wei that she did not want to conceive a child with him, and realized that their relationship was indeed loveless.

Her admittance of this fact to Coco represents an important theme within the text, one that unites the two cousins' despite their differences. While women's discussions of sex and, more significantly, their own overt sexual dissatisfaction, are constructed as taboo by patriarchal systems like the state-sponsored leftover women phenomenon intended to repress women's autonomy, Zhu Sha and Coco boldly proclaim their desires to confront the sources of their unhappiness, even if that means sacrificing an appearance of proper femininity. Their struggle represents the dilemma faced by many contemporary Chinese women who are frustrated by the double-burden of traditional constraints and modern demands in the post-Mao era while attempting to construct a female identity.

When she divorces Ming-Wei, Zhu Sha realizes that she may evaluate her romantic and sexual happiness, and consequentially control her own life according to the lessons of her self-discovery. Soon, she becomes involved with Coco's acquaintance Ah Dick, a foreigner who is eight years her junior and the ex-lover of another mutual friend called Madonna, a woman whose past job as a brothel manager disturbs Zhu Sha's moral sensibilities. Nonetheless, Zhu Sha takes a leap beyond the confines of her traditional, lady-like conduct when she becomes involved with Ah Dick.

"Why?" Perhaps she had grown tired of caution. She had no longer wanted to be seen as virtuous but soulless, a proper young lady. Nice girls can also feel the urge to step into a different world. She wasn't sure how dependable he was, but she didn't care anymore. Don't worry about the future...she wasn't looking for someone to lean on. She had a good job and a good-brain, typical of Shanghai's new generation of well-educated, self-sufficient women." (Zhou 128-129)

In this excerpt, Zhou challenges the narrow standards of marriage culture as contemporarily defined by the leftover women phenomenon discussed in Chapter One. The positive nature of Zhu Sha's divorce and her consequential status change into a desirable but intentionally single



woman provides an illustration of how females utilize and challenge patriarchal structures in order to seek personal liberation, whether or not they retain stereotypically feminine qualities along the way. Furthermore, this quote extricates another important theme in the novel; that of traditional women realizing and demonstrating their capacity for self-ownership. In this story, female identity is portrayed not as static or suppressed, but as a fluid process to be controlled by women themselves. Through Zhu Sha, Zhou describes a newly emerging mode of female empowerment inclusive to women who wish to focus less on traditional standards of relationship happiness and instead seek to satisfy themselves through authenticity. This quality, as she states, is typical of the rising generation of independent and educated women in urban Chinese space, which points to the importance of expanding definitions about feminism within China in order to bolster the term's accessibility and relevance.

Aligning with my interpretation of Guo Meimei's engagement with sex-work in Chapter Two, Zhou's image of empowered femininity advocates for the significance of intersectionality; a notion central to the principles of the western third-wave and useful in creating inclusive definitions of feminism among both Chinese and Western populations. In *Shanghai Baby*, Zhu Sha, "a nice girl who feels the urge to step into a different world," co-exists with other females characterized by contrasting decisions about their own feminine identity. Zhou's compelling focus on intersectionality can be illustrated through an analysis of the character Madonna, a slightly older member of Coco's hip Shanghai social circle who possesses a reputation for being self-sexualized and strong-willed. She also has a history as a sex-worker, although in much a different socio-historic context from the aforementioned Guo Meimei. Approximately half-way through the novel, Madonna drunkenly reveals her past to Coco, including her childhood in Shanghai wrought with abuse and poverty and eventual move to Guangzhou where she began to

work as a bar girl, utilizing her natural talent to build a successful business in the commercialization of sex.

Lying in bed and sharing secrets with Coco as if they were schoolgirls, she remembers the fleeting nature of that period in her life. "I did master the principles of how to domesticate a man... Men also have pressure points when they're vulnerable. Young women nowadays mature earlier and they're tougher and braver than we were but women still get the short end of the stick in many ways" (129). Madonna's account of how these early experiences provided her with an understanding of male psychology, a knowledge privy only to women in the sex industry, is coupled with profound thoughts about the disadvantageous nature of the contemporary gender hierarchy. The plurality and depth of Madonna's character portrayed in this excerpt supports my assertion first discussed in the case of Guo Meimei; that her decision to self-sexualize does not deem a woman a passive object of gendered subordination. Indeed, my analysis highlights the way in which Madonna and Guo both utilize patriarchal practices of mistress culture and prostitution to place themselves in positions of social and economic power.

After Madonna's confession, Coco claims that "when you get down to it, the social system still devalues the needs of women and doesn't support their effort's to recognize their self-worth. Girls who are street-smart are put down as crude and those who are gentler are treated like empty-headed flower vessels" (120). In return, Madonna voices her vehement agreement, indicating that, despite their different backgrounds and embodiment or rejection of traditional feminine qualities, the two women desire to reflect thoughtfully and constructively upon the gender hierarchies that constrain female upward mobility in their society. At the conclusion of their conversation, Coco considers the perspective from which Madonna has revealed her past, stating "it helped me discover the hidden place in her mind that housed her deeper and more

mature thoughts” (121). Through this realization, Coco embodies an outlook inherent to contemporary western third-wave feminism by acknowledging women's aptitudes for multi-dimensional, inclusive, and pluralistic identities. Through her vivid depictions of Coco, Zhu Sha, and Madonna, Zhou contributes to the necessary discussion of Chinese feminism as an intersectional process. Employing a casual and handy rhetoric, she argues that empowerment defies narrow limitations and may instead be expressed by women of all identities who engage with oppressive complexities that map the contemporary social climate in order to achieve their own versions of personal liberation.

Acknowledging assessments made by critics of Zhou and the beauty/body writing genre, it is necessary to state my agreement that, if taken alone, these texts present the problematic notion that a woman's identity can be defined only through her sexuality. Indeed, the novel was banned by the Chinese government soon after being published for, what they perceived as, explicit sexual and inappropriate content. However, I combat this singular interpretation by positioning my analysis of *Shanghai Baby* within the larger genre of post-Mao women's writing in which authors seek to respond to the complexities of the post-socialist, globalizing moment. For the purposes of this essay, I draw upon *Shanghai Baby*, not to prove that modes of sexual and romantic experimentation as exhibited by these characters are the only ways women can achieve liberation, but instead that these processes, which are present in contemporary women's lives but frequently dismissed as legitimate modes of feminist expression in China today. As demonstrated in this chapter, by depicting female characters who simultaneously challenge and employ the diverse structures intended to oppress them in order to pursue self-identity and personal advancement, Zhou's novel *Shanghai Baby* can be drawn upon to expand ideas about what constitutes feminism in China. My analysis may also assist U.S. audiences in strengthening

their dedication to intersectional ideology by illuminating the immense variations in women's experiences, and the empowering nature of their responses.

In the following chapter, I build upon my investigation of third-wave feminism within Chinese popular media through an analysis of several examples of contemporary film. The following cinematic examination works to support my thesis that the acknowledgment of Chinese women's engagement with patriarchal systems to achieve personal advancement as a legitimate mode of feminism is necessary in order to create a more harmonious dialogue between the two nations.

#### 4. Imposition and Individualism in Changing Cinemas

In this chapter, I discuss film as a medium of popular culture in order to conclude my study of how Chinese women display feminism by navigating the diverse, gender-oppressive systems that attempt to regulate their identities in the present day. I look to *Suzhou River* (2000), a fringe-movement film, and *Tiny Times* (2013), a recent box office blockbuster, to discuss how distinct cinematic portrayals illustrate the increasing prominence of intersectional feminist expression in contemporary Chinese populations. Through my close analysis of these movies, I aim to highlight how female agency in the construction of identity is a mode of feminism that should be recognized as such by domestic audiences, drawn upon to inform intersectionality in the U.S., and used to boost transnational solidarity necessary for a cooperative relationship between the nations.

I begin with *Suzhou River* (*Sūzhōu Hé*/ 苏州河), directed by sixth generation filmmaker Lou Ye. Unlike the sources discussed in previous chapters, this film, at least at the time of its release, was situated outside the framework of prevailing popular culture. When the film industry decentralized from the Chinese government in the early 1990's, sixth generation cinema was born as a response to the crisis over national and individual identity experienced by many as a result of the drastic political reconfiguration and economic reforms that occurred from 1970 onwards. Operating outside of the state-owned studio system, these films typically adopt an independent label and underground aesthetic while aiming to challenge the official authoritative rhetoric driving earlier generations of Chinese cinema. Drawing attention to an array of tumultuous social disparities, including economic, environmental and otherwise violent realities that compose Chinese landscapes tainted by globalization, sixth generation films frequently explore the relationship between female identity and capitalist imposition. I consider *Suzhou*

*River* as an exceptional demonstration of how outsider first filmmakers depicted this feminist process to enable its later inclusion by more mainstream media.

In *Suzhou River*, Lou utilizes a metafictional narrative and handheld, point-of-view camera work create a mood of disillusionment set against the background of urban Shanghai, where the vast river, once a vessel for trade, expansion and prosperity, has become polluted by modern industry. At the beginning, the narrator states "If you watch long enough the river will show you everything. It will show you people working, it will show you friendship, families, love, and loneliness as well" (Lou, *Suzhou River*). Throughout the film, the ever-present waterway provides a constant reminder of a failed socialist vision replaced by global capitalism, connecting the characters through their struggle for survival in the midst of a rapidly transitioning nation. Viewers assume the narrator's physical perspective as he recalls his fleeting romance with Mei Mei, played by Zhou Xun, a mysterious woman who lives in a houseboat on the river and performs as a mermaid in a nightclub, wherein patrons sip European beer and consume advertisements for American commodities. The plot shifts when he tells a story loosely referenced to him by Mei Mei, whose actual connection to the tale remains a crucial point of contention. In this second story, a motorcyclist named Mada is paid by an alcohol smuggler to look after his daughter Moudan, also played by Zhou Xun, while he visits prostitutes. A relationship blossoms as the two spend intimate together, and Mada gives her presents, including a mermaid doll. When Mada agrees to aid a local gang conglomerate in kidnapping her for ransom money, Moudan jumps into the Suzhou River, clutching the doll and claiming to Mada "I will come back as a mermaid, and I will find you again!" (Lou, *Suzhou River*).

Several years later, Mada is released from jail for crimes associated with Moudan's kidnapping and death. When he meets Mei Mei, Mada believes that she is Moudan due to her

appearance and job performing as a mermaid. Although the truth of Mei Mei's past identity mysteriously persists, she rejects the assertion that she was once Moudan but fails to reveal the truth of her life history. At the end of the film, Mada writes a letter to the videographer explaining that he finally found Moudan working in a convenience store in the Shanghai suburbs. Soon, Moudan and Mada's bodies are found dead in the Suzhou River not far from where Moudan originally jumped. Coincidentally, the nightclub where Mei Mei worked also gets shut down by the police, abolishing evidence of her job as a mermaid and all semblance of her concrete existence. Although the two women are eventually differentiated in the end, problems of identity and metaphorical implications encourage a more figurative interpretation of the film. Lou's use of a voyeuristic perspective, disorienting narrative, and omission of detail about the past creates a pervading sense of fantasy, leaving room for a symbolic connection between Moudan and Mei Mei which is further strengthened by their shared mermaid persona. In this sense, the two characters that Zhou Xun plays illustrate the legitimate capacity for feminine duality in a post-socialist culture of consumption. Mei Mei is jaded, damaged and highly sexualized, fetishized for a living as well as by the voyeuristic camera angle that captures her. She often mysteriously disappears, resides in her own home, and supports herself economically through a socially stigmatized job. In congruence with my discussion of the controversial web celebrity Guo Meimei, Lou's Mei Mei autonomously utilizes a system meant to exploit female sexuality - the sex industry - in order to gain personal independence, thus existing outside of the standards for passive female propriety.

As Moudan, Zhou Xun is cast as an innocent, joyful young girl who wears her hair in pigtails and embodies a school-girl aesthetic. Unlike the elusive Mei Mei who wanders without familial ties through a bleak city, leaving the audience to wonder how she came to lead the life that she

does, Moudan's world is highly controlled and supervised. Young and childish, emotional and communicative, she bluntly states her feelings and desires. Rather than seeming like a native to Shanghai's underground culture like the *femme-fatale* Mei Mei, Moudan is vulnerable to the danger that the city breeds. The embodiment of these contrasting images of womanhood by one actress within one landscape aligns with the notions of individuality and intersectionality that are central in western third-wave thought, much like the emphasis on female plurality put forth by author Zhou Weihui's employment of diverse characters in *Shanghai Baby*.

The symbolism of the mermaid, as shared and approached differently by Mei Mei and Moudan, also allows for an examination of how the two characters shed light upon the female search for self-identity within current socio-economic circumstances. Connected to the river in order to demonstrate the dramatic, multi-layered effects of globalization, Lou Ye states that, like other foreign products that compose many scenes, "the whole idea [of the mermaid] is a Western import" (Lu 121). Examining each woman's relationship with the symbol thus allows deeper insight into their engagement with the gendered power structures introduced by capitalism. The innocent Moudan clings to the transformative power of the mermaid and represents the hope for freedom and renewal following Western influence. As her alter ego, Mei Mei personifies the entrapment of globalization, which commercializes female sexuality for the demands of consumer culture. As discussed by Lu Hongwei in "Shanghai and Globalization through the Lens of Film Noir," the character vacillation held by a single actress, particularly regarding both characters differing relationships with the mermaid icon, symbolizes a "post-socialist cultural mutation," or the simultaneous optimism and disillusionment with China's transformation into a capitalist market. In this sense, Zhou Xun's demonstration of female



plurality helps to illuminate how women act with awareness of the oppressive systems that surround them, rather than as passive and stagnant objects.

In summation, Zhou Xun is both an item and agent of control while performing each character. As Moudan, she rejects the fetishized angle from which Mei Mei is captured: sitting pants-less in a bathroom playing with her mermaid doll and singing to herself, Moudan's actions and character it impossible to sexualize her despite the voyeuristic perspective from which she is filmed (Ye 2000). Though she is, in many ways, dependent upon him, Mada is unable to control Moudan while her actions entirely control his decisions and the course of his entire future. Furthermore, Moudan surrenders herself to the idealistic dream of the mermaid while also proclaiming ownership of the symbol in order to place herself in a position of power within her environment.

When the narrator first sees Mei Mei after being hired by her boss to film the performance several minutes into the movie, he films her through the curtain of her dressing room, intruding on her private space to further depict her as an object of eroticism available for the spectator's gaze (Lou 2000). Shots of her preparing for work are juxtaposed with her performance swimming in the tank, illustrating Lou Ye's fetishistic objectification of Mei Mei as a point of voyeuristic desire. In this sense, her identity is controlled by the videographer narrator and by Mada when he later imposes his romantic obsession upon her. Significantly, however, Mei Mei positions herself outside of the videographers control and claims that she is not the woman who Mada desires who to be, acting with her own agency by disregarding the men's attempts to regulate her identity. Finally although the mermaid symbolizes female oppression in certain contexts, Mei Mei uses the trope to gain personal independence, performing it or casting it aside as she pleases.

By examining the plurality of female characters as they autonomously engage with global capitalism, exemplified through the mermaid symbol, and declare self-ownership, I find that *Suzhou River* works to highlight individuality while illustrating the process of how contemporary women utilize systems of patriarchal oppression to express personal liberation. Despite the outsider position of this film due to its founding in the sixth generation, Lou's portrayal of vacillating, autonomous female identity aligns with my findings about the presence of third-wave intersectionality in the television show *If You Are the One*, Guo Meimei's story, and *Shanghai Baby*. Acknowledging the congruency between *Suzhou River*, as an example of media from the fringe movement, and the more mainstream images of women discussed in previous chapters further supports how these processes must be used to highlight and expand understandings of contemporary feminism in both China and the West. I turn to *Tiny Times* (*xiǎo shídài* / 小时代) as a final demonstration of how intersectional feminism is becoming increasingly present in Chinese society, reflected in contemporary media sources that work to establish and support social norms.

Written and directed by Guo Jingming and based off his best-selling 2008 novel of the same name, *Tiny Times* surpassed mainland China's box office records by earning over \$11.9 million on its opening day in 2013 (Lee). Three sequels have since been released, following the lives of four female university students from separate backgrounds as they pursue different but equally ambitious goals. The nature of the plot is similar to that of *Shanghai Baby*, in which young women navigate triumphs and tribulations in their careers, relationships and friendships; dynamics molded by a globalizing urban background. Like the responses to *Shanghai Baby*, Guo Meimei's story, and *IYATO* posed by general audiences, state-authorities and scholars alike, *Tiny Times* has received criticism for encouraging an unhealthy celebration of materialism

amongst millennial viewers. Indeed, the presence of luxury brands, foreign products, and other overt signs of an imported culture of consumption most notably characterize the film's glitzy aesthetic, as critics have condemned the "twisted value of worshipping money" that it asserts (Nan).

Nonetheless, I continue to pose the argument I introduced in Chapter One, wherein I discussed how state-sponsored norms, like the leftover women campaign, encourage women to seek success in marriage rather than independently, thus commercializing their social role and limiting their individual potential for upward mobility. Again, I argue that these standards intersect with the state-based economic reforms that enabled capitalist expansion to create narrow perception of female identity that inhibits and shames women who attempt to make autonomous decisions within their transitioning society. For this reason, I omit the frequent practice of scrutinizing women who participate in capitalist culture from my analysis of *Tiny Times*. Instead I borrow from feminist scholars Li Xiaojiang and Dai Jinhua, who state that "by participating in the new consumer economy, women can recover a sense of their feminine selves [and] fight for their recognition as a group distinct from men" (Tuft 3). Recognizing the exclusion of women from the private sphere during the pre-modern era, and the rejection of femininity under socialism, female participation in the new consumer economy, as Li and Dai explicate, must be regarded, in part, as their assertion for autonomy and independence in the contemporary era.

Labeled as feminist by film critic Teng Jimeng on the Chinese talk show *Crossover*, *Tiny Times* importantly emphasizes individuation in its exploration of women's identities. The first film opens with Lin Xiao, the protagonist, introducing her three friends, Nan Xiang, an artist, Gu Li, a business-woman and Tang Wanru, an athlete, who are characterized by their contrasting

demeanors and varying economic statuses. From the beginning, *Tiny Times* is driven by the female capacity for choice within a chaotic and demanding social hierarchy. As with female contestants on *IYATO*, the four girls in the film profess different definitions of love and success, but exhibit empowerment and conviction within their own spheres. The plot is structured by their respective pursuits of personal goals, as they remain supportive and equalized in a sisterhood of female camaraderie. While embodying distinct, comprehensive characters, the four girls consistently challenge stereotypes of desirable femininity. For example, at an interview for a position with a high-end magazine, the protagonist, clad in sneakers and a baggy sweater, finds herself intimidated by the fashionable model types also competing for the job (Guo 2013). Despite her outlier appearance and clumsy mannerisms, she gets chosen for the position above the other candidates who display a more ideal feminine aesthetic. Moments like this are common throughout the film, as the girls' idiosyncrasies time and time again carry them through the struggles they face.

Most significantly, Guo includes prevalent themes of self-worth and personal reflection in *Tiny Times*, defying assumptions about the naïve or one-dimensional nature of the women whom he depicts. When Gu Li is being bullied by her boyfriend's wealthy mother, she challenges notions about the connection between personal value and social status. "Don't see Gu Yuan anymore," his mother says to Li as the three stand on the campus of their university. "Our family is not open to the lowly poor like you. You'd better take a good look at your own worth before you go making friends or doing things for people," to which Li immediately replies, "then you should take a look at your own worth first" (Guo 2013). Questioning the materialistic values of their society, which the film certainly mirrors and received criticism for doing so, Li protests the common notion that the acquisition of wealth defines a person's dignity. Although a

businesswoman herself who is undoubtedly pursuing financial gain, Li separates this process from her self-image, implicitly proclaiming that her identity is vaster and more pluralistic than her engagement with China's socio-economic hierarchy.

In a moment of self-reflection towards the end of the film, Lin Xiao asks herself, "Do I like myself like this?" (Guo 2013). Like the author of *Shanghai Baby*, Guo presents women who choose, explore, manipulate, and thoughtfully alter their identities in order to gain personal satisfaction. Lin Xiao and her friends, as with the characters in Zhou's novel, realize their capacity for choice, declaring that empowerment is not specific to a singular image of womanhood but can instead be found in the liberating process of experimentation. As the story progresses through the following three films, the women in *Tiny Times* continuously transform into people unexpectedly and amazingly different from whom they once were. This theme is reinforced by the director in an interview about his inspiration behind the production:

"The biggest focal point is the pursuit of individuality. Our parents seek similarities in lifestyles, the same type of pants, same haircut, same food in the same cafeteria. But today, the lifestyles of the youth are of all types: you might like tattoos, and I like nose rings; you like rock, I like classical music. People are different, everyone's a unique individual." ("Guo Jingming")

In this sense, *Tiny Times* can be considered a representation of the changing attitudes held by millennials in China. Like the rising importance of intersectionality among young Americans who feel that their concerns are not shared by members of previous generations, Guo explicates the way in which his film advocates for notions of individuality that are relevant to youth culture. Inherent in his depiction of young Chinese woman are the concerns of multidimensionality, choice, and acceptance within female identity; values that are shared by many young feminists in the west.

An analysis of these two films serves to further prove my assertion that, by highlighting third-wave notions for intersectionality and choice, we may witness how the process of Chinese women employing the various structures of patriarchal dominance to achieve personal advancement serves as a mode of genuine feminist expression. In the sixth generation film *Suzhou River*, two women played by the same actress express pluralistic identities and conduct various methods of engaging with capitalist imposition to seek empowerment. I position this discussion in the context of counter-cultural media to frame how these feminist processes have since been included in more mainstream illustrations of women. As the conditions of twenty-first century China continue to demand a reconstruction of female identity in correspondence with the nation's transitioning cultural market, television shows such as *IYATO*, stories like that of Guo Meimei, and works of fiction like *Shanghai Baby* provide admirable expressions of autonomy by women in the face of patriarchal structures that intend to suppress their sovereignty. As my final source analysis, *Tiny Times* indicates how the female quest for self-identity is increasingly present in representations of contemporary womanhood produced since the turn of the millennium.

Nonetheless, the public reception of these items and their consequential placements in the popular culture framework suggests that their feminist merits have often been disregarded by audiences and theorists in both China and the United States. In the following conclusion, I return to my explanation of how considering the presence of third-wave ideology as it exists in the Chinese context is useful for improving women's social position in China, for strengthening intersectional ideologies among westerners, as well as for promoting a more effective transnational feminist dialogue.

## Conclusion

In March 2015, five young female activists from China's Women's Rights Action Group were jailed by police in three major Chinese cities for thirty-seven days, detained on charges of picking quarrels and provoking trouble after staging non-violent protests to raise awareness about the prevalence of issues like sexual harassment, domestic violence, and the insufficient amount women's public bathrooms. In an article covering their arrests, journalist Yuan Ren interviewed Zhang, a Beijing college student and fellow feminist advocate of the five activists. Zhang, who used the popular communication platform Wechat to post articles confirming the women's detention, told Ren, "I'm wary about posting more content [on women's rights] online, because people don't want to hear it. Many women around me, and especially men, are irritated by the topic." She adds, "women's rights have a negative reputation in Chinese society; if I talk about it or promote it too much, other people really will think there's something wrong with me or that I'm even sick." According to Ren, Zhang cited the phrase 'women's rights bitch' as a derogatory term used to describe women interested in the subject. She stated that it is through this lens that feminists in China are often viewed.

As explicated in the introduction, the modern Chinese women's movement worked in symbiosis with changing political configurations and was positioned as a tenant of state goals throughout the socialist policies implemented in the twentieth century. However, the reception of the 2015 arrests and stigma surrounding the feminist label, as confirmed in the article above as well as countless others, puts forth a different attitude held by general audiences in the contemporary moment; one that rejects the qualities traditionally associated with feminism and defines feminist identity in narrow, even unfavorable, terms. While these situations suggest that women's movement in the present day has become compartmentalized, shelved and denounced

by many mainstream populations, the research I have conducted in this essay works to demonstrate the significant ways in which feminist expression is *increasingly evident in popular culture, though often unrecognized as such*. Drawing upon notions of third-wave intersectionality, I examined how images of women in popular media navigate the various patriarchal systems present in the contemporary era in order to achieve empowerment and seek individuality, thus attesting to the pursuit of self-identity as a legitimate mode of female liberation within their socio-historical context, which must be utilized in order to expand notions of feminism in China, improve discourse in the United States – and foster a mutually-beneficial transnational dialogue.

By reframing notions of feminist expression with an emphasis placed upon intersectionality and third-wave ideology expounded upon in the introduction, my analysis of Chinese popular media sheds light upon the way that feminist action exists in conventional depictions of women. While the sources I have investigated in each of the preceding chapters often differ in their medium, scope, and reception by both international and domestic audiences, my research nonetheless illuminates consistent patterns in the way that women in popular culture engage with the social, historical, and political conditions that dictate many aspects of current Chinese society. Although their immediate circumstances differ, each situation tells a story in which the construction of identity serves as both the ultimate instrument of gendered subjugation and vehicle for emancipation for women. In Chapter One, an analysis of the reality dating show *If You Are The One* reveals the social pressure placed upon women to abandon their personal aspirations for work and education in favor becoming wives and mothers. By essentializing and objectifying contestants, the program aims to reproduce a strict regulation of women's identities, positioning them as accessories and diminishing their capacity for upward mobility as a



population. Nonetheless, my interpretation of the many episodes I have viewed demonstrates the ways in which female contestants display autonomy in presenting themselves and exhibit multidimensionality in their characters, challenging the patriarchal objectives that structure the environment of the program. In Chapter Two, my research into the controversial story of the sex-worker Guo Meimei also enforces the significance of identity in the question of women's oppression or liberation. The practice of paying for sex, or keeping a mistress, traditionally works to promote gender disparity, stigmatizing and forcing silence upon females while often depicting the men on the other side of the transaction as high-status and powerful. By publicizing her job and declaring agency in her work, Guo challenged the patriarchal objectives of sex work that attempt to position and label women as submissive and powerless. Her actions, reviewed online by millions, attempted to break-down stereotypical views of subservient, fixed feminine identity.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the novel *Shanghai Baby* which takes place in a setting characterized by traditional standards for women's appropriate engagement with relationships and marriage. Author Zhou Weihui demonstrates how adhering to standards for the proper utility of their bodies' leaves her characters feeling trapped and in-genuine. Throughout the text, women experiment with their sexuality and romantic aspirations, achieving a sense of personal fulfillment through self-governance. My close-reading of the text finds that by acting with agency over their bodies, a diverse array of characters in *Shanghai Baby* resist rigid, patriarchal expectations for their identity. The final chapter draws upon two films, *Suzhou River* and *Tiny Times*, to further acknowledge the demands for women's engagement within a rapidly transitioning economy. The first film, as an example of countercultural media at the time of its emergence, explores the female capacity for control and multidimensionality in responding to the

high-stakes of her fluctuating surroundings. The second film, a recent blockbuster which prevailed among young audiences, represents the importance of the quest for individuality in relevant depictions of womanhood. Taken together, my cinematic analyses convey the increasing presence of the process in which women exhibit powerful self-determination to liberate themselves from forms of gendered oppression.

Evident themes in my research are how issues of female identity are central to operations of Chinese women's oppression, as well as the opportunities for her liberation. On the one hand, synthesizing these analyses works to show how pervasive, rigid, and often contradictory expectations are imposed upon contemporary females. Indirectly or explicitly, these sources portray the pressure to define oneself exclusively as a wife and mother, while keeping up with opportunities for education and work in order to be viewed as modern. These cases present social norms that command women to act with submission and passivity over their bodies, but also embrace the overt sexualization that is often projected upon them. My research, in other words, exposes consistent patterns of females being forced to confront the insurmountable task of appropriately managing values of tradition, socialism, and capitalism in order to perform a socially acceptable exhibition of womanhood.

However, equally apparent in my research are vast images of women autonomously crafting their own identities despite the social, historical and political demands that aim to govern their decisions. In each source, females achieve liberation by controlling their bodies, exhibiting multidimensionality in their personalities, and choosing to pursue the pathways that offer them fulfillment despite the social risks involved. From the controversial, deviant Guo Meimei to the idolized characters in *Tiny Times*, these women break molds, experiment, vacillate, and assert individuality. Because, as I have argued, the suppression and regulation of

female identity at the hands of patriarchal structures serves as a mode of gendered oppression, it is both logical and consistent that a woman's sovereignty in forming her own identity signifies a challenge towards patriarchal dominance, as well as a form of emancipation from the restrictions of its reach. Drawing upon the inclusive ideologies of intersectional and third-wave theory, as I have done in this essay, assists in establishing how liberation in female identity is a necessary mode of renouncing patriarchal structures that work to oppress women's capacity for upward mobility.

Utilizing third-wave intersectionality to recognize the feminist merits that are increasingly common, but often disregarded, in popular representation of women can allow the dominant discourse surrounding them to be reframed. Based on the implications of my research, I argue that the narratives surrounding these widespread media depictions should be reconfigured in order to accentuate how a new form of feminist expression, which differs from features of the traditional movement and is instead specific to the contemporary social climate, is moving to the center for younger generations of Chinese women. By recognizing women's versatility in their experiences and self-agency in their identities, narrow perceptions of feminism currently prevailing among many audiences can be expanded in order to broaden the definition of who a feminist is and what she or he does.

Reframing these narratives in order to point out its evolving form and rising normalization can help to alleviate the stigma surrounding the feminist label. In turn, feminist movements with more traditional objectives, like those expressed by the five women before their arrest in 2015 discussed at the opening of this chapter, should no longer be considered taboo and instead be received in a more positive manner by the state and the general populous. Finally, by acknowledging the way in which women's construction of self-identity, as increasingly present in

popular media, is a form of liberation that responds to the array of gendered burdens which conjoin in the contemporary context, sources of implicit and explicit subjugation of women can be further identified and regarded as unjust by wide-spread audiences. Intersectionality, which aims to recognize how diverse systems of oppression define women's contrasting experiences, can help to elucidate concealed and definitive foundations for gender disparity in contemporary China.

Reevaluating Chinese feminism also holds positive implications for the women's movement in the United States. Notions of intersectionality currently dominating the discourse of new generations of western feminists can be sharpened by comprehending how Chinese women display shared objectives of social empowerment within the distinctions of their own society. As stated in "Feminist Sinologies: an Introduction," by scholars Nan Z. Da and Wang Zheng, "One of the things that transnational studies has enabled us to see is that the West is no longer the sole author of Sinologist, or, indeed, of feminisms" (549). By acknowledging the feminist merits shown by young Chinese women who respond to their specific historical, political and social conditions, western feminists can reconfigure their own ideologies to become inclusive of and receptive to input from women of identities, countries, and beliefs that differ from their own. Indeed, recognizing how women's experiences diverge as a result of social structures that afflict only certain populations has served as the central task of intersectional feminism since the term was first employed by professor Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 for purposes of combating the detrimental exclusivity plaguing women's movements during the twentieth century. Identifying the struggles and honoring the triumphs of Chinese women as they deviate from our own thus widens the reach and empowers both the ideologies and practices of intersectionality.

As evidenced in the circumstances of and comments made by Hilary Clinton as well other speakers at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, the development of an empathic and informed discussion about feminism would contribute to improvement of an efficient dialogue on human rights between both the nations. Also evidenced by the media coverage and reception of the conference is how the lack of transparency afforded to Chinese and American citizens about one another's lives, especially within the realm of feminism, exacerbates the sense of division between our communities. By examining the conditions of womanhood in China through an analysis of popular media, this essay hopes to bridge transnational perspectives in favor of creating a more comprehensive relationship that will foster a sense of unified co-existence between Chinese and American populations. In an age that calls for growing political, economic, and social engagement between the two nations, an understanding of each other's cultures is key to the stability and harmony of our shared tomorrow. This journey begins with feminism.

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