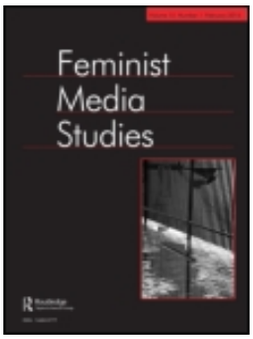

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ARE YOU THE ONE? CHINA'S TV DATING SHOWS AND THE *SHENG NÜ*'S PREDICAMENT

Wei Luo and **Zhen Sun**

This study looks into TV dating shows in post-millennial China. These widespread shows, exemplified by Fei Cheng Wu Rao *(translated, by both local and global media, as* If You Are the One*), open up an ongoing social forum, which, to varying extents, enables self-articulations and renegotiations of class and gender identities and gives voice to selected female participants of the media. Through the lens of critical discourse analysis, the paper focuses on analyzing the stage arrangements and hidden rules of* Fei Cheng Wu Rao*, female participants' self-introductions, both male and female participants' depictions of their "ideal" spouse, and the remarks of the host and the two expert commentators. The study argues that these dating shows play upon the predicament of Chinese single women, especially those labeled as* "sheng nü" *("leftover women"), who strive for upward social mobility, yet are constrained within the new gender mandate of a market economy. Stigmatizing single womanhood, the dating shows also grant a glimpse of the varied ways the media and women participants play a complicit role in reducing women's potential to resist new forms of male privilege in post-socialist China.*

KEYWORDS TV dating shows; Chinese *sheng nü* (leftover women); single womanhood; post-socialist femininity; post-socialist masculinity; critical discourse analysis

Introduction

> By switching their lights on or off, twenty-four single, attractive ladies decide the fate of a bachelor .... Every Saturday and Sunday night on Jiangsu Satellite Television, a jury of twenty-four single women question one guy, watch his introductory video and press light buttons to determine whether he should remain on the show. In turn, the guy can choose his favorite girl and if he survives the "trial," he will have a chance to pick a girl for a date. (Qi Lin 2010)

The vignette above depicts more than the rules of a dating game, as the contrasting interactions between the single women and the bachelor constitute a tension-ridden cultural drama, in which private anxieties about love and marriage are showcased in front of millions of TV viewers. From the initial importation of *Survivor* to the debut of the locally produced *Super Girl*, Chinese reality TV finds its pinnacle in dating shows, which are vying for a considerable share of the ever-burgeoning media marketplace. *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* (translated, by both local and global media, as *If You Are the One*), as sketched in the

journalistic report above, stands out among its peers, garnering 1,800 million RMB in advertising revenue in 2011 (Di Cui 2012). Produced by Jiangsu satellite TV, the show copies the format of the British show *Take Me Out*, but transforms the foreign content into one imbued with the sense and sensibility of what appears to be China's marriage market. Such a dating show does not merely portray courtship and love but, as Lin (2010) points out, participants, hosts, commentators, and guests make provocative remarks and even initiate controversial arguments about social issues. Whereas media scholars are quick to note the limitations of a "reality" TV genre in its mediated representations (Justin DeRose, Elfriede Fürsich, and Ekaterina V. Haskins 2003; Richard Kilborn 1994; Sujata Moorti and Karen Ross 2004; Camilla A. Sears and Rebecca Godderis 2011), we posit that the dating shows circulated in China conjure up a microcosm of a social reality, which has real impacts on single women who are pressed to find their Mr Right so to speak.

The give-and-take and choose-and-pick on the TV screen tell only half of the story. The ostensible dominance of the women participants does not easily translate into an empowered female subject position. The women's eagerness to find their heterosexual partners is a telltale sign of the palpable tension faced by single women in post-socialist China. As Arianne Gaetano (2009) observes, China's thriving economy ironically witnesses an "unmarried crisis," from which an industry emerges, consisting of "expert advice columns and self-help books, television talk shows, professional marriage counselors, divorce lawyers, and a plethora of creative match-making services" (7). In this regard, the TV dating shows grant a glimpse of not only what the matchmaking media signify, but also how Chinese single women, as participants of the media, navigate the tribulations of seeking the supposedly "perfect date" on a public stage.

In this article, we take a close look at *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*, which exemplifies the widespread reality dating shows in post-millennial China. Our study considers the extent to which such dating shows allow for the renegotiation of class and gender identities within China's neoliberal consumerist discourse. It sheds light on the implications of the representation of single womanhood within an influential TV genre and further asks this important question: in what ways do single women themselves respond to the evolving gender ideologies and play out their post-socialist femininity in a competitive market economy? More broadly, this study queries what role the media play in reconfiguring gender mandate and social hierarchy in the throes of China's neoliberal restructuring and rapid social transformation. Embedded in our media analysis is Antonio Gramsci's influential critique on cultural ideology and hegemony (see, David Forgacs 2000). In our Chinese case, the Gramscian critique helps to shed light on both the blatant and subtle means by which the post-socialist state employs cultural institutions—the commercial media, in particular—to maintain socio-political power in the transition to a capitalist market economy.

Gender, Class, and the Norm of Marrying Up/Down in Post-Socialist China

Much feminist attention has been paid to the "third world woman" against the sweeping tide of globalizing capitalism. Theoretically, this analysis of young, educated, urban Chinese female singletons draws from the overarching post-colonial framework put forth by Chandra Mohanty (1988), which critiques the problematic analytical presupposition of the "third world woman" as a stable, homogenous heuristic device within Western feminist scholarship. Specifically, in alignment with Mohanty's (1988) significant critique,

our study refrains from the following: (1) a theoretical blending of third world women as a coherent, identical group without class, ethnic, or racial distinctions; (2) an uncritical offering of proofs of third world women's oppression as universality; and (3) a problematic dichotomy between the supposedly powerless, victimized "average third world women" and their educated, modern Western counterparts. Instead of assuming an ahistorical unity of Chinese women based on a generalized, monolithic notion of their subordination, we carefully consider the definition of the female subjects according to their interwoven gender, and social class identities. Importantly, our study argues for the importance of contextualizing Chinese women's participation in dating shows within both the sensibility of global post-feminism and the specificity of local gender politics.

The team of twenty-four young, glamorously dressed-up and made-up female participants in *FCWR* are watched by numerous reviewers at home and abroad to "wield their 'power' of questioning, challenging, and switching stage lights on and off to determine the success and failure of each individual male player" (Luo 2012, 89). Their "conspicuous commonalities of youth, beauty, and career success" present an interesting contrast to their eagerness to "find a date, boyfriend, or even husband" under the public gaze (Luo 2012, 89). Seemingly, this particular group of Chinese women bear remarkable similarities to their counterparts depicted in the globalizing chick lit (see Eva Chen 2012; Rosalind Gill and Jane Arthurs 2006; Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdiecherhoff 2006; Angela McRobbie 2004). British Bridget Jones, for instance, exemplifies "a new female subjectivity of agency, of pleasure and of the ability of active choice," made possible by neoliberalism itself with the hallmark policies of "privatization, deregulation, globalization of market and capital, and scaling back of social welfare and state power" (Chen 2012, 220 and 216). McRobbie (2004) sheds light on the dilemma of Bridget who "is a free agent, single and childless and able to enjoy herself in pubs, bars and restaurants" but who, however, fears both "not catching a man" within the time frame of her biological clock and being "isolated, marginalized from the world of happy couples" (11–12). Bridget becomes a signifier of the self-monitoring subject, and the irony of post-feminist sensibility (especially the overemphasis on choice and agency, and the lack of collective consciousness and social advancement), as the "free" woman still faces the predicament of new gender norms and inequality. As McRobbie (2004) further explains, "the planning of a life of one's own with recourse to an array of self-help manuals, popular fictions, and advice columns is in itself a new coercive structure than a solution to the new dilemmas thrown up by de-traditionalization [. . .]" (11).

Following the feminist critique of a pervasive post-feminist climate, we also argue that unmarried women in post-socialist China, in comparison to the fictional yet symbolic Bridget Jones, face more pernicious intertwined gender and class inequalities. The 1980s ushered in watershed economic reform, which initiated the spread of Euro-American-led neoliberalism in mainland China. With a market economy replacing the decades of a centrally planned socialist economy, the transition to a post-socialist China, however, does not index the disintegration of communist power. The Chinese post-socialist state has navigated through the repercussions of the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries via exerting constant control over every developmental phase of the economic reform, and the time and space for the flow of transnational capital and resources in a presumably free marketplace (Luo 2012). The neoliberal values of marketization, privatization, and consumerism intermingle with the lingering socialist ideals of collectivity and the common goal of prosperity. Such a complex

fusion results in a post-socialism that brings about special challenges to Chinese women, faced with not only sweeping social and economic transformations, but also the reconstruction of their post-socialist femininity.

An "allegory of postsocialism," in Lisa Rofel's (1999) term, points to the essentialized notion of gender, which celebrates "innate femininity, marriage, and motherhood" (217). The sexualized and commodified body of the young, urban Chinese woman in a new discourse of consumerism signifies the emergence of a new gender mandate wherein post-socialist femininity represents China's new economic power and modernity, as well as signals the remapping of class distinctions, as Amy Hanser (2005) argues. A keen witness of China's political and social changes, Harriet Evans (2002) asserts that:

> although the emphasis in discourses about women's natural attributes shifted to include subject positions not formerly available to women—they remained, and continue to remain, attached to a notion of motherhood as a desirable state for all women ... motherhood emerges as an inalienable aspect of wifehood. (348)

Such observations reify the pitfall of the post-socialist gender mandate in that young, urban single women, who are "called upon to represent a new, capitalist modernity" (Hanser 2005, 582), find themselves pinned down by the normative gender roles and the inevitable life-long duties of the wife and mother. We further posit that the local's new gender politics exert discursive power via cultivating male privilege, and spreading a new spouse-matching norm, which plagues contemporary single womanhood, and constrains the social and cultural dimensions of their subjectivity.

The imagery of vigorous, androgynous Chinese women who were expected to "hold up half of the sky" in the Mao era bespoke the erosion of male power in the not so distant revolutionary past when women were interpellated to the social production force on a par with their male counterparts. As history unfolds, post-socialist consumerism has evoked a recovery of masculine potency (Susan Brownell and Jeffery Wasserstrom 2002). Tiantian Zheng (2012) is quick to note that unequal distributions of social wealth, as a result of neoliberal restructuring, facilitate the social construction of "an entrepreneurial masculinity that entails power, wealth, sexual prowess, and rebellion" (45). As Brownell and Wasserstrom (2002) also observe, affluent men can now afford to "flex their muscles in world politics, as well as at home by using newfound wealth to take mistresses, to allow their wives to stay at home, or to buy male tonics in the booming industry of male potency supplements" (442). In fact, not only upper-middle class men, but also their lower class counterparts, says Jie Yang (2013), attempt to fortify their masculinity while striving to climb up the socio-economic ladder. Yang (2013) further exposes lower-class men's verbal aggression towards rural migrant women workers as a means to "establish new footings to participate in the alienating privatization and to redress their perceived 'eroded' masculinity" (67).

All these discerning cultural observations demonstrate that in men's attempts to regain their masculine prowess, Chinese women from all walks of life, to a varying extent, are implicated in the remapping of gender relations and subjected to new forms of gender asymmetries (Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002; Yang 2013; Zheng 2012). In particular, the essentializing discourse of gender cultivates male privilege.

Such male privilege is most blatantly manifested in a new spouse-matching norm spread via China's media texts:

> A-quality guys will find B-quality women; B-quality guys will find C-quality women; C-quality men will find D-quality women. (Quoted in Mary Kay Magistad 2013)

"The marriage of equals," which used to be the normative recipe for conjugal happiness in the socialist era, has given way to the "marrying down" norm for men and the simultaneous "marrying up" norm for women. "Marrying down" no doubt enables men to take an upper-hand in control over their wives and boosts men's sense of superiority in a marital relationship. This norm further communicates class distinctions, as the perceived "D-quality women," lacking a higher education background, a refined upbringing, and socio-economic power, lie at the bottom of the social totem pole. By contrast, the educated, financially well-off "A-quality women" fall into the category of *sheng nü*, who, despite their social mobility, ironically become misfits through conflicts between their high social status and the normative gender roles, and experience difficulty finding eligible bachelors. A brief look into China's *sheng nü* phenomenon not only grants a glimpse into the predicament of this particular group of women, but also sheds light on the matchmaking role the media adopt at the neoliberal consumer market.

The *Sheng Nü*'s Predicament and Reality Dating Shows

Appearing, at a surface level, to be an interesting social spectacle, matchmaking events in post-millennial China signify insidious male privilege. Whereas "*xiangqin*" ("blind date") becomes a catchphrase, government sponsored matchmaking events are mostly arranged by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), the official women's rights organization, with the goal of helping perceived "highly educated, high-quality" women to speedily find marital happiness so to speak (Leta H. Fincher 2012). Such matchmaking activities in post-Mao China serve political and ideological ends. Given China's overall population rise, there was a drop (by approximately 3.5 million) in the number of couples who officially registered for their first marriages between 1992 and 2005 (Gaetano 2009). However, the main challenge of matchmaking lies with a surfeit of single males—a serious consequence of selective abortions under the one-child policy in the past two decades, according to a BBC journalist report (Magistad 2013). The report quotes statistics from the National Bureau, which estimates that China now has twenty million more men under thirty than women under thirty (Magistad 2013).

Ironically, despite the shortage of potential brides, it is women who face the disadvantage of a marriage market because women "have a shorter window of time" for finding a spouse in comparison to men (Gaetano 2009, 11). As Gaetano (2009) explicates, the "ideal" age of marriage for women "ranges between 25–28 years old, peaks at age 30, and falls off dramatically thereafter," whereas men are free from the pressure of a depleting reproductive capacity before reaching forty (11). This gender asymmetry in the marriage market further gives rise to the demeaning verbiage of *sheng nü*, and these women's plight. The ACWF literally defined *sheng nü* as unmarried women over the age of twenty-seven, and the term itself was added to the official lexicon by China's Ministry of Education in 2007 (Fincher 2012). Serving as an important mouthpiece of the Communist Party, the ACWF plays an especially problematic role in coining the *sheng nü* label (meaning "leftover women"), which blatantly contradicts its alleged long-term mission to propagate gender equality. Metaphorically, such a label with the pejorative connotation of being "leftover" suggests a self-blamed woman who misses her opportunities to marry herself off by her

mid-twenties. In the vernacular discourse, a *sheng nü* is suspected of not being attractive enough or being too picky on the one hand, and on the other hand, her anxiety for marriage is no longer personal while the whole of society seems concerned about the ticking of her biological clock.

The gender imbalance, the politics of matchmaking, and the *sheng nü*'s predicament give impetus to the consumption of reality dating shows that thrive in China's post-millennial mediascape. Among the top ten television shows of 2012 are *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* (*If You Are The One)* by Jiangsu TV, *Bai Li Tiao Yi (One Out of 100)* by Shanghai Broadcast Network, *Ai Qing Lian Lian Kan (Fall in Love)* by Zhejiang TV, and *Wo Men Yue Hui Ba (Let's Date)* by Hunan TV, all of which fall into the high-profile reality dating genre aired at prime-time on weekends through provincial satellite TV stations (chinawhisper.com 2012). China's dating shows resemble those classified as the "perfect match" games in the West, "in which a male or female must make a series of decisions in order to screen candidates and pick one out of a few dozen" (Amir Hetsroni and Linda-Renee Bloch 1999, 320). These shows share the similar rule of rewarding the male winners with a prize of an excursion, say, a cruise to the Aegean Sea, sponsored by advertisers in the Chinese case. However, the Chinese dating shows are more than copycats of those popularized in the West (*Singled Out* from the United States, and *Take Me Out* from the United Kingdom, for example). Interestingly, the Chinese TV producers rhetorically redefine the dating shows as "large-scale programs to provide services" (see FCWR's opening announcement) instead of "game shows" as they are called in the West, and proclaim that the Chinese shows aim at helping participants to launch a serious relationship. Apparently, this TV genre in China is the product of local cultural industries, responsive to acute social issues faced by urban Chinese from their twenties to their forties in particular, ranging from anxiety about marriage and love, the pursuit of wealth and cultural capital, to the repercussions of the one-child policy (Edward Wong 2011). The most outstanding of all, *FCWR* has maintained high ratings, with more than fifty million viewers tuning in, and has therefore profited from tremendous advertising revenue since its debut in 2010 (Wong 2011).

The widespread popularity of *FCWR* no doubt signals the notable market success of Jiangsu TV station. Indeed, China's neoliberal market reform entails the institutional restructuring of the media industry nationwide, which has rendered state-owned, private, and joint-venture enterprises responsible for their own financial management as well as for their own competition and survival in the consumer market. However, as the power of the post-socialist governance becomes discursive in the Foucauldian sense, the media nevertheless remain a most powerful institutional apparatus of representation that reinforces dominant ideologies (Jie Yang 2007). As a case in point, the dating shows are subjected to the central state's control through the censorship of the SARFT (the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television) (Wong 2011). In this regard, *FCWR* and its counterparts, albeit having moments of creativity and improvisation, have been mediated by both the production crew and the governmental bureau and thus become a convenient conveyance of normative social and gendered scripts.

Fei Cheng Wu Rao through the Lens of Critical Discourse Analysis

Media critic John Fiske (1990) argues that game shows, within the constructed female domain, can empower women. He writes:

> 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. (139)

In light of Fiske's perspective, China's TV dating shows seem promising to single women, especially to *sheng nü*, who are presented as enjoying the opportunities to court and be courted on the stage. Indeed, Chinese women of previous generations were less likely to initiate a date or court a man. Matchmaking used to be a completely private affair between two families where a woman, conformed to the passive role of being wooed and proposed to, had "no control over her own rite of passage of transforming from a single woman into a immobilized bride and finally into a wife, encumbered with familial responsibilities and filial piety" (Luo 2012, 85). In contrast, the contemporary female participants on the dating show stage appear able to douse potential suitors with acid putdowns, or court their favorites to pop music and audience applause. Assertively, these modern women selected by the shows voice their opinions on such trenchant issues as "whether a wedded couple should live with the husband's parents, if car and house ownership matters more than love, and whether or not a career should be sacrificed for love" (Lin 2010). Bringing private matters of love and marriage under the spotlight, the female participants, to varying extents, seem engaged in an ongoing social forum. This forum itself is further expanded via social media such as the participants' email addresses and micro-blogs publicized by the televised shows.

Similar to the situation depicted by Fiske (1990), the Chinese dating shows display the potential to enable self-articulations of women participants and allow for renegotiations of class and gender identities. However, a close examination of *FCWR* through the lens of critical discourse analysis exposes the public buttress to gender and class inequalities that underpin the new gender mandate of post-socialist China. More specifically, we find that stigmatizing single womanhood, the dating show grants a glimpse of the varied ways the media and women participants play a complicit role in reducing women's potential to resist male privilege in post-socialist China. Implicitly, the women participants internalize the problematization of *sheng nü* as an objective fact rather than an oppressive social construction.

Critical Discourse Analysis

We approach our study of *FCWR* through the analytical framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA). In linguistics, a discourse initially refers to any unit of spoken or written language greater than a sentence (Bernadette Casey, Neil Casey, Ben Calvert, Liam French, and Justin Lewis 2002). According to Norman Fairclough (2001), when appropriated in media and communication studies, the notion of discourse includes meaning-making processes and signifying practices. As Teun van Dijk (1993) points out, drawing from a Foucauldian perspective, discourse analysis looks into language use and social interactions. As a subset of discourse analysis, CDA considers language as a form of social practice and looks into the ways social and political domination are reproduced in texts and talks (Norman Fairclough and Clive Holes 1995; Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak 1997). As Thomas Huckin (2002) explains, as a "context-sensitive form of discourse analysis," CDA not only "offers a powerful arsenal of analytical tools" that are deployable in the close examination of public texts, but also "enriches the analysis that such close reading be done

in conjunction with a broader contextual analysis, including consideration of discursive practices, intertextual relations, and sociocultural factors" (157). To quote Ruth Wodak (1995), CDA is particularly useful to analyze "opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of domination, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (204).

The framework of CDA serves our purpose of examining the TV dating genre as a mass media discourse and revealing the power imbalance among the different players of the mediated texts within the specificity of China's post-socialist gender ideologies. Although we adopt CDA as "an approach, a way of looking at texts" instead of "a rigorously systematic method of analysis," to borrow from Huckin (2002, 163), the overarching critical lens of CDA helps to magnify what the media texts simultaneously conceal and disseminate. In particular, this framework allows for identifying and exposing the (re) production of male privilege via policing femininity, as manifested in the onstage language use of the media participants.

More specifically, we focus on analyzing *FCWR*, the representative televised dating show. To that end, we randomly sampled twenty-four episodes of *FCWR* between March 2012 and May 2013 and, in our analysis, we paid special attention to labels, textual silences, metaphors, insinuations, and depictions that are laden with class and gender values. The entry point of our analysis is the stage arrangements and hidden rules of the dating show. We then shed light on what the women's self-introductions convey, and further focus on analyzing the participants' depictions of their "ideal" spouse. Finally, we read between the lines of the remarks by the host, and the two expert commentators, who are the implicit players of the show.

The Stage Arrangements and Hidden Rules

Generating substantial profits and attracting multitudinous consumers, *FCWR* represents a neoliberal media discourse that embraces the value of an open market, where female participants seem to enjoy verbal exchanges with potential male suitors while making an important decision of accepting or rejecting via a mere switching on or off of a light. The entire stage design radiates a strong feminine sentiment, as if to cultivate a woman-oriented environment: the shining purple and pink lights, the elevated, individualistic podium facing the audience, and the new feature of a "burst light" enabling any woman to openly express her strong interests in a man, all of which seemingly promote women's agency and subjectivity, and encourage their active choice of love. Most interestingly, a team of twenty-four women parade onto the stage in the opening scene of every episode, accompanied by Madonna's *Give Me All Your Lovin* with the deliberate selection of Nicki Minaj's rap lyrics:

> Give me all your love boy
> You can be my boy, you can be my boy toy
> In the nick of time, I can say a sicker rhyme
> Cause it's time for change, like a nickel or a dime
> I'm roman, I'm a barbarian, I'm conan ...

Such soundtrack and lyrics evoke not only the assertive images of Madonna and Nicki, but also the single womanhood they embody: carefree, happy-go-lucky, rebellious, and yearning for romance yet without the constraints of a serious commitment. The

combination of the stage, the music, and the new outlook of single womanhood seems to promise the imminent display of a diverse array of post-socialist femininity in stark contrast to the androgynous, shapeless female imagery of the communist past.

A closer reading of the show nevertheless reveals several hidden rules, which constitute what Huckin (2002) terms as "textual silences," namely, strategically "leaving relevant information out of a text" for the purpose of concealing broader ideologies (162). Arguably, the fragmentary manifestations of textual silences in *FCWR* bespeak a very different picture of femininity depicted in Madonna's song: instead of lacking constraints or even with a liberating spirit, the women players are engaged in self-policing their femininity and gender roles, as our analysis will demonstrate.

First, *FCWR* advertises its free, open enrollment through the public announcement of Meng Fei, the bald, unassuming, yet charismatic host of the show in the closing remarks of each episode. What have been concealed are the criteria for selecting the show's participants. Seemingly catering to women from all walks of life, the majority of those who are finally chosen to stand on the stage turn out to possess physical beauty and enjoy the social privilege of, say, the nouveau riche. In the case of a woman player who might lack the above qualities, she must have an emotionally compelling or even heart-wrenching story to satisfy the voyeuristic viewers. "Ms. Bai Fu Mei" ("Ms. Fair Wealthy Beautiful"), a catchphrase coined in China's post-millennial consumerism, is used to label women with such perceived "outstanding qualities" as having fair skin, wealthy family background, and beauty. While the notion of "feminine beauty" connotes vague meanings, a cursory search in Baidu.com indexes that in post-socialist contexts, a "beautiful" Chinese woman must have aesthetically pleasing facial features, a tall and slim body shape, a graceful demeanor, and agreeable personality traits. Although this label blatantly remaps social distinctions onto the female body, it is unthinkingly employed and circulated numerous times on the stage. In one recent episode, dated April 27, 2013, when Meng Fei boasted that the program had a large pool of female applicants eager to be selected, he mentioned in a bantering manner that his friends attempted to bring in potential female participants through his "guanxi" (i.e., seeking favoritism through special social connections). "But," Meng said laughing complacently, "out of the thirty women my friends introduced, only one had been picked by the program's interview committee because only she had both the look and the status." This lighthearted remark implies that beauty matters and social privilege is a plus in the selection process.

Second, each participant is provided with the same set of equipment: the podium, the name tag, the switch, and the light. When a team of twenty-four women stand side by side on one huge stage with an assigned number from one to twenty-four, each number indicates a different position that each individual occupies. Whereas No. 1 and No. 24 stand at each end of the line, No. 12, No. 13, and No. 14 are cast in the central spotlight. And these numbers and positions are by no means randomly assigned. Lizhong Liang (2012) interviewed Zheng Li, the producer of the show, who confided to the researcher that the female participants are categorized and deliberately given different positions based upon these categories over the past two hundred episodes. For instance, position No. 5 is saved deliberately for women of older age but with graduate degrees whereas divorced women are assigned to stand at position No. 10 or No. 20 (Liang 2012). What has been left out in the producer's account is that the central positions (from No. 12 to No. 14) are occupied by the "prettiest" women, who are fashion models, for instance, but also capable of engaging in public conversations that attract viewers, as Miao-qing Li (2011) notes. Because of their

central positions, these women arrest more close-up camera shots as well as more opportunities to join conversations than their peers who occupy the podiums on either side. Our reading of the twenty-four sampled episodes corroborates Li's (2011) observation, as we find that 83 percent of the women who have been chosen as "the love at first sight" by the male participants stand in the center. The women standing at both sides of the long line (position No. 1 and position No. 24) have to seek their own ways to draw public attention rather than impressing potential suitors and TV viewers with their "physical beauty," so to speak. Chang Xiaojuan, who was assigned to the No. 1 podium between December 11, 2011 and March 3, 2012, became well-known for her statement that her own "ugly physical appearance" was to underscore other women's beauty. During her participation in the show, she was often seen shedding tears in front of the camera, confiding to viewers that, at age twenty-four, she had not yet succeeded in attracting a man for a date and that she yearned for romantic love. Her "ugly duckling" self-depictions ironically made her an instant tabloid celebrity and a great number of anonymous netizens labelled her the "Ugly No. 1" and "Cinderella" (see anonymous blog postings at Haxiu.com; Baike.com; Tt.mop.com). Interestingly, Ding Dongli, who stood at the No. 24 podium, also created her own dramatic situation. Unlike Chang, who displayed a strong sense of inferiority, Ding was imbued with confidence despite her "unassuming look" and her "overweight body," to quote the viewers' expressions which circulated in cyberspace. Ding was found to constantly report the progress of her weight loss and to claim that her age of thirty-seven meant no anxieties for rushing into a relationship. She also appeared to enjoy being the "Lady Burst Light," a label given by the media, viewers, as well as her peers on the stage because of her persistent profession of strong interest in, via using the show's "burst light" feature, "Mr Gao Fu Shuai" ("Mr Tall Wealthy Handsome"), including those more than ten years her junior. The scenarios of Chang and Ding point to the unequal positioning of women, masked by the show's open but vague invitation to women from all walks of life. The contrast between "Ms Bai Fu Mei" who attracts attention with ease, and those who fall out of such a category and thus have to struggle to stand out, bespeaks the tension of class and gender concealed within the rules of the dating show. The viewers' rude labeling and derision imposed upon the women standing at the margin of the team reveal the stage as a hotbed where social marginalization among women is cultivated and perpetuated within the post-socialist media discourse.

Finally, we further find that even though women participants are often seen boldly questioning, pontificating, and making saucy comments, they can only decide whether or not a male participant is to stay instead of being able to opt for whom exactly they want to date. The rules, however, enable a potential suitor to make the final decision to leave the stage with one woman of his choice if he passes three rounds of questioning. In the case of having more than one woman leaving their lights on, these women end up competing against one another (Luo 2012). Another set of hidden rules is exposed the moment the male "survivor" is offered a chance to view one of the ten questions with well-prepared answers (in the format of written statements or video clips) about each individual woman of his choice thus far. Listed on a big screen, these ten questions fall into four categories: (1) the woman's "real" appearance in everyday life; (2) the woman's romantic experiences; (3) the woman's family background and financial situation; and (4) the woman's capability of undertaking housework. As Li (2011) states, these categories point to the normative gender roles reinscribed on the stage, as the woman, despite showcasing a diversity of capacities, is expected to be a "xian qi liang mu" ("virtuous wife and loving mother") after all (95).

Single Women with Labels, and *Sheng Nü*'s Self-Subjugation

While the stage arrangements and rules of the show—as silent media texts—convey gender and class values, the act of labeling via the use of overt expressions or covert metaphors misconstrues the women's femininity. Our reading of the sampled episodes further reveals that the media and the single women themselves play a complicit role in reducing women's potential to resist new forms of male privilege. With the seemingly open enrollment policy, the female participants of *FCWR* are assumed to represent ordinary women from everyday life. However, once these women are admitted to the show, they soon gain labels from viewers and the media, as if becoming amateur performers. At tv.sohu.com, one of the most popular video databases in mainland China, the following titles appeared for some of the most recent episodes:

- "Sheng Nü Goddess Aspiring After Marriage" (May 11, 2013)
- "Qipao Goddess Finding the Perfect Bachelor" (April 29, 2013)
- "'Beauty CEO' Changing Her Mind Upon Switching Off Her Light" (February 2, 2013)
- "Marriage Craver Expressing Her Heart" (October 28, 2012)
- "Ms. Domineering Turing into A Little Woman for Love" (October 28, 2012)
- "Female PhD Encountering Her First Admirer" (July 27, 2012)
- "Beauty Doctor Finding Her Romantic Date" (July 15, 2012)

The "goddess" expression, another bias-laden catchphrase emerging from China's consumer culture, somehow becomes the synonym of "Ms. Bai Fu Mei" discussed previously. Used in a bantering manner, a woman with a "goddess" label is supposed to have such perceived "desirable" feminine traits as physical beauty, attractive body shape, and graceful demeanor, especially as a result of her privileged upbringing. For instance, the label "Qipao Goddess" was imposed upon Zhu Xiao, a twenty-eight-year-old, well-educated psychological consultant and romance writer, who wore exquisitely-designed Qipao in almost every episode before she left the stage with a "Mr Right." This bachelor proclaimed in public that his favorite part of a woman's body was her waist and that Zhu fit into the most beautiful Qipao, thus emphasizing Zhu's slim, curvy body shape. It seems these female participants enjoy successful careers and upward social mobility. Nevertheless, these labels depict them as if all surrender themselves for love, romance, and marriage.

Whereas the media use flashy labeling to sell *FCWR* and attract voyeuristic viewers to peep into the participants' private lives and emotional experiences, it is not impossible for the women themselves to resist the stigmatizing labels. On the stage, each woman is given a name tag that provides them with the opportunity to write a motto to describe themselves. Instead of acting upon the opportunity to assert their identities and redress the media's and viewers' misconstrued depictions, most of the female participants attribute similar labels to themselves. Here are some of the self-descriptions on the women's name tags:

- Yu Tiantian, age twenty-three, optometrist intern: "[I am] a beauty and a medical doctor according to my friends" (March 3, 2012)
- Xu Yali, age thirty-two, associate professor of sports medicine: "I do not like to tell others that I am a woman PhD" (March 3, 2012)
- Wang Guang, age twenty-four, secretary of a public relations company: "[I am] a 'little' woman of domesticity" (March 3, 2013)

- Liu Jiani, age thirty-three, marketing director of an advertising company: "I am NOT a 'big' woman" (March 10, 2013)
- Wang Can, age twenty-two, accountant with a trading company: "[I am] a virtuous woman in the eyes of my seniors" (September 1, 2013)
- Lü Dan, age twenty-eight, CEO of an IT company: "Marriage is a woman's primal career" (September 2, 2012)

This abbreviated list of labeling provides a synecdochical view of the female participants' self-subjugation to normative femininity and gender roles so entrenched in Chinese tradition and blatantly disseminated via the media discourse. The contrast between the "big woman" and the "little woman" in the women's self-expressions is particularly revealing. A "big woman" in Chinese vernacular discourse refers to an assertive woman with career achievements. Quite the opposite of a "little woman" who is confined within the walls of domesticity and dependent on her man, a "big woman" is active in the public sphere and displays her maturity, independence, and foresight. Contradictorily, these individuals eagerly convey their willingness and even cherished wish to be a "little woman," notwithstanding their achievement of the upper echelon social status.

Apart from the ideologically-charged labels, the depictions of the "ideal" spouse by both male and female participants throw an even clearer light on the gender power asymmetries in the constructions of post-socialist masculinity and femininity. Zhu Xiao, the previously labeled "Qipao Goddess," had her well-crafted self-introduction advertised as part of the prologue to *FCWR*. She said:

> Since a very young age, I've put on the pretense of maturity and precociousness. Independent, perseverant, dignified, and self-esteemed—these qualities have constituted who I am. Deep down in my heart, I however yearn for the sagacious tradition of husband–wife companionship (i.e., the husband sings while the wife follows, as the Chinese proverb goes). I believe a woman's virtue and morality [as a good wife] is superior to a thousand other skills. The value of a woman lies with her marital happiness. If my man would provide me a stretch of blue sky, I would be his loyal and helpful assistant, and his gentle, long-lasting, and awaiting companion. (March 30, 2013)

Interestingly, a male participant named He Juchao provided a contrasting account of his "ideal" woman:

> My favorite woman resembles a Z4 model, having the best functions with the most reasonable price. Like the surface of my car, my woman is fashionable yet without being overbearing. I hope she functions as well as the car. That means it is of great importance that she does housework well [. . .]. In fact, dating a girlfriend feels like driving a car. Most often, I drive slowly, enjoying a sense of coziness. Occasionally, I intentionally step on the gas and speed up so as to add more excitement and fun to life itself. I expect that in our future life, you [the woman] make decisions over trivial matters while I control the steering wheel and decide which main direction to go. (June 9, 2013)

These vivid gendered metaphors simultaneously reflect and deflect the male and female participants' "representational agency," to quote Yang (2013), which refers to "creative potency undergirding every act of meaning making, from the invention of words to the creation of texts" (Yang 2013, 65). These creative self-articulations on the stage

conjure up a matching picture of the conjugal relationship only to reinforce masculine domination and feminine submissiveness.

Not all the female participants are *sheng nü*, if *sheng nü*, based upon the literal definition by the All-China Women's Federation, only refers to single, partnerless women of over twenty-seven years of age. Our analysis of the women's self-introductions reveals a permeating sense of personal and social anxieties about being "leftover" and thus left out of the perceived happy world of marital relationships. For instance, Li Lina, a thirty-two-year-old instructor, who taught vehicle repair in a career institute, caught viewers' attention when she débuted with the following introductory remarks:

> Before I was twenty-eight, I felt as if I were like the moon courted by the surrounding stars. I felt great to be single. How nice it was to be wooed by men around me. Upon turning twenty-eight, I started to realize I could hardly wait. I have to, even in a hurry, marry off myself to a good man. Therefore, I master up my courage to stand on the stage here today, seeking the other half of my life. Let me remind the unmarried sisters both on and off the stage: don't miss out finding a good man to marry off yourself in the most beautiful time of your life; otherwise, when you are reaching my age, how embarrassing! (May 11, 2013)

This narrative discloses the dilemma of a woman who has internalized the negativity about single womanhood, and who strives for upward social mobility yet faces self-imposed, peer, and social pressures of keeping up with her biological clock. Notably, the woman herself uses the demeaning and pejorative term of *sheng nü* and accepts the problematization of unmarried women as a factual circumstance instead of a socio-cultural construction. The *sheng nü* mentality enables the building of a public buttress that obstructs the women's potential resistance against unequal gendered labeling as well as biases towards single womanhood.

Problematic Role-Play: The Remarks and Tips of the "Experts"

To add a touch of seriousness and authority to the show, Dr Huang Han, a professor of social psychology, and Le Jia, a popular writer and TV host (later on replaced by Zeng Zihang, a popular romance writer), are invited to serve as commentators in every episode. The host and commentators have all turned into instant celebrities with the widespread market success of *FCWR*. Huang, a Communist Party member, who teaches at a research institution affiliated with the Communist Party, was a deliberate arrangement by Jiangsu TV as a response to the SARFT's censorship against shallow, materialistic verbal exchanges which appeared during the initial launch of the show (Justin Bergman 2010). The twenty-two-year-old Ma Nuo, a Beijing model, caused a journalistic sensation at home and abroad for her blunt rejection of a potential suitor who offered her a bike ride with the notorious statement that she "would rather cry in a BMW" (Bergman 2010; Calum MacLeod 2010; Wong 2011). Unsurprisingly, politically incorrect articulations of this kind became an immediate target of criticism from local and global audiences. On the one hand, audiences and netizens can act as empowered media critics against blatant messages of social ills and immorality. On the other hand, these amateur critics nevertheless fail to discern more subtle and sophisticated discourses that provoke new forces of intertwining gender and social inequalities. As a case in point, the well-established TV host and commentators who enjoy social prestige undertake the problematic role-play of a celebrity-turned-expert,

offering remarks and tips about love, romance, and marriage to the applause of undiscerning participants and viewers of the show. For instance, in response to Li Lina's self-introduction which conveys the stigma about *sheng nü*, they had the following dialogue:

Meng: In the repairman's outfit [hinting the masculine outlook of the car technician's uniform], you lie underneath a vehicle [. . .]. How winsome! Imagine when you are repairing a car, how many people would like to be your observers!

Huang: In fact, I was about to use a more visual word [. . .]. ur, [with some hesitation] very sexy.

Zeng: Once you get married, you would no longer feel like you were the moon surrounded by all the stars. Would you feel a sense of loss?

Li: Well, at my age [thirty-two], I no longer have the privilege for romantic indulgence. I should be more realistic so as to find a good man to marry. (May 11, 2013)

In their well respected "expert" positions, the host and commentators aggravate the *sheng nü* tension and incite the spread of gendered biases, instead of offering their guiding hands to the bewildered and diffident participant. In the same episode, Zeng was memorable for providing his tips on building an "ideal" conjugal relationship:

Zeng: The [ideal] woman should appear a "big woman" [successful, capable, and presentable to the public] in public; at home, the woman should become a "little woman" [submissive, sweet, innocent]; during the day, the woman should act like a "white-boned demon" [a legendary character from the Chinese classical mythology *Journey to the West*, embodying the imagery of a beautiful, clever, wicked, and powerful woman, who, after all, can fight against the very powerful male Monkey King]; at night, the woman should turn into a "fox demon" [mischievous, seductive, and young] for her husband.

Huang: Very well put indeed [with a touch of satire in her tone]! Can you tell me how a man should appear and act?

Zeng: Well, in public, a hunt dog whereas at home, a flattering puppy. (May 11, 2013)

Such verbiages create a façade of good humor and playful entertainment mingled with a touch of what seem to be words of wisdom, as if derived from these celebrities' knowledge, expertise, and personal experience. It is de facto verbal exchanges like these that subtly impart the false imagery of post-socialist femininity, the illusion of the "perfect" marital relationship, and the unachievable expectation for contemporary Chinese women. Furthermore, these exchanges unwarily disseminate the social stigma surrounding single womanhood.

Concluding Remarks

China's neoliberal transition and market economy have brought about predicaments for the reconfigurations of contemporary women's class and gender identities, as our study shows. The findings of our analysis have been twofold. First, the case of *FCWR* points to a precarious role the media play in policing post-socialist femininity, reinforcing male privilege, and conveying the new gender mandate. Selling the dating shows, the local media thrive within the globalizing consumerism through strategically tapping into the political imperatives over the gender imbalance as a repercussion of the three decades of the country's one-child policy and further playing upon women's personal and social anxieties. The capitalist market success of the dating shows in their importation of global formats and creation of local meanings, however, comes along with the uncritical dissemination of gender and class asymmetries and biases. Second, our study reveals the dilemma of urban single women who strive for upward social mobility, yet are constrained within the post-socialist gender mandate, to wit, remapping class codes onto the essentializing female body and femininity. Ironically, the single womanhood, under the influence of the global post-feminist climate and the local *sheng nü* mentality, signifies a disempowered female icon despite its liberated façade of agency for active choice of love. Indeed, the gender performance of *FCWR*'s female participants gives a glimpse of their complicit role in reducing women's potential to resist new forms of male privilege in post-socialist China.

Revisiting her own provocative article "Under Western Eyes" published two decades ago, Chandra Mohanty (2002) points to the new challenges post-colonial feminists face in the era of hegemonic global capitalism. The penetration of neoliberalism and spread of capitalist values, says Mohanty (2002), influence "the ability to make choices on one's own behalf in the daily lives of economically marginalized as well as economically privileged communities around the globe" (508). In the new century, as Mohanty (2002) asserts, it is of great importance for transnational feminists to achieve solidarity and develop new "anticapitalist critique" that demystifies, reexamines, and theorizes "global economic and political processes," which "have become more brutal, exacerbating economic, racial, and gender inequalities . . . " (509). In response to Mohanty's call, we further argue that the demystification of macro globalizing processes should start with a query into the micropolitics of everyday life, making visible the dangerous trend in "producing new masked politics of domination and subordination," to borrow from Elza Ibroscheva (2012, 117). Towards that end, our analysis through the lens of CDA interrogates the coining and spreading of new labels, metaphors, insinuations, and depictions seeping into the neoliberal media discourse in the Chinese case, which foment new forces of gender and class inequalities. Overcoming the *sheng nü*'s predicament, for instance, should start with the dismantling of the label within its vernacular discourse and everyday use.

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