Post-socialist femininity unleashed/restrained: reconfigurations of gender in Chinese television dramas

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In post-socialist China, gender norms are marked by rising divorce rates (Kleiman et al., shifting attitudes towards sex (Farrer; Yan), and a growing commodification of marriage (Yu; Evans)). These processes have brought about a significant change in the way we perceive and understand gender relations. The emerging market economies have led to increased commodification of women, and this has been reflected in the rising divorce rates and the commodification of marriage. Women are now seen as valuable commodities, and their worth is often determined by their ability to attract and retain male partners.

The trend towards commodification has also affected the way we understand gender roles. Women are now expected to be more economically independent, and this has led to a change in the way we perceive marriage and family. The traditional family structure has been challenged, and this has led to increased individualism and a greater focus on personal choices and desires.

However, despite these changes, traditional gender roles still persist. Women are still expected to be responsible for domestic duties and childcare, and this has led to increased stress and burnout for many women. This has been highlighted in the recent trend towards stay-at-home moms, where women are choosing to leave the workforce to focus on their families. This decision is often made out of necessity, but it also reflects a desire for a more balanced and fulfilling life.

In conclusion, the commodification of marriage and the rising divorce rates in post-socialist China reflect a significant shift in gender norms. While there has been progress towards greater economic independence for women, traditional gender roles still persist, and this has led to increased stress and burnout for many women. This highlights the need for continued efforts towards gender equality and the promotion of more balanced and fulfilling family structures.
less naïve than Haizao, financially well-off because of their business acumen, and much more outspoken and determined to fight for what they want. On the surface these women are depicted as more liberated and free from gender hierarchies and sexual oppression. Hung describes Xiaosan as “an active if constrained agent... whose new mode of life has become revealingly defensible and publicly acceptable in socioeconomic terms that reflect the moral changes that follow economic reforms” (“State” 166). However, the closure of these storylines suggest that although more complex reasons for becoming a mistress have been explored in the new drama, mistresses are still regarded as a threat to social stability and therefore punished, challenging Hung’s argument about the “acceptability” of mistresses in post-socialist China.

**Post-Socialist Femininity Restrained: Wives and Mothers**

Countering these liberal forms of post-socialist femininity are portrayals of righteous wives and exemplary mothers. These depictions articulate a moral positioning grounded in pre-socialist and socialist understandings of a woman’s place in Chinese society. These portrayals of moral women check the transgressive powers of single women and mistresses with the potential to break families up. More importantly, they remind the audience of desired gender norms that retain the integrity of the family and anchor a society undergoing rapid transformation.

The three dramas portray wives who are stridently righteous in their confrontations with women they perceive as a threat to their families. These women find moral justification for the violence they inflict on transgressors from cultural understandings of their rights as wives. Lin Xiaofeng (Divorce) repeatedly challenges Xiao Li to explain the “logic” underlying her actions when she discovers that Xiao accompanied Song Jiaping to a wedding (Episode 14). The “logic” Lin refers to is a cultural understanding that it is her right as wife to accompany Song to public events and not Xiao’s. By transgressing this moral boundary, Xiao accords Lin the moral authority to cast doubt on her abilities as a doctor in a public confrontation. It also provides moral justification for Lin to slap Xiao when she suggests that Lin is an embarrassment to her husband, an argument that underscores Lin’s failure and challenges her moral authority as wife. Jiang Miaomiao (Dwelling) draws on similar cultural understandings when she appears at the apartment Haizao shares with Song Siming (Episode 33). Jiang positions herself in the traditional role of a wife as a household manager (Ebrey) whose responsibilities include paying Song’s mistresses. She puts Haizao into a subordinate position by arguing that since Haizao is less than a mistress and slightly better than a prostitute, she is not worth the money Song has given her. When Haizao refuses to return the money a tussle ensues, causing Haizao to have a miscarriage.

Likewise, Miao Jinxiu (Lawyers) draws on similar cultural understandings of a wife’s position when she laments popular arguments that depict mistresses such as Luo Meiyuan as usurping the superior position of wives like herself who are less attractive and able to navigate the market economy. Miao describes these arguments as “inverting black into white” (Episode 19). She publicly humiliates Luo by throwing paint on her at a charity event (Episode 17) and covers Luo’s car with posters labelling Luo a “slut,” “prostitute,” and “ shameless” (Episode 18). Miao succeeds in “winning” her husband back. The public violence Miao inflicts on Luo and her success in protecting her marriage are struggles to reinforce the boundaries defining the categories of wife and mistress as these limits become increasingly challenged in China.

In contrast to the violent strategies that Lin, Jiang, and Miao adopt, Tang Meiyu resists Shi Jiang’s destructive powers by reminding her errant husband of the emotional warmth of their family. She asks him, “Do you still remember telling me what the nicest sound is at home?” For Cao, the best sounds are Tang’s laughter, their baby’s cries, the sound of the washing machine, and the flushing of their leaky toilet (Episode 43). The couple reconciles and even wins a lottery that cements their “happy ending.” By highlighting the warmth of their family, Tang reminds Cao of her rightful place as wife, restrains Shi from breaking up the couple, and protects the integrity of the family. It is by drawing on deeply entrenched cultural understandings of the rights of wives that these women find the moral authority to challenge, restrain, and control the transgressive powers of mistresses and single women.

The dramas’ portrayals of mothers further reinforce the sense that there is a need to restrain liberal forms of post-socialist femininity embodied by errant daughters who transgress the moral boundaries of the family. Lin Xiaofeng’s mother (Divorce) assumes the role of the forgiving wife and mother. She not only forgives Lin’s father for having an affair but raises Lin, her husband’s love child, as her own (Episode 23). On her deathbed, she articulates the values underlying her acceptance of this transgression, namely that one needs to be “a little kinder, more tolerant, and a little muddleheaded” when dealing with matters of the family. Her forgiveness bears fruit in the form of the warm companionship and support she enjoys with Lin’s father. This sends a strong pedagogical message to the audience that it is possible for a marriage to remain intact if one is willing to forgive.

In contrast, Haizao’s mother (Dwelling) adopts the role of the disciplinary mother. She attempts to beat Haizao with a coat hanger when she finds out that her daughter has spent the night with her toyboy Song Siming (Episode 31). She recounts Haizao’s decision as “the wrong thing” and is emphatic that abortion is the only way to right this wrong. She argues that abortion will allow her daughter to start life anew in a relationship she describes as “open and aboveboard,” which will culminate in marriage. When Haizao rejects her mother’s disciplinary, her lover dies in a car accident and she has a miscarriage. She loses her ability to speak for two months after these double tragedies and pays the ultimate price, losing her reproductive abilities.

Luo Li’s mother (Lawyers), Li Chunhua, extends this pedagogical approach by adopting the role of public counsellor as a talk show host. Li describes Luo’s profession as “wicked” because it focuses on separating the family (Episode 9). Instead, she promotes reconciliation as an alternative. She counsels couples to remain together by propounding traditional family values, such as the need for daughters-in-law to consider the filial obligations of sons when managing their relationship with their mothers-in-law (Episode 25). Her rising ratings and the effectiveness of her strategy in bringing estranged couples like Miao Jinxiu and Dong Dahai back together (Episode 26) challenges the transgressive powers of mistresses by preventing the separation of families. More importantly, as with Haizao’s and Lin’s mothers, the moral boundary of Li’s position and the alternatives to divorce that she suggests draw on pre-socialist and socialist understandings of family values that underscore the sanctity of marriage to the audience. By reminding errant daughters of deeply embedded cultural standards of what it means to be a woman in Chinese society, these mothers are moral exemplars who restrain the potentiality of daughters becoming mistresses.

**Conclusion**

Market reforms have led to a transformation in understandings of womanhood in post-socialist China. Depictions of mistresses and single women as independent, economically successful, and sexually liberated underscores the emergence of liberal forms of post-socialist femininity. Although adept at navigating the new market economy, these types of post-socialist women threaten the integrity of the family and need to be controlled. Moral arguments articulated by wives and mothers restrain the potentially destructive powers of post-socialist womanhood by drawing on deeply embedded understandings of the rights of women shaped in pre-socialist China. It is by drawing on liberal forms of post-socialist femininity that they fit back into deeply embedded gender hierarchies that social order is restored.

By illuminating the moral politics underlying relationships between women in post-socialist China, the dramas discussed underscore the continued significance of television as a pedagogical device through which desired gender norms are popularised. These portrayals of the struggles between liberal forms of post-socialist feminism and conservative pre-socialist understandings of womanhood as lived in everyday life serve to communicate the importance of protecting the integrity of the family and maintaining social stability in order for China to continue to pursue development.

**References**


